

FORGOTTEN REALMS
THE CITADELS



Obsidian Ridge

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The Citadels: Obsidian Ridge

By Jess Lebow

Prologue

The Year of the Leaping Frog, 1266 DR
Somewhere over Calimshan.

The princess was ushered quickly through the black stone hallways. The shadows shifted with every twist and turn, making the entire place seem as if it had been torn straight from the nightmares of an overly imaginative child. The floor beneath her feet vibrated softly—the clicking of her escorts' claws on the chipped stone barely audible over the constant hum.

Coming to the end of a long swooping corridor, the princess was abruptly

shoved inside a large, poorly lit chamber. She fell to the ground, landing hard on her knees and hands. The door slammed behind her.

"Well met, princess," said a voice—or rather, two voices: one high pitched, one much lower. They seemed to echo one another, one following only a fraction of a heartbeat behind the first.

The princess got to her feet, smoothing her robes and straightening herself in a rather regal fashion. "Who are you?" she asked.

"Yes, my servants aren't very accommodating when it comes to introductions," replied the echoing dual voice. "I am Arch Magus Xeries, the lord and ruler of the Obsidian Ridge."

The princess examined her surroundings. The walls of this chamber were made from the same black, chipped obsidian as the rest of the citadel. The ceiling, if there was one, was obscured in darkness far, far above. The floor was smooth and polished, and in the very center sat a large dais, a pair of connected thrones atop of it.

"There is only one of you?" she asked, puzzled by the echo.

A bent figure sat in one of the thrones, obscured by shadows.

"Yes," he replied with his two voices.

"But that is why you are here, so I will no longer be alone."

The princess shuddered, a chill running down her spine. She wrapped her arms

tightly around herself. "What do you want from me?"

"What does anyone want from anyone else?" replied the arch magus. "I want you by my side. Your sympathy. Your loyalty. Your companionship. Those things that everyone craves."

The princess turned her back to the throne. "And why do you think I would give myself to you?"

"Because I can give you whatever you desire," replied Xeries, his voice echoing over itself. "What do you wish for?"

The princess turned back around, softening her stance. "Whatever I desire?"

"Immortality. Riches. Power." Xeries

leaned over, lifting a decanter of deep red wine and pouring it into a goblet in his bent, twisted hand. "Is there something else you could want?"

The princess took a step closer. "And what must I do for this immortality, riches, and power?"

Xeries chuckled. He took a sip of his wine, then wiped his lips with the back of his hand.

"Like all things, there is a price."

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Chapter one

The Year of the Staff I366DR The Kingdom of ErIkazar

The air stank of old blood and feces, adding to the eerie sense of openness in the empty slaughterhouse. Night had

fallen some time ago, and most residents of Llorbauth were already asleep—but not on the docks. Nighttime was when the denizens of this place came out for work.

High in the rafters, the shadows moved, and a figure emerged. He stood watching, scanning the nooks and empty stalls. Far below he caught sight of what he wanted—a group of men. The figure leaped. His cloak fluttered slightly, but his feet made no sound as they came to rest on another sturdy rafter.

Down below, wearing torn overalls and discolored shirts, the group of men—the sort who made their living with their hands and their backs—drew closer, seemingly unaware of the figure above

them.

"Where'd all the pigs go?" asked one, looking around the empty slaughterhouse.

"Cut up and shipped out," answered a fat man, the only one dressed in sorcerers' robes. "Just this morning."

"That's a lot of pig," said the first.

"Yes," agreed the fat man. "A lot of pig." The figure watched as the men crossed the slaughterhouse floor and slipped out of his view. The figure leaped once more. The moment his foot touched the solid wood, he was bounding toward the next perch. With three great jumping strides, he covered nearly a third of the slaughterhouse. Then with one final push, he flung himself, arms out, toward

a much farther rafter.

A large hole in the ceiling spilled the half-moon's weak light into the building, and for a moment, the figure's lithe frame was silhouetted against the night sky. Had any of the men looked up, they would have seen the glint of metal at the tips of the figure's outstretched hands.

Catching the rafter, the figure swung twice then pulled himself up to crouch, waiting and watching.

The men had converged on the northern end of the slaughterhouse, where three huge stacks of crates were piled against the wall. Without talking, they got to work.

Inside the first crate, nestled in a huge pile of straw, was a large glass vessel.

One man pulled the wooden planks off the top of the crate, and two more converged on the contents, lifting the heavy glass from both sides. The men had to squat and waddle to move it. As they did, one of them stumbled and nearly lost his balance.

The others gasped and rushed to his aid. But it was unnecessary. The man regained his balance and finished moving the vessel to a safe location on the floor, only a few more steps away.

"Be more careful!" shouted the fat man. "My brother is going to be here soon. If you break one of his vats, we'll all g« it."

The clumsy man nodded frantically. "Yes, Master Tasca." Then he hurried to

unpack another crate.

The other men followed suit, unloading more glass and iron. The pieces came out one at a time, and the men worked smoothly and carefully. There were no more stumbles.

A contraption materialized from the men's efforts. Three huge glass vats, each half again larger than the last, rested on metal stands that held them off the floor by several feet. Each was connected to the next by a series of twisted tubes. It looked like a monstrous glass centipede, cut into sections and strung together by clear veins or intestines.

Not breaking their stride, the men continued. From the next stack of crates

they pulled out glass beakers full of viscous, red liquid. Each was sealed with wax, which the men peeled away before pouring the contents into the largest vat.

"Don't spill any of that, or you'll be sorry," scolded the fat man.

The men continued their work in silence. It took some time, but the vat grew fuller, and it reached the halfway point when the men finished unpacking the second stack of crates.

The man they called Master Tasca bent down beside the largest vat. Rubbing his hands together, he spoke a series of quick words. A bright purple flame erupted in his palms, and he set it down on the flagstones below the vat.

Struggling to his feet, the fat man nodded at the others, and they began unpacking the last of the crates.

Inside were more beakers, each holding a bright blue liquid that glowed, illuminating the blood-stained floor.

Once again, the wax seals were pulled and the liquid poured into the vat. When it hit the thick, red substance already inside, a gray vapor formed. It swirled up the sides, heavy and dense, clinging to the glass as it climbed.

"Quickly now," instructed Pello Tasca. "We don't want to lose any."

The men formed a bucket brigade, working together to pour the beakers in as fast as they could. There was much less of the blue liquid, and the men had it

finished in half the time. Then they lifted the final glass tube and fitted it over the largest vat, sealing the top.

The gray vapor rose, climbing through the twisting tubes. The clear glass became opaque, and the vapor poured into the

second vat, filling it. It stuck to the sides, growing more dense and collecting in large drops that rolled down into the bottom of the second vat. A brownish liquid the color of muddy water pooled at the bottom.

The fat man bent down again and lit a second fire under this new vat. The muddy liquid boiled immediately, and the steam rose, darker and more energetic than the vapor. Black lines

twisted themselves in between the gray, looking like interlocking fingers on opposing hands. Then the blackness broke free, climbing out of the vat and into the final stage of the contraption.

Wrapping his pudgy arms around the glass, the robed man embraced the final vat. His hands grew white with power, and icicles climbed up the sides of the glass. The black steam condensed and rained down into the bottom of the vat in inky drips.

Above them, the figure watched. The vats gurgled, creating their dense black substance, and the men stood by silently, watching the magical fires and ice catalyze the process.

At the south end of the slaughterhouse,

the huge sliding doors slammed open, and another group of men entered. These men were dressed in armor and fine robes—the types who paid other men to do their dirty work.

The fat man turned and with a smile opened his arms.

"Jallal," he said. "Brother, your timing is impeccable." He embraced a tall graying man with a thick beard.

Unlike his pudgy sibling, Jallal was fit and muscular. He wore a fine chain shirt over equally fine padded clothing. With him, he had a half-dozen armed and armored guards.

"Well met, Pello," said the graying brother. "I trust everything is in order and that you haven't had any problems

with the Magistrates?"

"No problems," replied Pello. "It's been very quiet, and we are nearly ready to begin packaging the Elixir."

High above, the figure in the rafters gripped the beam tighter. Just as the figure had been told, the Tasca brothers were manufacturing Elixir—a dark, magical substance used to put the drinker into a euphoric trance. It was rumored that while in this magically induced state, the user would be able to see into the future, predict events that would come to pass, and even, if the potion was strong enough, be able to make adjustments to one's own personal fortune.

Black magic potions such as these were

becoming very popular in the seedier parts of the kingdom, and not only with those who had no access to the Weave. Word of the great powers that could be had traveled fast, and people flocked to buy the Elixir in droves.

As the rumors grew, so too did the expectations. The stories of the visions and their ability to change the future were getting more and more outlandish, driving the prices for the Elixir higher and higher. People began selling anything they could get their hands on. Bottles of unguent from skin ointment to rat poison and everything in between were being peddled as new forms of this wonder Elixir. Those unlucky enough to buy into the scam not only lost their

gold, they oftentimes lost their sight or even their lives.

The desire to see into the future was so great that even knowing the risks, many people drank whatever they could lay their hands on, trusting that the stranger in the back alley was telling the truth about the contents.

Of course, magical potion or rat poison, it didn't matter. No one was able to reach into the future. The rumors and the hope that they were true were powerful enough on their own to fuel this illicit business. The problem had grown so bad that King Korox had been forced to declare the Elixirs illegal.

Jallal crossed to the smallest vat and lifted the glass tube from its top. Sticking

his thin finger into the opening, he scraped out a small glob of the black substance.

The older man rolled it around on his fingertips. "Funny that such a simple substance would cause so much trouble." He pulled his fingers apart. The Elixir stretched into a long, thin strand. "Sometimes I wonder if it's worth it."

"What are you saying?" Pello waddled up beside his brother and secured the glass tube on the collection vat. "If King Korox is going to target us, then we should target him." He wiped his palms on his robes. "Why don't you let me take care of this? Just say the word, and the king will no longer be troubling us."

The older brother chuckled. "You want to kill the king? Very bold. But I'm afraid we've already beat you to it."
"What?"

"You heard me, little brother. Everything is in place, and plans move forward. In another tenday, the king will be dead, and our Elixir operations will be back in full swing."

The fat man lifted his arms in the air. "This is great news. Great news indeed. But what of the Magistrates? Won't they continue to be a problem?"

"We'll deal with one piece at a time. First the king, then the Magistrates."
Behind them, the glass contraption sputtered and creaked.

"The batch is almost ready," said Jallal.

He pulled out a handkerchief and cleaned the sticky, concentrated Elixir off his fingers. "I should leave you to your work."

Pello ignored his brother's prompting. "You must tell me, Brother, how are we going to kill the king? Does the Matron know? When will it happen?"

"Patience, Pello. This is not the time nor the place to be outlining the details. You will know what you need to soon enough." He handed his soiled handkerchief to his brother. "Now really, get back to work."

The older man nodded to his guards and headed for the sliding double doors at the other end of the slaughterhouse.

"You heard my brother," shouted Pello

Tasca. "Get to work."

The workers began dismantling the Elixir contraption.

The older brother and his entourage passed through the beam of moonlight illuminating the slaughterhouse floor.

A shadow flashed over them, and one of the guards looked up—into eight steel blades, glimmering in the moonlight. The man had time to let out a single scream before his face and neck were cut to ribbons.

The figure hit the ground and tumbled past the entourage, coming to his feet between the older brother and the open slaughterhouse doors. Shrugging off his cloak, the figure lifted himself to his full height, then crouched, holding his arms

wide as if he were preparing to grapple a wrestler. Dressed all in black, the figure wore a thick featureless mask. Simple, smooth, and black, the mask made him disappear into the dark, leaving only his piercing eyes and the heavy metal gauntlets on his hands—each with four sharpened steel blades—as his only distinguishing features.

"What sort of beast is this?" the older brother cried. Then realization struck the man, and he shivered. His voice dropping to a whisper, he sputtered, "The... the Claw!"

The guards pulled their swords. The air rang with the grinding sound of steel on steel, and the men spread out, surrounding the masked man.

The dark figure didn't give them the chance to trap him. Taking a single step, he somersaulted forward in a tight ball. Jallal tried to sidestep the tumbling mass, but he was too slow, and he left his feet, falling hard onto his back.

The Claw came out of his roll on top of his victim, the blades on his right hand buried deep in Jallal's gray beard.

"No!" shouted Pello, recoiling at the sight of his older brother pinned to the wood floor.

The guards closed in from all sides.

The Claw did not wait. Yanking his blades free, he stood, stepped, and tumbled, dodging between two of the armed men. Both took quick, short strikes, but both missed their target, and

the Claw came to his feet again, outside the circle of guards.

Pello Tasca rushed to his brother's side. Dropping to his knees, he lifted his head from the floor, smearing blood all over the sleeves of his robes. "Jallal! Brother!"

Jallal Tasca sputtered, trying to speak. But it was no use. He fell back limp.

Pello shook his brother. "No! No! Open your eyes."

Jallal didn't respond.

"This can't be happening. This can't be happening." Pello looked up and pointed at the Claw. "Kill him!" he shouted. "Make him pay for this."

The guards charged, a wall of chain mail and sharpened steel. Their blades came

down, and the Claw bashed them aside, his gauntlets catching the incoming swords and turning them away.

Flipping forward, the Claw bounded over his assailants. Upside down, hurtling through the air, his bladed hands flashed out, striking one guard on the shoulder and another along the back of the neck. Both collapsed to the floor, one clutching his arm, the other simply in a heap.

That was all the workers needed to see. "I'm getting out of here!" shouted one, and he ran for the door. The rest followed.

"Where are you going?" shouted Pello.

"I gave you an order. Kill the Claw!"

The workers ignored the pudgy sorcerer,

flying past him and out the open doors. Three of Jallal's guards remained. They looked at each other, then at their fallen leader. Pello was struggling to get to his feet, the front of his robes covered in sanguine stains, his brother's dead body folded on the floor.

The Claw took one step, and all three guards turned and bolted. He made no motion to follow. They weren't the reason he was here.

Casually, the masked man crossed the wooden floor to loom over the sorcerer. Pello slipped in the pool of his brother's blood and fell flat onto his back.

His voice shook as he scrambled away. "What... what do you want?"

The masked figure lifted his arm, his

bladed gauntlets reflecting the moon's glow.

Pello screamed, "No. Please no," and covered his face.

The Claw's right hand came down, grasping Pello Tasca by the arm and flipping him over onto his stomach. Producing a thin rope, he bound the fat man's hands behind his back. Then he turned his attention to the glass vats.

From a tiny pouch on his back, the Claw recovered two small globes of alchemist's fire and hurled them at the contraption. The fluid-filled orbs impacted and flashed, then exploded in a huge ball of flame.

He watched for a moment until the concentrated Elixir caught fire. It didn't

take long. The sticky substance bubbled and spat, flames reaching high into the air.

Satisfied with his work, the Claw grabbed Pello Tasca by the back of his robes and dragged him from the slaughterhouse.

Chapter two

Inside the palace at Klarsamryn, King Korox placed his hand on his cheek and sank down deeper into his throne. Spring had just arrived in ErIkazar. He'd only been king since his father had passed away the previous winter. Already he missed his duties as the head of the Crusaders, protecting the five baronies. It had been a long morning and afternoon, as most of them were. The

business of running the kingdom took all day, and so Korox had begun holding court after sunset, hoping it would discourage those with petty complaints. It hadn't quite worked out that way.

"I demand an explanation!" A thin, opulently dressed older woman stood before the king, shaking her long, craggy finger in his direction.

It was going to be another very long night at court.

"What is it this time, Lady Herrin?" asked the king, trying not to let the complete lack of interest he had in this matter seep into his voice.

"Are you mocking me, Korox?"

The King of Erilkazar sat up straight in his throne and then leaned forward to

scowl at Whitman, his scribe—a stocky man who looked like someone who had been sincerely over-educated. The royally dressed courtier was busy recording every word of the conversation and didn't notice that the ruler of his country was staring down at him. Nor, apparently, had he noticed the merchant calling the king by his proper name. With a sigh, the king turned his attention back to the cranky merchant.

"The last time I checked," he said, a smirk rounding out the corners of his lips, "the proper way to address your king would be as 'my lord,' or 'your majesty,' or even simply as 'King.' Isn't that right, Scribe?"

Whitman looked up from his vellum and

quill. "Uh, yes my lord. Those are all acceptable addresses."

King Korox scowled again.

This time Whitman realized his lapse in duty. "Oh, uh, yes." He looked up at the merchant, pushing his wire glasses down his nose and glaring over the rims. "Lady Herrin. I find myself in the awkward position of having to remind you, once again, that this is the seat of power of Erhkazar, and King Korox's personal audience chamber. Your disregard for protocol will not be tolerated."

The fusty merchant crossed her arms, lifted her nose in the air, and let out an almost imperceptible offended chuckle. Then, after a long moment of pouting, she uncrossed her arms and turned to

face the king.

"My lord—" she started.

"That's much better," interrupted Korox.

Lady Herrin took a deep breath, visibly irritated. Then she started again. "My lord, I am here as a representative of the merchant's guild to lodge our protest of your newly adopted tariffs."

"And what is it that you don't like about them?"

"We don't like anything about them," said Lady Herrin. "Surely, my lord—"she said these last two words with a fair amount of sarcasm—"even you can understand that we merchants can't make a living if the crown keeps taking all of our profits."

The king looked over Lady Herrin and

her hired bodyguards. Her robes were made from the finest spun silk, accented with gold filigree. Her hair, gray and thinning as it was, was adorned with tiny gemstones. Her fingers dripped with gold and platinum rings. Even her guards were accessorized—golden, fitted chest plates with ornate inscriptions and magical protective wards.

"I can see by the state of your dress that times are hard." He sat back. "I'm sure every copper you can save will help you bring food home for your children."

Lady Herrin narrowed her eyes and lifted her hand to begin another of her finger-shaking tirades, when the doors to the outer chamber burst open, and a unit

of the King's Magistrates stormed in. They had with them a pudgy man in robes whose hands were tied behind his back.

"What is this interruption?" said Lady Herrin, distracted from her initial thought.

The king stood, grateful for the turn of events. "You want to know why you are charged tariffs on the goods you import and sell in Erlkazar?" He pointed at the Magistrates' prisoner. "It's so we can apprehend men like this. Men who prey upon you and your fellow merchants. Men who break the laws of the realm and make this a less-than-safe place to live and do business." It was the king's turn to cross his arms. "Without those

tariffs, there wouldn't be a marketplace to sell in, or safe -roads to transport goods on, or even regular commerce. You should be happy to pay for such things, and thankful for the comfortable living you have made out of them."

"Your Magistrates are hurting that man," she said. "I demand that you release him at once."

King Korox narrowed his eyes. "This is my audience chamber, and I am the king." He took a step closer, leaning over the merchant with his superior height. "You do not demand anything from me."

A soft hand pulled on his arm, urging him away from Lady Herrin.

Furious for the interruption, King

Korox's face burned red, and he spun around intent on giving someone a piece of his

mind. But he stopped dead away, and his fury disappeared, replaced with a sense of ease.

"Perhaps, Father, you should continue the conversation about tariffs at another time." Princess Mariko pulled the king back and urged him toward his throne, then stepped into the space he had just vacated. "I'm sure you understand, Lady Herrin. The king has pressing business with the Magistrates right now."

The king smiled at his daughter. "Yes, Lady Herrin. You'll excuse me." The king walked past his throne, touching Whitman on his shoulder as he passed.

"Send for Quinn. I'll need him when we question Pello Tasca."

The scribe nodded. "Yes, my lord."

"But what about the tariffs?" shouted Lady Herrin after the retreating king.

"There will be plenty of time for the two of us to go around and around about your latest issue, I'm sure," replied the king.

"Remind me on your next visit."

The king continued past the row of pillars to the curved outer wall of his circular audience chamber. At the far end, right next to a statue of Ondeth Obarskyr, lay the door to his private reading chambers. Picking up a candle from a table beside the entrance, he opened the door and left the public domain, entering his sanctuary.

The king's reading room was dark, lit by only a pair of windows high up on the north wall. The moon's light came in through the glass, reflecting in grotesque, elongated shapes along the opposite side of the chamber. Though he loved his time alone—especially time with his history books that recounted tales of previous wars—his hectic schedule didn't allow him that luxury very often. Thus his reading room was often left dark.

Halfway across the room, his candle sputtered out. Korox cursed under his breath.

When his daughter came in with him, she would illuminate the room with a magical light. But he was all

alone this time, and he'd have to navigate back through the darkness without her help. Feeling his way past an upholstered chair, the king knocked over a small table as he pushed on toward the moonlit doorway.

Righting the table, the king took a survey of the chamber. His eyes were beginning to adjust to the darkness, and he could make out the familiar shapes of his belongings. This was the place he went when he needed solitude, but right now, here in the dark, he didn't feel alone. Something, or someone, was here with him.

"Who's there?"

The king stood still, watching the corners and trying to make sense of the

strange feeling he was having—as if someone was watching him. For a brief moment, the king considered making a break for the door. The palace guards and Magistrates were not far away.

A shadow shifted in the far corner of the room, and a chill ran down the king's spine.

"By order of King Korox Morkann, lord of this castle and ruler of all ErIkazar"—the king drew his sword—"show yourself."

The darkness grew, taking shape as it separated from the wall. A form, roughly the size of a man, appeared out of the shadow. But there was something more about him, something... animal. Where on a man would be a pair of hands, on

this figure there were blades, four on each, resembling the claws of a predatory cat or a beast from another plane.

Before the king could utter another word, the figure stepped forward into the pale beam of light, revealing a long cloak that covered most of his body and a fitted, featureless black mask over his face.

The king took a step away. "Welcome back. And well done. Capturing Pello Tasca will present a big blow to the underworld."

The Claw bowed before the king. "Thank you, my lord."

Korox slipped his sword back inside its sheath. "You gave me quite a start there.

You really shouldn't startle your king."

The Claw nodded. "You are wise to be afraid."

Korox chuckled. "Oh, come now. You do not scare me. Even if you do skulk around a little too much for my liking."

The Claw shook his head. "There is a plot against your life."

It was the king's turn to shake his head. He sighed. "Will I ever be safe in my own kingdom?" Then it dawned on him. "Is the Tasca family behind this?"

"Yes. I believe the older brother was the instigator."

"Well, I guess this means they're not fond of my Magistrates."

"Or your plan to eradicate their Elixir operations."

The king slammed his fist into an upholstered chair. "The greatest threat ErIkazar will face in our lifetime will be posed by the drugs that these cretins are pushing on our people. I firmly believe that, and I intend to stop them from destroying this kingdom with it."

"You will get no argument from me, my lord." The Claw moved to the darkened corner. "I will see what else I can discover about this plot on your life. In the meantime, be careful. Our enemies are everywhere."

Slipping into the shadows, the Claw disappeared.

"Yes," said the king, pondering this new information. "They certainly are."

Chapter Three

Over there, Genevie," said Princess Mariko. "Bring me that book. The one with the twisted-looking sigil on it."

"Yes, my lady," replied the handmaiden. Genevie was old, even for a half-elf, but she seemed capable enough. Mariko had taken a liking to her immediately. She reminded the young princess of her recently deceased mother. Anything that brought back the soothing memories of her mother was something the princess wanted near.

The handmaiden wrapped her feeble arms around the book and attempted to lift it from the shelf. The massive tome had been handmade and was constructed of leather, vellum, and sturdy hemp thread. It had been built to withstand the

rigors of age, and as such was very, very heavy.

The princess looked up from the notes she had been scribbling to see Genevie struggling.

"Oh, Genevie!" The princess raised her hand, and the book rose into the air. "Let me help you with that."

The handmaiden smiled, relieved to be rid of such a strain. "Thank you, my lady. My arms no longer have the strength in them that they once did."

"Of course, Genevie. I didn't realize how heavy it was, or I wouldn't have asked you to retrieve it." Mariko waved at the suspended book as if it were a servant. "Come," she said.

The tome floated through the air and laid

itself down on the desk.

The princess patted the bench beside her. "You too," she said to the handmaiden. "Come take a rest."

Mariko liked to play the "good princess" game, as she called it, while Genevie was around. After all, Genevie saw her as an innocent, hardly more than a child. Mariko intended to keep it that way.

"Thank you, Princess, but I still have duties to—"

"Nonsense," interrupted Mariko. "Come sit next to me. Besides, I have a secret I'm dying to tell someone."

"Well in that case..." The elderly half-elf hurried to the bench. "I'm all ears. You know how I love secrets."

The princess nodded. "Yes, I do."

Genevie bounced a little on the bench, seeming suddenly much younger in her impatience.

"You must promise to keep this a secret." "Of course, my lady."

"Well"—the princess grinned—"I think I have met' someone. Someone I might like a lot."

"Have you now?" Genevie gave the princess a conspiratorial smile and leaned in, lowering her voice. "And does your father know?"

Mariko frowned. "Oh, no. No, no, no, no, no. And you mustn't tell him."

Genevie clasped her hand to her breast. "You have my word. Your secret is safe with me."

"I've been so excited, but I haven't been

able to tell—"

A knock on the heavy wooden door to the princess's chamber interrupted their conversation.

"Princess," came a voice from the other side, "I have a message from the king."

Mariko stood and straightened her robes. She scanned the table in front of her. There were books and scrolls scattered everywhere, all covered in magical scripts.

"One moment please!" she shouted.

Clasping her hands

together, she spoke a single word. A purplish light burst between her hands, and she spread them wide, producing a large sheet of woven cotton cloth.

"Genevie," she whispered, "help me

cover the table."

The handmaiden grabbed hold of the cloth, helping the princess obscure the books and scrolls from view.

Satisfied that her recent activities were not immediately visible, the princess opened the door.

On the other side stood one of the king's messengers.

The man bowed. "Forgive the intrusion, my lady," he said. "But your father requests your presence in the audience chamber."

Mariko looked back at her handmaiden.

Genevie smiled and waved her on. "You go, my lady. I'll tidy up here."

"Thank you, Genevie."

The messenger stepped back, and the

princess headed off to meet her father.

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"Is there something else?" asked Genevie.

The messenger stood in the open doorway, watching the princess disappear down the hall. When she was completely out of sight, he turned his attention back to the handmaiden.

"Yes," he said, producing a sealed wooden box—runes inscribed from one end to the other on its outside. "This came for you."

"Thank you."

The messenger nodded and held it out. The moment Genevie's hand touched the box, the runes lit up, bluish white. They glowed, then grew dim, the runes

disappearing as the light went out.

The lid popped open, and Genevie placed her palm on top, holding it closed.

"Thank you," she repeated, looking the messenger in the eye. "You are free to go."

The messenger gave her a sideways glance, then bowed and left.

Closing the door behind her, Genevie took the box to the cluttered table and lay it down on top of the sheet and the princess's books beneath. She opened the lid and pulled out a piece of parchment. Unfurling it, she read the inscription on its surface. With each word she read, her brows lowered more and more, and her face reddened. Her

hands trembled as she neared the end.

When she finished, Genevie rolled the parchment and placed it back inside the box. Holding it in her open palm, she spoke three words, and the box burst into flames.

The light from the fire overpowered even the late morning daylight coming from the tall windows. It cast the handmaiden's shadow on the floor and wooden bookshelves. Within moments the entire box was consumed, and as quickly as it had arrived, the flame disappeared.

Genevie blew the fine blackened ash out of her palm and wiped the remaining residue onto her robes. She hurried to the chest of drawers beside the canopy

bed where the princess kept all of her most private things. Mariko was very protective of the contents of these drawers, and Genevie had been given strict instructions never to go inside.

Throwing open the first drawer, the princess's handmaiden pushed aside garments and magical devices. Not finding what she wanted, the handmaiden continued on to the second drawer and then the third, growing more frantic as she went.

"There must be something," she growled. Completing her sweep of the dresser, Genevie returned to the door. Peeking out, she found the hallway completely clear. Closing the door, she secured the lock and turned her attention to the

bookshelf. Moving aside each and every book, she continued her search.

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"You will never get away with this!" Pello shouted at King Korox and the rest of the royal court.

Heavy iron chains draped his arms, and a magical torque adorned his neck. The opal stone at its center generated an anti-magic field, keeping the sorcerer and his spells at bay while he stood trial.

Despite the restraint, the king had taken extra precautions. His court wizards waited on the fringes of the room, prepared to counter any magical attacks should the younger Tasca escape his bonds.

That was the problem with sorcerers.

Even unarmed, they were dangerous. The king stood and a tall, very fit blond man wearing a fine chain shirt with a white tabard over the top stepped out from his perch beside the throne. Two intertwined red wyverns—Korox's personal crest—adorned the blond man's chest. Quinn, the king's personal bodyguard. Though he was standing on the dais, his eyes searched every dignitary in attendance.

Turning his attention back to the bound sorcerer, the king raised himself to his full height and cleared his throat. Whitman, wearing formal courtly robes, dunked his quill in the ink vat, preparing to copy down the king's next words.

"You have all heard the proclamation of

this court," said the king, his personal scribe scratching his quill across a piece of heavy parchment. "You know the charges leveled against this man."

Taking a long moment to glance around the room, the king scanned over many people to make eye contact with an old friend, a red-headed man with three large scars across his left cheek. The man wore well-made clothing, but nothing too fancy. His royal blue and jade green crest—a simple shield covering two crossed swords—identified him as none other than Lord Purdun, the Baron of Ahlarkhem.

Lord Purdun was Korox's brother-in-law and one of his closest friends and allies.

Purdun had fought beside him and his father, the late King Valon Morkann, when Erbkazar was still forming as a nation. Korox and Purdun had been part of a fighting regiment known as the Crusaders—the elite of the elite in the then-nascent nation of Erbkazar. They had been the driving force behind the creation of this kingdom after it had ceded from Tethyr.

"Pello Tasca, you have been found guilty of trafficking in forbidden magic and potions." He stepped down off the dais and moved closer to the prisoner. Quinn moved with him, keeping himself between Pello and the king.

Korox continued on, his gaze falling upon a man in polished white plate mail,

also with the king's wyverns proudly displayed. Captain Kaden, the head of the King's Magistrates. A muscular, sharp-eyed man, Kaden looked as if he had ancestors from beyond the Hordelands. His hair was dark and straight, and his skin had a warm healthy tone, no matter what time of year. After Quinn, Kaden was the next most trusted of the king's inner circle.

Beside the captain stood Senator Divian. One of the most powerful clerics in all of Erlkazar, the senator was also Korox's most senior court advisor. She had been part of his father's court and had graciously offered to help Korox after Valon had passed away. Many of the most important laws in Erlkazar's

books had been penned by her hand. Having turned nearly a full circle while taking in the room, the king's glance came to rest on his daughter, Princess Mariko. The eye contact and the long pause had been intentional. He wanted the verdict of this trial to be felt by every single denizen of ErIkazar—the lawful and the not-so-lawful alike.

"My stance on such crimes is no secret," said Korox, now speaking directly to the shackled sorcerer. "As evidenced by my first act as king—the formation of the King's Magistrates. I have tasked them first and foremost with cleaning up the filth that you and your kind peddle to our children and families."

To this Tasca rolled his eyes, turning his body as far from the king as he could within the limits of his restraints.

The king narrowed his eyes. "It's men like you who bring evil into this world. It's men like you who burden the lives of the underprivileged. It's men like you who destroy the dreams and ambitions of our youth by seducing them with black magic and addictions. It's men like you who keep me up at night sharpening my sword, so that I will be ready to strike you down." He paused, taking a breath. "Today Torm has given me the chance to remove some of the injustice from this world—and I am ready to take full advantage."

The king took a step back, and much of

the tension left Quinn's shoulders, and his eyes softened.

"As the ruler of all five baronies and the kingdom of ErIkazar, I hereby sentence you, Pello Tasca, to a life of confinement in the Cellar."

"The... the Cellar?" Pello choked on the words, clearly aghast at the severity of the judgment.

"So it has been spoken," said the king, "and so it shall be carried out."

Pello Tasca slumped in his chair.

The king returned to his throne and nodded at the Magistrates. "Take him away."

Four fully armed and armored men converged on the shackled sorcerer, lifting him from his chair and carrying

him out of the court without his feet touching the ground.

Struggling in their grip, Pello regained some of his former bravado.

"I'll get you for this, Korox! You'll be dead soon, and so will the Claw!"

The king, the princess, and Quinn all bristled at the threat.

"This is not the end of me. Do you hear ____"

"Silence!" shouted Lord Purdun, cutting off Tasca's final words with the wave of his hand and the casting of a spell.

The criminal was dragged through the double doors and out of the hall, the memory of his final tirade still echoing

through the chamber.

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Chapter Four

The moon rose high in the night sky, chasing away all but the most stalwart shadows and blanketing Erlkazar with light. The colors were muted, mostly gone, and the shapes blended into one another, making this bright night more menacing than most. Where darkness normally gave a shroud of privacy to the roads and fields, the courtyards and rooftops, now they were laid bare, exposed for anyone to see in all their naked glory.

But it wasn't just the places that suffered from the harsh light of the moon. Anyone who chose to traverse those places was

also exposed.

In the courtyard just outside Klarsamryn in Llorbauth, the Claw emerged from the shadows to stand in the stark light. His black cape fluttered softly in the breeze as he scanned the courtyard. This was the time of night when all good denizens of ErIkazar were asleep—all good denizens except those who protected the line between good and evil.

Another figure emerged from the darkened edges of the stone palace, shaping herself not from the shadows but from the brightness of the moon's own light. She crossed the courtyard to stand before the Claw, her lightness the balance to his darkness.

"Were you followed?" asked the Claw.

"No," said Princess Mariko. "Were you?"

He smiled. "Yes. Half of the underworld will be here any moment. So we must make this brief."

"So the Claw has a sense of humor." The princess ran her finger down his arm, then traced the flat of his gauntlet. "Rather unexpected for a man with so many sharp edges."

"I have many facets. Most of them not discernible from a first glance."

"Tall, dark, mysterious... and amusing. What else could a woman ask for?"

The Claw chuckled. "If only it were that easy."

The princess stepped closer, placing her hand on his chest. "This seems pretty

easy." She reached up and pulled back the dark mask. Lifting herself onto her tiptoes, she pressed her lips against his. The Claw returned her kiss, leaning into her body.

They stood in the moonlit courtyard for a long moment, her arms wrapped around his chest.

Moments like this, moments where he enjoyed the simple, human pleasures and felt just like a regular citizen—felt free of obligations, free of danger, free to make choices that affected nobody but himself—were few, and they never lasted long. The obligations of being the king's assassin always returned.

So he learned to draw from these moments every second of enjoyment,

knowing that every one could be his last. The princess loosened her grip and stepped back to look into his eyes. She smiled at him. It was that smile that had done him in. He couldn't resist from the first moment he'd seen it, and he couldn't resist now.

"I have a gift for you," he said. Reaching into a pouch on his belt, the Claw retrieved a thin silver necklace with a simple round locket, a pair of interlocking circles with a clasp on one side, dangling from it. The moon reflected off its polished surface, directing a ray of light, shaped like two tiny clasped hands, onto the princess's chest.

She gasped as she took it from his hands.

"It's beautiful," she said.

Lifting it over her head, she let it drape from her neck. It caught the moonlight and cast it onto the Claw's face. "I will never take it off."

"I hope that's true," he said, admiring it around her neck. "The locket holds inside it an enchantment. If you are ever in trouble, just open the clasp, and I will be able to find you—no matter where or how far away you are."

The princess wrinkled her nose. "How romantic," she said, sarcasm echoing in her words. Its-

Mariko laughed. "I love it," she assured him. "Besides, I'm not going to need it." She put her hand on her hip. "I'm able to take care of myself."

"Of that I'm sure." The Claw looked down. "It's for my peace of mind."

The princess put her finger under his chin and lifted his face until he was looking into her eyes.

"Then I will wear it forever and ever." Taking his hand, Mariko turned it over so his palm faced the sky. "But you must let me do something for you—for my peace of mind."

Unfastening the straps along his wrist, the princess removed the gauntlet on his left hand. Placing it on the ground, she took hold of him, examining his palm. His hands were twice the size of hers.

The Claw looked down on her, watching as she ran her fingers over his, her smooth skin caressing the calluses and

bruises. He took a deep breath and let the moment wash over him.

The princess traced a figure on his palm, making the same lines over and over again. As she did, she spoke a few soft words, and the shape on his palm lit up brightly.

He recognized the symbol she had drawn. Her personal rune.

The Claw pulled away. "Did you just brand me?" he asked, rather incredulous. "Of course," she said, hardly able to contain her laughter. "I do this to all my men."

"Very funny." The Claw shook his hand, hoping it was an illusion. But the light remained.

The princess gave him a fake scowl.

"Hold still. I'm not finished yet."

Pulling him forward, she took another firm grip on his hand. Waving her palm over his, she spoke words that made no sense to him. When she finished, the light went out.

The Claw examined his hand. It looked the same as it always had. "What... what did you do?"

"Repeat after me," she said. "As you wish, Princess Mariko."

The Claw tilted his head. "As you wish, Princess Mariko."

The rune on his palm came back to life, glowing like a mage-lit stone.

"Now close your palm."

The Claw did as he was told, and the light extinguished itself.

"Now you'll never get lost on your way home in the darkness," she said.

"As you wish, Princess Mariko." His palm illuminated again. "I'll be..." he said, impressed by the usefulness of such a gift. "I'm touched." He closed his palm and picked up his gauntlet.

"I'm sure a man in your position will find it... helpful." She reached up and gave him another quick kiss. "I must be off now. I have much work to do."

"Yes," said the Claw. "As do I."

"Same time tomorrow night?"

The Claw nodded. "Same time."

Princess Mariko turned and disappeared into the darkness, her form of light dismantling as it slipped off into the shadows.

The Claw smiled as he watched her go. After taking one last look at his palm, he too turned and headed off into the night, toward the seedy darkness of ErIkazar's underworld.

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In the corner of the courtyard, where the shadows from two intersecting walls overlapped in complete darkness, a figure watched. Mariko had tried very hard not to be followed, doubling back more than once, traveling in the shadows, and checking her tracks.

But the figure was good at watching her. He knew her patterns and where she would look for trackers. The figure knew how to observe her without being observed. He knew that she frequently

left the royal palace late at night. He knew that she would often be out until just before sunrise. What he didn't know was where she went or with whom she met.

That was why he had followed her here, to the northernmost courtyard outside the palace.

The princess crossed the open space, stopping halfway across to speak with someone. From the darkened corner, the concealing walls blocked part of the figure's view. He could not see who Mariko had met here in the middle of the night. The moon was high and bright, leaving very little room to move without being revealed. So the figure waited. He watched her cast a spell on

something, then she leaned back, pulling another person's hand—a man's hand—into view. She cast another spell, then, after some further conversation, she leaned up to give the man a kiss.

Knowing what was at risk, the figure leaned away from the wall, craning his neck to get a better view. Had the princess turned at that moment, she would have seen the figure's dark hood, lit by the moon's rays, would have seen the smooth, pale skin of the figure's forehead illuminated by the unusually bright night.

But the princess did not turn, and the figure pressed himself back against the concealing wall.

"The princess and the Claw," the figure

whispered. "This is bigger than I had thought."

The princess turned away from her evening rendezvous and returned to the shadows on the eastern edge of the courtyard.

Just as he had before, the figure slunk away, following the princess into the shadows.

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From the rooftop, a man in a cape and wide-brimmed hat watched the princess and the Claw being watched by a figure in the shadows. It was not easy to see the figure, for it had taken great care to conceal itself in the darkest part of the courtyard. But the man in the hat had followed the figure here just as it had

followed the princess.

High above all the action, the man chuckled quietly. This was a strange turn of events. Never would he have thought he'd find the Claw as part of this. He suspected the figure had been equally surprised to learn of the princess's relationship with the king's assassin. Who would have thought it? The kingdom's most beloved royal paired with the kingdom's most-rumored and least-understood figure. Maybe there was something to this tall, dark, and handsome bit after all.

This night might turn out to be much more interesting than he had thought.

The rendezvous below broke up, and the princess disappeared back into the

shadows.

"Go on," he said, talking to the figure, though he knew it couldn't hear. "Follow her."

Predictably, his quarry did, skirting the edge of the high wall, following the shadows to the edge of the courtyard and out of sight.

"Time to go." Getting up from his perch, the man in the hat crossed the rooftop to stand at the edge of the building.

From here he could see the slowly winding road and the fields to the east of the palace. In the far distance he could see the waves in the harbor, gently pressing against the docks.

The moon's light illuminated everything in stark contrast, and he watched the

princess drift in and out of the small, concentrated shadows. She was a smart one, Mariko. She navigated her way toward the docks with the caution and confidence of a well-trained rogue. It was a wonder that the figure was able to track her at all from the street. It wouldn't surprise him if there was some magic aiding the figure's success.

The princess disappeared at the end of the road, and the figure appeared, as if on cue, from the shadows near the palace.

Reaching into his vest pocket, the man in the hat pulled out a small wooden charm, a feather tied to one end by a slim piece of leather. Squeezing it in his hand, he stepped over the edge and began to fall,

quickly at first, then much slower as he approached the ground. His cape lifted over his head, and the wide brim of his hat undulated softly in the breeze.

His feet touched the cobblestones of the courtyard with no more force than if he had just walked off a single step. Opening his hands, the charm was gone, consumed by the fall. Brushing off his palms, the man in the hat started after the figure.

Clearly the figure was not concerned with being followed or not wise enough to guard against such eventualities. Tracing its steps was quite easy, and the man followed it all the way into the heart of the underworld—the docks, storehouses, and seedy businesses that

cluttered Llorbauth's waterfront.

The man caught sight of the princess once again—atop a small stable used to house the workhorses that pulled heavy freight off of incoming trade ships. From where she was perched, she could see people approaching from any direction.

The man in the hat smiled. People were predictable. They spent most of their time looking at the road, watching where they were going. Very rarely did they look up, to see what was directly above them. Mariko was hiding in plain sight.

5"

"Nice trick," he said quietly.

Her gamble paid off. The figure reached the intersection and stopped, consulting some object in its palm. After a moment,

the figure darted down the road to the north. Getting to the next intersection, it turned around and darted back the other direction.

The man in the hat settled up against the side of a storehouse to watch as the figure's frantic searching continued. Finally, unable to locate the princess, the figure headed east, toward the Shalane waterfront and the docks.

Glancing up at the rooftop as he followed, the man confirmed what he had suspected. The princess was nowhere to be found. But that was none of his concern.

The buildings were tightly packed here, giving the moon's light less of a chance to penetrate the confines of the city's

most corrupt district. The tight corners and long, dark shadows made tracking the figure much harder, but the man managed despite the difficulty.

The figure turned down an alleyway, one block up from the water. Coming around a final corner, the man in the hat stopped cold in his tracks. The alley dead-ended in a single, wooden door. It was a door like any other door in Llorbauth, except that this one was adorned with a small crest—the golden profile of a beautiful woman, a simple tiara on her head, her long hair flowing around her face.

That crest could only mean one thing. That it was time for the man to take his hat and get far away from this place.

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Chapter Five

As the sun rose over Llorbauth, Princess Mariko dangled from the edge of the palace wall, counting footfalls. The guards had been doubled since Tasca's death threat on her father. The patrols on the roof had also doubled, making it harder for her to return home unseen.

Two guards walked past her, silent except for their footsteps.

"Ten, eleven, twelve..." The princess pulled herself onto the roof and tumbled across the stone, coming to rest behind a gargoyle perched beside a chimney stack. Hiding behind the stone creature, she waited.

A second patrol appeared in her view, marching just slightly behind the first.

The moment they disappeared from her sight, she moved again, slipping around to the opposite side of the chimney. Lifting a small, stained glass skylight, Mariko silently lowered herself down into her private chamber.

The room was dark, except for the slight trickle of light through the skylight. Crossing to her dressing cabinet, Mariko stripped off the tight garments she had been wearing and tucked them neatly into a wooden box. Placing her hand on the lid, she closed her eyes and whispered the words that activated the rune permanently placed on its surface. In a blink the box vanished, and the princess closed the doors of the cabinet. Knock-knock-knock.

"My lady," came Genevie's voice from the other side of her chamber door. "Are you awake? May I enter?"

Turning to her bed, Mariko unmade the blankets as best she could, crumpling and tossing them to the side. Then grabbing a simple gown from a hook in the cabinet, the princess hurriedly pulled it over her head.

"Yes, Genevie," she replied, trying to settle the rumpled fabric against her skin. "You may enter."

The door opened slightly, and the aging half-elf pressed herself through the narrow space. She closed it behind her as quickly as she could, as if she were trying to avoid letting anything in or out of the room.

In her right hand she carried a candelabrum, and the lit candles filled the chamber with an orange glow. Once inside, Genevie set about lighting the other candles in the room, slowly chasing away the nighttime shadows. When she finished, she set the candelabrum down on the heavy wooden table and turned to the princess.

She smiled. "Good morning, my lady. Sleep well?"

Princess Mariko rubbed her hands over her face and brushed her hair back, opening her mouth in a fake yawn. "Not so well," she replied. "I was a little restless last night." She sat down on the edge of her bed. "I didn't get much sleep."

The half-elf frowned. "Yes, not much at all." Stepping around the princess, Genevie shooed her off the bed, pulling up the wrinkled blankets and smoothing them down in an orderly fashion. "I've not seen you so restless in a long time."

The princess let out a long sigh. Time to play Good Princess, she thought.

"Yes," she said. "It's because I haven't felt this way in a long time."

Genevie stopped her tucking and folding. "Why, Princess." She put her hands on her hips and gave the younger woman a stern smile. "Am I to understand that you are lusting after this gentleman suitor of yours ?"

Mariko giggled, continuing the "good princess" act. "You make it sound so..."

She couldn't find the right word. "So wonderfully unladylike."

Genevie sat down on the bed, all but forgetting about her task of making it again. "So you saw him last night?"

The princess nodded.

"And what did he say?"

Mariko cocked her head. She rather enjoyed teasing the older half-elf. "Say?"

"You know," replied the half-elf without missing a beat, "did he tempt you with promises of his undying devotion?"

Mariko shook her head. "Don't be silly, Genevie. You and your romantic fantasies."

"No, really, what did he say? He must have said something... something to

make you so restless."

The princess wandered over to her dressing cabinet and began examining the robes and gowns, looking for something appropriate to wear. "Well, he didn't recite me poetry or compare my beauty to that of the moon, if that's what you are asking."

"Oh come now," scolded Genevie. "Indulge an old woman with your stories of young love."

Mariko lifted a simple, elegant emerald- and sapphire-colored robe and held it against her body, contemplating it. "You make me sound like some preening blueblood who can't wait to be seen at the next royal ball."

"Oh goodness," said Genevie, "I doubt

anyone would mistake you for that."

"Thank you." Lifting her dressing gown over her head, she slipped it off her shoulders and hung it on its hook. Then she began pushing her arms through the new robe. "I'll take that as a compliment."

There was another knock at the door.

"This is a busy place this morning," said the princess, rolling her eyes. "I'm not decent!" she shouted at the door.

"There is nothing you can show me that I have not seen before," said her father from the other side. "But if you wish to keep the king waiting, I understand."

Genevie leaped to her feet, dragging the blankets along with her, quickly making the bed.

Mariko flopped the heavy fabric of her robe over her shoulders and popped her head through the opening at the top, letting the blue and green roll down her body like a flowing ocean wave. Crossing to the door, she pulled it open to see her father and his personal bodyguard, Quinn, waiting outside.

"Good morning, Father." She gave a shallow bow as he entered her bedchamber.

"That's no way to greet your father," replied Korox, his arms open.

Mariko smiled and gave her father a warm embrace.

Crossing to the heavy table, the king scanned the room, letting his eyes come to rest on the handmaiden.

He grit his teeth. "Genevie, if you would, please." He indicated the chamber door with his thick, open palm. The half-elf looked nervously from the king to the princess. Then she bowed deeply and scurried out of the room. Quinn pulled the door shut behind her, staying outside in the hall and leaving the king and the princess alone in her chamber.

"What news?" asked the king.

"Not much." Mariko shrugged. "I was followed."

"By whom?"

The princess shook her head. "I don't know. Whoever it was, I lost them by the docks." "Where did they spot you?"

"Somewhere off the road, just west of

the waterfront." "Could have been an underworld sentry." The princess nodded. "Quite possibly." The king sighed. "Well, be careful tonight." The princess smiled at her father. "You too."

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The king exited the princess's bedchamber and headed down the hall. Quinn stepped into line behind him, brushing his blond hair out of his face as he followed just off the king's right side. As they approached the audience chamber, a man appeared before them. He had a long, curled moustache and the hair on his chin was neatly groomed into a sharp, pointed beard. His eyes were rather sunken above freckled cheeks, and he grinned as the two men approached.

The king lifted his hand in greeting, but before he could utter a word, Quinn was in front of him, his sword drawn.

"Step back and state your business," commanded the bodyguard.

The man didn't flinch, holding his ground, still smirking. "Stand down, Quinn," said the king in a low voice. "Vasser is expected."

Quinn lowered his sword, but he did not sheathe it. He watched the newcomer with the steely gaze of a mother bear.

The king put his hand on his bodyguard's shoulder. "It's all right. I need a moment."

Pushing past Quinn, the king pulled Vasser into an alcove off of the main hall. The man whispered into the king's

ear, and Korox listened intently.

"Yes, I knew this," said the king loud enough for Quinn to hear.

Vasser continued, and the king nodded a few times.

"I see," he said. "That I did not know."

Then, after listening to the last of what the man had to say, he dismissed him.

"Thank you. Please keep me informed."

Returning to the hall, Vasser turned to Quinn and gave him a long, overly animated bow. Standing up, he straightened his beard, sharpened the tips of his moustache, and marched off down the corridor.

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The slain body of Jallal Tasca lay lifeless on a flat stone slab. He had died

several days before—of stab wounds through the neck.

"What do you think?" asked a woman dressed in a thick purple velvet robe. "Is he reaping the rewards of the Marketplace Eternal? Or is he straggling through the scalding streets of Dis with a devil on his back?"

"I do not know," replied the wrinkled old man on the other side of the room. "Nor do I care." He was skimming over the words scribbled on a scroll, squinting in the dim light. "Why don't you ask him yourself?"

"Well, I hope it's the Marketplace," she said, unfolding a piece of waxed vellum and lifting a thin, sticky, foul-smelling slice of black flesh from its surface.

Leaning over Jallal's body, she pried open his jaw and placed it inside. Then she dropped a small leather pouch on his chest. "I would hate to think bringing him back to this world made his existence any easier."

The woman pulled back the sleeves of her robe then opened the pouch. Turning it over, she sprinkled the contents on the dead man's chest. A hundred tiny diamonds scattered across his pale skin. Tossing the leather pouch aside, the woman spread the twinkling stones on Jallal's ice-cold flesh. Closing her eyes, she began a prayer to the goddess Waukeen.

"Take this wealth, goddess of trade, protector of bounty. And return to us the

life that was taken from this good merchant."

Not one for long prayers, the woman bowed her head. "In coin we trust."

Her hands flaring with golden light, magic seeped from her fingertips, first surrounding the tiny diamonds then spreading over the dead man. The warm glow enveloped the entire stone slab, throbbing once, twice, then coalescing into something more solid.

A short burst of light consumed the tiny diamonds, replacing them with large golden coins covering Jallal's body.

Each had on its surface the profile of a beautiful woman, her face angular, uplifted, and strong. Her hair flowed around her, wisps of energy, power, and

wealth. And on her brow rested a simple tiara of gold and precious stones.

Then Jallal's body began to transform. The limbs, already strong in life, grew thicker and more powerful, the feet turning to hooves. The fingers, thin and smooth, became rough and covered with hair. The face, round and flat, protruded ever so slightly, the cheekbones spreading, the mouth expanding with sharpened teeth, and the beard disappearing, leaving only the smooth skin beneath. And on the forehead, two tiny horns jutted forward—the mark of a minor demon.

Jallal Tasca coughed, sending a pile of coins jingling off the stone slab and onto the floor. Taking in another breath, the

revived man coughed a second time, struggling with lungs that had not been used for nearly a tenday.

"Take your time," said the old wrinkled man, still not looking up from his scroll. "You've been away from this plane awhile."

Opening his eyes, Jallal sat up, sending the remaining coins tumbling to the floor. He poked at his new, stronger body, testing his skin and bones for solidity. His fingers traveled up his neck until they found the place where the four blades had punched through. There were no holes there now, only thick, purplish scar tissue piled up in smooth lumps. His fingers continued on to his face, probing its new shape and the sharpened

teeth. Finally, Jallal felt the horns, and he pulled his hands away, recoiling in fear.

"What have you done to me?" His voice was rough and scratchy.

"I have brought you back from the dead," the woman said, not at all pleased with the man's tone. "And given you a gift."

Jallal looked at his hair-covered hands. "I'm—" He cleared his throat. "I'm.. I'm in your debt," he said, resignation in his voice.

The woman nodded. "Yes. Yes you are." Still perplexed by his new form, Jallal continued to examine himself. "What is this... this... gift you have bestowed upon me?"

"You have consumed the flesh of a

ghour," explained the old man, "a demon who was in the service of an abyssal lord."

"I see," replied Jallal.

"The effects are different for everyone," continued the old man. "You seem to have received a physical manifestation." Jallal spun himself so his legs dangled off the side of the slab. Then he rubbed his temples.

"I—" He shook his head. "I don't remember much. The storehouse. The Claw coming out of nowhere..."

"That's very common," said the old man, finally rolling up his scroll and crossing over to the slab. "Your memory will slowly return, now that you draw breath again."

As if on cue, Jallal seemed struck by a sudden thought. He grabbed the woman by the arm. "My brother! Where is Pello?"

The woman pulled her robe from his grasp, irritated by his groping. "Your brother is alive."

Seeing the woman's anger rising, Jallal recoiled, realizing his error. "Matron, forgive me." He bowed as best he could while seated.

The Matron nodded, smoothing out the velvet on her sleeve where it had been ruffled. "See that it doesn't happen again."

"Yes, Matron." Jallal pulled his naked frame off the stone slab and dropped to his knees in supplication. "Thank you,

Matron."

"Yes, yes," she replied. "We don't have time for all of this. Your brother has been sent to the Cellar." "The Cellar! But how?"

"He was sentenced by the king for trafficking in Elixir," said the old man.

"A rather overzealous punishment if you ask me," added the Matron. "But perhaps we can use it to our favor."

"Forgive me, Matron, but how will my brother's imprisonment work in our favor? He is all but dead to us in the Cellar. There is no way in or out. We'll never get him back."

The Matron smiled. "You are wrong." She placed her hand on top of his head, stroking his horns affectionately, as if he

were her favorite pet. "The king, the senators, and the head of the Magistrates all have access to the Cellar."

Jallal let out a sigh of relief. "I see." He stood up, seemingly regaining his composure. "So it is only a matter of time."

The old man let out a damp, raspy chuckle. "He catches on quickly."

The Matron nodded to the old man. "Now you see why I wanted your help in bringing him back." Turning to Jallal, her gaze spoke for her.

"I owe you my life," said Jallal. "Whatever you desire, if it is within my power, you shall have it."

The old man came around the stone slab, a white robe draped over his arms. Its

chest was adorned with the image of the goddess Waukeen—the same image as was on the gold coins that now littered the floor.

The Matron took it from him and handed it to the naked Jallal. "I want you to kidnap Princess Mariko."

Taking the garment, he covered himself. "As you wish."

Then, from the folds of her own robe, the Matron produced a flared sword, wrapped in a polished wooden sheath with inlaid golden runes along the edge.

"You may need this as well," she said, thrusting the blade into Jallal's hand. "In case you meet your friend." She touched the purple scars on his neck. "The Claw."

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Chapter six

The sun had set over the Snowflake Mountains some time ago. The last rays of light disappeared as a blanket of darkness pulled up over Llorbauth. Princess Mariko made her way to the eastern-most courtyard.

As she did, she passed the statue of her mother, and she ran her hand along the polished stone plinth that held her high above the ground. Her father had erected the statue within the last year, in memory of the queen's passing. Mariko could feel the powerful anti-magic auras that emanated out of the stone. Her father had found a way to cast every protective ward imaginable on the carving of his

deceased wife. Nothing magical at least would ever defile her. While Mariko's mother had been taken prematurely, her memory would last for eternity.

Lifting her hand, the princess continued on into the courtyard. The buildings that surrounded this open bit of land were often unused. Built as the last phase of Klarsamryn, they were meant to hold foreign dignitaries and their entourages when they came for diplomatic visits. Years ago, when ErIkazar was a young nation just getting on its feet, there were many such meetings. But now that King Valon Morkann's crown had passed to his son, Korox, stability had been achieved. King Korox had united the kingdom in a peaceful accord by

anointing his fellow Crusaders as the rulers of the other four baronies. There were fewer concerns from the neighboring kingdoms these days. And they stopped trying to butt into the daily matters of the newest nation in the region.

As such, this made a perfect location for the princess's nightly rendezvous with the Claw. If there was any reason for the buildings that looked out on the courtyard to be occupied, certainly she would know. Tonight the buildings were all deserted.

The day had been cloudy, which meant the night was quite dark. This suited the princess fine. Her dark leathers would blend into the shadows.

"You're early." The words came from behind her.

"Am I?" she asked, recognizing the Claw's voice. "Or are you late?"

"Let's just say we're both right on time and leave it at that."

Princess Mariko turned around to look into the mask of the man she had fallen in love with. "Not in the mood to argue with me tonight?"

"Not in the mood to lose an argument tonight."

"You're a smart man."

"I have my moments. Where are you tonight?"

The princess grew serious. "I'm hearing about a lot of activity down near the docks again. I'm going to go check it out."

See if I can get more than I did last time. And you?"

"I'm going south, to Ahlarkhem. I have business with Captain Beetlestone, of Lord Purdun's army."

"Be on the lookout for vampires. My Watchers tell me there is some recent activity near the ruins of Dajaan."

"I have heard that too, but it's not the undead that worry me. It's the threats on the king's life."

"That's the reason I'm going to the underbelly of Llorbauth—to see if I can uncover anything about the assassination threat."

The Claw opened his mouth to say something, but then shut it again and looked away.

Mariko put her hand to his mask, and turned him to look at her. "I will not let anything happen to him while you are out of the barony."

"I know you won't."

She leaned in and kissed the cheek of his mask. "Now go to Ahlarkhem, and hurry back."

The Claw nodded. "I will see you here again tomorrow night. Be safe."

"You too."

With that, the Claw headed south. The princess watched him go, until he slipped out of sight. For someone whose name struck fear in the hearts of evil men, the Claw was far more sentimental than she would have given him credit for.

The princess left the courtyard and headed down the road to the seedy parts of Llorbauth. For the most part, the city was a lawful, well-kept affair. But down by the docks, it was another story. The storehouses, workshops, and trading guild buildings had been constructed long before Erbkazar became an independent nation. Their foundations were built right into the piers and boardwalks, and there had been little if any oversight on the proper construction techniques.

When this region had been known as the Duchy of Elestam, then a part of Tethyr, there was very little in the way of rulership or order. Any organized band of thugs could operate without fear of

reprisal, and the people did as they pleased, without regard for the well-being of other citizens or the future of the region. As the population grew and Elestam seceded to become the Monarchy of ErIkazar, the docks of Llorbauth became more and more important to the trade and economic health of the region.

The problem was that the entire area had been built on top of dangerously unsafe structures. Any part of it could collapse or move without warning. The whole port really needed to be torn down and rebuilt, but doing so would temporarily shut down commerce through the Deepwash. And that would be too costly for the merchants and indeed the Barony

of Shalanar as a whole.

The king had tried on several occasions to come up with a plan that would revitalize the area and prepare it for the future. But many of the trading guilds employed small armies of their own—sellswords who provided security for the goods and their wealthy owners. The king's efforts had very nearly started an open civil war, and so he had relented. Storming the docks with his entire army was not part of his vision for ruling Erlkazar.

As a result, the waterfront had become a sort of independent state. The trade guilds kept to themselves and protected their own. Anyone who had business there was free to come and go, but their

safety was their own concern. It became a place where ordinary citizens never ventured—a place where only criminals and toughs felt at home.

Stepping from the flagstones of the road onto the wooden planks of the boardwalk, Princess Mariko entered the seedy underbelly of the city. She had spent many nights here, patrolling the area for information. She and her Watchers were the eyes and ears of her father, and by extension, of the newly created Magistrates. On any other night, she would be looking for shipments of Elixir or other illegal potions. But tonight was something else.

Slipping into a dark alley, Mariko climbed the tall side of a decrepit

wooden building and crept onto its shingled roof. Most of the storehouses down here were owned by individual groups. There were a few larger guilds that had blocks of buildings together, but for the most part it was a patchwork of different businesses all shuffled together. Reaching the top, she could hear the faint rumbling of conversation passing by in the opposite alley. Crossing the roof, she crouched down and listened.

It was two men, and they were speaking in a language that Mariko didn't immediately recognize. Closing her eyes, she placed her fingers on her temples. "Reveal to me," she said quietly, casting a quick spell.

The sounds rising from the alley below

transformed from gibberish into words.

"Old Korox is going to get one real good this time, he is," said the first man.

"Get what he deserves if you ask me," replied the other.

Mariko lifted herself up and craned her neck. She could just see the men's heads as they traveled down the alleyway. Neither wore a helmet, but she could hear the jangle of chain mail as they walked. Turning the corner, the two men headed east, toward the water and out of earshot.

Getting quickly to her feet, Mariko looked over the edge. The ground was three stories down—a long drop, and one she couldn't make silently. The roof of the storehouse across the alley was

probably twenty-five, maybe thirty feet away. It was a shorter building than the one she was on, which would make the jump a little easier.

Turning around, she crept back to the opposite side of the roof. Then, spinning with the grace of a stage dancer, she faced the storehouse across the alley. The edge of the building blocked her view of the landing spot. For that matter, it blocked the view of the docks and other buildings as well. All she could see was the open sky and the waters of Shalane Lake in the distance. Steeling herself, she bent her knees and took off at full speed.

Planting her foot squarely on the edge of the roof, she pushed off into open space.

The princess hung for a moment, suspended over the alley by nothing but the dark of the night. She stretched, spreading herself out to reach across the emptiness. It seemed a long time, but was no more than two heartbeats—and she came down on the edge of the storehouse. Her toes touched the bricks that formed the outer wall, and she crouched as she hit, rolling forward into a ball and tumbling once before coming to her feet already at a run.

The landing had been a little noisier than she had hoped. Sliding to a stop at the easternmost wall, the princess cautiously crept up to the edge. The two men were passing just below. They were still talking, apparently so engrossed in

their topic that they hadn't heard her leap.

"That'll teach him to go messing with our livelihood and all," continued the first.

"Say, when do you think it'll happen?"

"Don't know. But I'll bet the Matron does."

Mariko's heart skipped a beat. The Matron? This was much bigger than she had first thought. If what they said was true, it could only mean one thing: the underworld planned to start an all-out war with the throne.

The men continued down the road, and Mariko followed. The storehouse was nearly side-by-side with the slaughterhouse, and the princess simply hopped over the intervening space to

continue her pursuit. She was much closer now and could see them more clearly. Both men were cleanly shaven and quite well equipped. Each had a long sword on one hip and a dagger on the other. They wore chain mail tunics, which were covered partially by sleeveless white robes. She couldn't quite make out the symbol they carried on their chests, but from the short glimpse she did get, it appeared to be the profile of a woman with long golden hair.

"I wish I could see his face when he knows he's done for."

"Yeah, wouldn't that be something?" The man slapped his companion on the arm. "Hey, what would you say to him? You

know, just before you did him in?"

"That's easy. I'd say—" Their words were drowned out by the sliding slaughterhouse door being pulled open as the two men walked inside.

Lifting the edge of a skylight, Mariko followed, slipping through the roof and lowering herself down onto one of the large framing beams.

Inside, the smell was nearly unbearable. There must have been two hundred pigs packed into the space below. They snorted and squealed, stepping on each other and pressing their snouts through the wooden slats.

The men continued through a small door on the other side of the slaughterhouse, leaving it ajar behind them. Mariko

scampered across the beam to a post along the wall and scaled her way down to the floor. Crossing the room as fast as she could, she closed the distance, inching her way around a huge burned section of the floor.

Behind the door was a small room. There were no windows, and the men hadn't lit any torches or candles. The moonlight coming in from the skylights above illuminated only a small triangle of space on the floor of the room, revealing a plain brick wall maybe thirty paces beyond. She tried to listen for the men's voices, but the soft snuffling of two hundred pigs was simply drowning out all other noise.

Pressing her back against the wall,

Mariko thought for a moment. She didn't know who was on the other side of that door or what they were doing. She was at the very least outnumbered two to one, maybe more. This wasn't a very smart idea. But the risks aside, if there was even a small chance that she could learn more about the planned assassination of her father—and if that information could help her keep him safe—then it was well worth the risk.

She had no choice. She was going to have to follow those men, and she was going to have to go quietly, hoping they wouldn't notice. If they did, well... she'd worry about that if and when it happened.

Slipping her dagger from its sheath on

her boot, the princess squeezed its hilt. The worn leather wrapping felt comfortable in her hand. Taking a deep breath, she spun away from the wall and stepped through the open door.

Just inside, she could barely see anything. Except for the sliver of moonlight, the rest of the room was completely black. Mariko slipped into the far corner. Finding it unoccupied, she knelt down and peered into the darkness.

The beam of moonlight crossed the room in front of her. If anything in the darkness on the other side wanted to come at her, it was going to have to step through the light. That

would give her all the warning she needed.

But, if there was something in the darkness closer to her...

Opening her eyes as wide as she could, she sat in place, tense, letting her eyes adjust. Nothing moved. Inside the office, the sounds of the pigs in the slaughterhouse were muffled, and she could hear a small scuffling sound coming from the other side of the room. It sounded like scratching—like fingernails on the wooden floor.

The noise started to grow, coming closer and becoming more frantic. Mariko lifted herself up into a lunge, holding her blade out to one side, ready to strike down anyone—or anything—that came into the light.

Scruff—scruff—scruff

It was right in front of her. She could feel it vibrate through the floorboards, only a few feet away. Then something appeared in the pale moonlight.

Mariko squinted, unable to make out the shape at first. It was pointed, and moved very slowly, sort of undulating as it came further into view—a rat.

An ordinary wharf rat, just scrounging around the slaughterhouse for scraps.

The princess relaxed. She lowered her blade and let out a sigh. Her brow was covered in sweat, and she could hear her heart pound in her ears. Wiping off her face with her hand, she shook her head and chuckled, relieved that she hadn't just been backed into a corner by a band of underworld thugs.

Slam.

The sliver of moonlight disappeared, and the room went completely dark as the door shut tight. The sound of boots, dozens of them, tromping across worn wooden floor followed.

Mariko reacted on instinct. Holding out both hands, she shouted the words to a spell she didn't often have to use. From her fingertips sprung long, ropy strands. Her spell

filled the room with sticky magical silk, pinning everything—she hoped—in place.

The pounding noise of running boots stopped, replaced by shouts of frustration and the sound of men falling to the ground.

Reaching out her palm, the princess touched the brick wall to her right. She cast another spell, one she used more frequently.

The chamber exploded with light as every brick in the wall lit up. The men shouted and cursed as their eyes were shocked awake from complete blackness.

"Not good," said the princess.

The room was much larger than she had anticipated. The corner she had seen in the moonlight was just a small nook. Behind the door, the office—really more like a sub-storehouse—ran off for at least several hundred paces then disappeared again in the darkness.

But more disturbing was the scene

immediately in front of her.

Twenty men, all of them wearing similar white robes and chain mail stood before her. A good dozen of them were tangled in her magical web. Several had tripped over their companions and were stuck face first to the ground, completely incapacitated. Try as they might, they weren't getting free anytime soon.

Beside the door stood a man. He wore a fine chain shirt over padded clothing, the same image of the golden-haired woman on his chest, but his face was elongated, and there were two small horns jutting from the top of his forehead. Despite his deformations, he seemed oddly familiar. The man was directly between Mariko and the way she had come in. It was

possible that there was another way out, somewhere in the still-dark section of the room, but her web and nearly two-dozen men made finding it a little trickier.

"Well met, Princess," said the horned man, his words slurring a little as they slipped over his sharp teeth. "We've been expecting you."

"I see that," she said, searching the room for an exit.

Those men not stuck fast came at her from around the edge of the web. They all carried long swords, but to a man they left them in their sheaths. Instead, they bore down on the princess with wooden clubs.

Mariko managed to raise her dagger in

time to stab the first assailant through the foot. He screamed and dropped his club. A second came in at her from the left, which she sidestepped. But the third struck her squarely on the thigh, knocking her off balance and forcing her down to one knee.

Wounded and angry, the princess looked up at the mob of white-robed men in front of her and let out a scream.

Not a cry for help or a sign of defeat—the princess's shout was more of the ear-splitting, skull-rattling, gem-shattering variety. Backed into the corner, the brick wall amplified her spell, catching six men in its blast and sending them reeling backward, holding their heads in their hands.

"The ringing! Make it stop! Make it stop!"

The men staggered away, poking their fingers in their ears and howling.

Taking advantage of the opening, the princess limped to her feet and moved toward the door. Only the horned man stood between her and freedom.

Lifting her dagger over her head, she struck a fencer's pose—one she had been taught by her fighting instructor back at the palace. The blade of her weapon began to glow a deep purple, and the runes on its edge sparkled with white light.

"Let me pass, and I let you live," she said. The man merely looked at her. "My name is Jallal Tasca," he said. "Perhaps

you recognize it."

"Pello Tasca's brother," she whispered.

That was why

he had seemed so familiar. His face did hold a resemblance to the man she had spied coming and going from the docks on many a night. But something dreadful had transformed him.

Jallal looked down on her with what the princess could only imagine was pity.

"So you do recognize me. Very good."

The princess felt something heavy hit the back of her head, and the room went blurry. She slumped to one side. A pair of hands appeared in her view, then the sleeves of a white robe.

One hand slipped behind her head, and the other held a piece of cloth to her

face. There was something caustic on the cloth. The smell of it burned Mariko's eyes and made her gag. She struggled, but the robed figure was just too strong, and the smell of the fabric made her woozy. The bricks on the far wall began to shimmer and move. They grew and shrank, coming up close to her face then slipping away. Her body grew weak. She was tired, and her eyes rolled back into her head.

Finally, she surrendered. Unable to struggle further, she felt her body go limp, then the light went out.

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Jallal Tasca led his men out of the slaughterhouse. They moved swiftly through the quiet streets. The sun would

be rising soon, and the docks would grow thick with workers and traders. Many would turn a blind eye to armed men carrying the tied-up, limp body of Princess Mariko. But most people followed a simple unspoken rule here on the wharf—if they didn't see it, then it wasn't wrong. Jallal preferred to keep to that rule, especially given his new appearance.

"Hurry," he urged, picking up the pace. The man marching in the front of the column stopped suddenly, and Jallal nearly ran right into his back.

"What is it?" barked Tasca the elder. The guard was squinting at something in the distance, and he shook his head.

"Well?" said Jallal. "Speak up."

The guard lifted his arm, and pointed to the horizon. "What... what in the Nine Hells is that?"

Jallal followed the man's outstretched finger, looking up into the sky.

Overhead, a gargantuan black mountain had appeared. Rising from a base of jagged black stone, it came to a sharp ridge at the top. If it weren't for the battlements that decorated its sides, it would have looked like a volcano, ripped from the ground to hover over Llorbauth like an executioner's axe.

The men gasped as each of them followed Jallal's gaze into the sky.

"Holy gods..." said one. He dropped his weapon and let it clatter to the ground. "We're doomed." Without another word,

he turned and bolted into the darkness, running as if he were being chased by a lion.

Seeing him take off in fright, two other men lost their nerve and went running off as well.

"Stop, you cowards!" shouted Jallal. "No one leaves unless I say so, or I will kill you myself!"

The two men froze in their tracks. The third was already too far away to hear the threat.

Jallal growled, then looked up at the structure looming in the sky. "Let's get her royal highness to the Matron and out from under that thing. Whatever it's going to do, I don't want to be out here when it happens."

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High above, Arch Magus Xeries looked down from his floating citadel onto the sleeping kingdom of Erilkazar. He'd been waiting to return here for almost two hundred years.

Last time, he wanted something very different. Sadly, it had eluded him.

Taking a sip from his goblet of blood-red wine, he waved his hand. His conjured image of this soon-to-be-conquered kingdom winked out of existence.

This time, he would get what he wanted.

Chapter seven

Call Captain Kaden!" shouted King Korox. "And Senator Divian too!"

Whitman and Quinn, the only two others in the room, bowed and took off to find the king's advisors. Korox stood at the edge of his balcony, looking down onto the valley, the water, and the sprawling city of Llorbauth.

"For all that is holy," he whispered. "What is that thing?"

Right in the middle of his view hung a mountain. The morning sun had risen, but the shadow of the floating fortress left most of the city still in the dark.

"You called, my lord?" Captain Kaden arrived out of breath, having run all the way in his heavy plate mail.

"Have you seen this?" asked the king.

"Yes, my lord. I think everyone in the barony has seen it."

The king nodded. "Yes, I suppose it is hard to miss." "I've already put the Magistrates on notice." The king paced back to the other side of the room. "Does anyone know what it is? Where it came from?" "No one I've spoken to, my lord." Quinn arrived, running up the stairs and into the chamber.

"I found the senator," he announced between large gulps of air, his blond hair stuck to his forehead with sweat.

"She

just arrived at the palace and will be here momentarily."

The king continued to pace. Nothing like this ever happened during his father's reign. If only his wife were still alive. She always seemed to know what to do in impossible situations. Thinking of her gave him an idea.

"Quinn, see if you can find Plathus," said the king.

"The queen's old tailor?"

"He's probably the oldest person in Klarsamryn. Maybe he knows something about this... this thing floating outside my window."

Quinn bowed and left. As the king's bodyguard stepped out, Senator Divian stepped in.

One of the king's chief advisors and one of the most influential voices on the

matter of law and order in the kingdom, Senator Divian was also a very powerful cleric. Tall and slender, her hair had gone completely white years before, with only the occasional strand of grayish blond still showing. Despite her slowly advancing years, she was still quite attractive, and more than a few of Erbkazar's powerful dukes and noblemen had pursued her.

Winded like everyone else from the rapid climb up the stairway, the senator approached King Korox. Under her left arm she carried what appeared to be a very old and very heavy tome. And in her right hand, she gripped an ornately wrapped alabaster staff.

"I have been trying all morning," she

blurted, trying also to catch her breath. "But I've learned nothing." "Trying what?" asked the king.

The cleric came to stop at his side. She placed her staff on a small table and opened her dilapidated book. The worn pages bore an ancient script on them. And the king recognized immediately that this was a holy text—perhaps the oldest of its kind in the kingdom.

"Trying to see inside," she said, having now regained much of her composure.

Waving her hand over the words as she recited them aloud,

Senator Divian raised her voice in a melodic prayer. Above the book, a small cloud of white, gaseous vapor appeared. It swirled in long wisps, folding over

itself until it formed into a small globe. The globe spun in a tight circle, spinning faster and faster as the senator continued her prayer. In the middle of the globe, a shape took form—the torn, jagged ridge of the mountain floating over the city.

The vision grew, the crags and sharp edges coming into focus. As it closed in, openings appeared along the base and higher up along the ridge. They looked to be hand-hewn archways with heavy stone doors hung in between.

The magical image closed in on one of these archways. Along its edges were several rows of inlaid golden filigree.

"What is that?" asked the king, pointing at the ornate markings.

The wisps of vapor shot away from the

globe. The floating mountain began to shake and grow blurry. The image exploded into a million tiny mores of black, buzzing around each other like a hive of angry bees. Then just as quickly, they coalesced into the shape of a monstrous hand—huge, hairy fingers with scabs on the knuckles and sharp, discolored claws at the ends.

The hand reached out, grabbing the edge of the tome and slamming it shut. The book tumbled from the senator's grasp, landing on the floor with a loud slam and splitting slightly at the seam.

The senator let out a perturbed sigh and bent down to pick up her tome, seeming unaffected by what they had just witnessed. "As I was saying, I've been

praying all morning for a vision into what that hunk of black rock out there wants from us."

"How do you know it wants anything?" asked the king.

Senator Divian looked up at King Korox. "Make no mistake, my lord. Whatever is inside that thing is made of pure evil, and evil always desires something."

The king nodded. Turning away from the senator, he

looked out again at the black mountain.

"You say you tried to cast that spell before, and each time you see nothing more than we did this time?"

"That is right," replied the senator. "The entire ridge is warded against scrying. I

have seen nothing more than you have."

"Any guesses?"

The senator laughed. "Perhaps a demon has decided to take a holiday in Llorbauth."

The king scowled and turned to Captain Kaden. "And you? Any ideas?"

"I've never seen anything like it." The leader of the Magistrates shook his head. "But whatever it is, we need to be ready to fight it."

"Are you suggesting that we send our army up against that... that abomination?" asked Senator Divian. "Do you think that is wise? We still don't know anything about it."

"What I am suggesting, Senator," said Kaden, "is that we must be ready to

defend our home. And yes, one option is force."

"I hardly think provoking an attack from a magical foe is the correct course of action, Captain," said the Senator.

"Silence," said the king. "We have enough trouble without the two of you getting into one of your philosophical squabbles."

"Yes, my lord," replied Kaden, shooting the old cleric a nasty glare.

Senator Divian picked up her tome and crossed her arms, holding the book to her chest. She returned the captain's look. "As you wish, my king."

"Good. I will need the both of you on the same side if we are going to guide Erhkazar out of this in one piece."

Both nodded, but they continued to stare at one another, refusing to look away.

The sound of footsteps on the marble floor broke the awkward silence.

The king waited for the senator and the captain to break their gaze with one another before looking up himself to see that Quinn had returned.

The king's bodyguard escorted the late queen's tailor. The impeccably dressed old half-elf walked with the aid of a cane, and Quinn held his arm, helping him finish climbing the stairs.

"Plathus," said the king, relieved by the tension breaker and genuinely glad to see an old familiar face. "It's been a long time."

The half-elf, his back hunched from a

century of bending over a needle and thread, ambled to the king and took his hand in greeting.

"Too long, I'm afraid," replied Plathus.

"Your clothes are looking quite shabby."

The king smiled. "I see you haven't lost your charm."

"No, no," said the half-elf. "I've lost much of my eyesight, and many of my teeth, but not my charm." Reaching into a pocket on his vest, Plathus pulled out a tiny pair of spectacles and placed them on the bridge of his nose. "Now," he said, looking the king up and down. "What sort of garment did you have in mind?"

"Actually, Plathus, I have asked you here for another reason."

The half-elf lifted his nose. "Oh?"

"Yes," replied Korox. "I want to know if you've ever heard of or seen that." He pointed to the floating black mass hovering over Llorbauth.

Plathus followed the king's outstretched arm and gazed out over the balcony.

"Oh my." The old half-elf lost his balance and tottered sideways. His spectacles fell from his face, shattering as they hit the marble.

Kaden, Quinn, and the king all dashed to catch him, but they weren't fast enough, and Plathus spilled to the floor. His cane slipped from his hand, bouncing several times,

and the harmonious knock of the solid silverwood filled the chamber.

"Are you hurt?" asked the king.

The old half-elf seemed confused and a little dazed. He checked himself over, looking in each of his pockets before nodding.

"No, no. I don't think so."

The king and Quinn helped him back to his feet.

Plathus grimaced sheepishly. "Thank you," he said, dusting himself off and trying to regain some of his dignity.

"So I take it you've seen this before," said Korox, handing him back his cane.

The old tailor pursed his lips, seriousness written on his face. "Not with my own eyes. But I have heard of it, have met others who have seen it hang in the sky."

"Do you know what it is?" asked the senator. "What it wants?"

"It is called the Obsidian Ridge," said Plathus. "At least, that is what we called it at the time. What it wants, I do not know."

"Do you know where it came from?" asked the king.

The tailor shook his head. "No. All I know is that no one will speak of the terrors that follow the arrival of the dark citadel. To speak of them gives them life. Makes them real—flesh and blood from shadow and hate."

"How long ago did it last appear?"

"It's hard to say." Plathus thought for a moment. "I was only a boy, and the elves who spoke of it were old themselves."

Perhaps a hundred, two hundred years ago?" He shook his head.

"Did it appear here?" asked the senator.

"In ErIkazar?"

"ErIkazar had not yet been conceived. It was still part of Tethyr, and the Crusaders who liberated her were not yet born." He shook his head, a grave look on his face. "No, this very thing appeared over Calimshan."

"What else can you tell us?" The king was growing more and more nervous with every word the old half-elf spoke.

"Just that you are right to be afraid—terribly afraid of the Obsidian Ridge."

"That's all you have to say?" said Senator Divian. "That we should be

afraid? You know nothing else to say?" The old half-elf leveled his gaze at the senator, the stern look of a disciplinarian about to scold a disobedient child. "I know that we are wasting time standing here talking." He turned back to the king. "We're in for a fight. And not a quick one. You'd do well to make preparations to defend Llorbauth." He bowed his head before his king. "My lord, the battle has not yet started, but I do believe we are at war."

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An entire unit of the king's army rode out from the palace. Five hundred men strong, they carried the royal flag of Korox Morkann at their head—the twin red wyverns slithering as the fabric was

pushed by the wind. Polished to a high shine, their armor reflected bright in the afternoon sun. The war-horses donned the livery of the kingdom of Erlkazar. The riders carried long swords, their hilts tied symbolically shut with peace ribbon.

It was the king's great hope that they would not need to use their blades—not against this foe, not today, not ever. The peace ribbon had been the compromise he had made to appease Senator Divian. If his army was going to ride out to meet this threat, at least they could arrive with the illusion that they were willing to negotiate. Or so the senator argued.

The shadow of the Obsidian Ridge had grown longer as the day had gone on.

And the riders' armor, reflective and bright, went dark and dull as they rode into its embrace. The captain at the head of the column held up his hand, and the well-disciplined unit of cavalry came, as one, to a stop.

The captain looked up at the floating citadel. If possible, it was even more imposing up close. The black stone that formed the fortress's base looked as if it had simply been ripped from the earth. Like a huge hand had reached down from out of the sky, grabbed the ridge, and tore it from its home—leaving a gaping hole in the ground and taking with it most of a mountain range.

Broken stone seemed to drip from the

mountain's surface. Angular boulders tumbled over each other, shattering and re-shattering as they crashed into the sides of the citadel, only to fall off the base into the open air, ultimately burying their sharp edges in the ground below.

The captain swallowed hard. He'd been sent here with a message for whoever or whatever was inside.

"In the name of King Korox Morkann, the capital city of Llorbauth, the Barony of Shalanar, and the Kingdom of Erlkazar, we come to speak with the lord of the Obsidian Ridge!" His words echoed in the chasm between the floating citadel and the city below.

Stones continued to fall from the black mountain, splattering their sharp, jagged

bits across the ground like raindrops in a mud puddle. The captain and his men waited, but there was no response.

Clearing his throat, the captain continued. "We have come with the intention of negotiating the peaceful retreat of the Obsidian Ridge from the Kingdom of ErIkazar. We do not wish this meeting to become a hostile conflict, but we are prepared to defend our home with any means necessary." The captain paused, chewing on his next words. "Even bloodshed."

No response.

"We respectfully request—"

The captain's message was cut short by the sound of grinding stone. The heavy doors that hung inside the hand-hewn

archways slowly opened. The dripping stones falling from the edge of the fortress came down harder, a light drizzle becoming a rainstorm.

Black shapes poured out of the doors. They rolled down the sides of the citadel, dropping off the base and joining the shower of jagged obsidian. When they landed on the ground, they did not shatter—they unfurled.

Like men, they stood on two legs. But that is where the similarities ended. Their skin resembled the broken bits of obsidian littering the ground—smooth, shiny, and pitch black. Tufts of course black hair covered their bodies in patches. Their heads were long and thin; teeth like those of a wild boar; hands

covered in spiky bone and long sharp obsidian claws; eyes, light blue circles against huge pure black pupils; hooves in place of feet; and long thin tails with wicked-looking barbs at their tips.

"May Helm have mercy on my soul," whispered the captain.

That was all he had time to say. The foul beasts pounced upon the front row of cavalry, sinking their teeth into soldier and mount alike. The sounds of bodies breaking and flesh being torn from bone wafted out into the plain. The screams of dying men and horses echoed under the obsidian citadel.

The cascade of black beasts from the floating mountain grew. The creatures poured down on the heads of the king's

army. The soldiers' swords broke their peace bonds, but they rarely had time to do much else. The creatures were swift and merciless. They tore into the cavalry with the vigor of hungry dragons. And as quickly as the rain of death started, it ended.

All five hundred men in the unit lay dead, dismembered, or pulverized. Their mounts lay with them, many resembling little more than wrinkled shreds of flesh and mingled piles of intestine, stomach, and broken bone. The field was muddy from the dirt mixing with the puddles of blood.

The beasts let out a cacophony of satisfied wails, then piled atop one another, building a ladder out of their

bodies until they could reach the citadel's base with their razor claws. Climbing over each others' backs, moving as one, they scrambled back up into the open archways, leaving their carnage behind. When the last of them had returned from whence they came, the stone doors swung closed, their heavy grinding signaling the answer of the Lord of the Obsidian Ridge.

Chapter Eight

The long journey back to Llorbauth from Duhlnarim was finally over. It had been early morning when the Claw left Klarsamryn, but he returned in total darkness.

Though inconveniently timed, the

information he'd retrieved from Captain Beetlestone would be of great use in his fight against the Elixir trade. But right now, the king's assassin was preoccupied with the gigantic floating volcano perched over Llorbauth and the developing plot against the king's life.

A row of low hedges had been planted just outside the southern edge of the palace. The groundskeeper, in her infinite wisdom, had placed them several strides away from the building, so they had room to grow and mature. After almost ten years, the hedges were still considered young. Though they were not very tall, they were quite full, and the space between them and the palace gave the Claw easy, unobserved

access to and from the courtyard where he nightly met the princess.

Tonight was just like most other nights. The outer buildings that surrounded their rendezvous were shut up tight. The spring air was warm, and the new blossoms on the trees filled the courtyard with their sweet fragrance—a romantic place for a late night meeting.

Coming around the corner, the Claw passed the tall statue of Mariko's mother, the queen. She was posed with an open book in her hands, looking down at the pages. Every time he came into the courtyard, the Claw couldn't help but think that she was watching him. He wondered sometimes whether or not she would approve of his

rendezvous with the princess.

Slipping past the statue, he entered the courtyard and made his way to their meeting spot near the center. He was quite late, but despite his tardiness, he was the first to arrive. That was unusual but not unheard of. Especially considering the arrival of the black fortress.

Still, something wasn't right. And after waiting in the courtyard for some time, he started to get concerned. The sun would be coming up soon, and with every passing moment, the chances of meeting the princess were growing smaller.

The Claw's long day had become even longer. As he slipped out the way he had

come, he glanced up at the stone carving of the queen.

"I'll find her," he said.

Then he headed down the thinly paved road toward the docks—the stomping grounds of Llorbauth's underworld.

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The shadows near the Obsidian Ridge seemed unnaturally dark. Even in the dead of night, the looming citadel cast a pall over the homes and lives of everyone in Llorbauth.

Though he was still quite a ways away, traversing the road from the palace to the docks was the closest the Claw had been to the hulking mountain. More than simple blackness, or even the foreboding sense of unease that it gave off, there

was power here. Great power. He couldn't be certain, but he could have sworn he heard a high-pitched humming, as if the entire citadel were vibrating, pushing the air around it.

Moving cautiously through the trees and brush along the side of the road, the king's assassin froze in his tracks.

He heard voices carrying on the wind. At least two, maybe more. He stopped to listen. They were gruff and deep, and it sounded as if they were just up ahead.

Slipping quietly through the brush, he approached what appeared to be two men. Both on horseback, they sat in their saddles, looking this way and that in the middle of a tight curve on the main road. "They better get here soon," said one.

"I'm not all that happy about waiting for our Elixir in the shadow of that... thing."

"Nor am I," replied the other.

Moving in a little closer, the Claw crouched in the heavy brush only a few steps away. From this part of the road, neither the palace nor the entrance to the docks were visible—the ideal location for an illicit rendezvous.

"Do you hear that?" asked one of the men.

The Claw didn't move. His heart raced. He'd been preoccupied with the Obsidian Ridge. Had he given himself away?

"I heard nothing," said the other.

"No, listen," insisted the first. "Coming from the docks."

The sound of horses drifted in off the water and mingled with the breeze rustling the leaves. Then a coach came into view. A driver and a guard sat up front, side by side on a single wooden bench. Both jingled with chain mail.

The carriage had two compartments, a traditional one right behind the driver, and another attached to the top for more important passengers. The upper box had curtains across its windows. The Claw recognized the coach. It had been custom made, and there was only one like it in the kingdom.

The man inside was one of the most notorious wizards-for-hire in all of Erlkazar. He had cashed in on the Elixir trade, traveling from town to town,

selling bottled potions to the highest bidder. But unlike many of the cheats and swindlers, this man sold the real deal.

His potions were magical all right—dark magic. Those who swallowed the Elixir would find themselves transported to another time and place. They would have their euphoric trance, but often they never came out of it. Those who did come out became hopelessly addicted, needing to get more and more.

The coach reached the curve in the road and slowed as it reached the two men on horseback. Leaping from his crouch out of the trees the Claw somersaulted onto the dirt road in front of the carriage.

Two quick flips of his wrist severed the leather straps holding the horses' halters to the shafts. Startled by the sudden appearance of a masked, bladed figure, the horses immediately bolted, galloping down the road tethered together but free of their wheeled burden.

"What in the—" shouted one guard.

"We're under attack!" hollered the other. No longer attached to the horses, the coach came to a rolling stop. The guard and driver jumped down, pulling their swords with a practiced flair.

"Surrender." The Claw got to his feet, his bladed gauntlets poised at his sides. "Or I'll be forced to kill you."

"I'd give you the same option," said the coach driver, "but it's too late for you.

Whoever you are, you've chosen the wrong coach to rob."

The doors swung open and two more men, each with a pair of short swords, stepped out. Then the men on horseback rode around the carriage and took up positions behind the Claw, each pointing a loaded crossbow at him as they stopped.

"This is your last warning," said the king's assassin. "Drop your weapons and turn over your cargo. It's your only chance to live."

The driver chuckled. "You hear him, boys? We got him surrounded and outnumbered six to one, and he's the one giving us orders." The other guards didn't laugh.

The driver lunged, stabbing to his left then striking to his right. The attack forced the Claw back.

The Claw dropped to the ground and somersaulted backward. Curled into a ball, he heard the tell-tale twang of crossbows discharging, one right after the other. The first bolt thudded harmlessly into the ground in front of the driver, right where the Claw had been standing. The second, however, hit him square in the ribs, knocking the wind from his chest and sending him spinning sideways.

Getting to one knee, the Claw looked down at himself. There was no blood, no bolt sticking out of his skin. His whole left side throbbed in pain, and it hurt to

breathe. Scanning the ground, he saw why—they were firing square-tipped bolts—wide, flat heads used to dent and ruin heavy armor, not pierce. These men were prepared to fight a unit of soldiers in plate mail. Instead they were fighting him, and they had just crushed one of his ribs.

They didn't give him much time to recover. Three men came at him at once, their swords darting from different directions. The Claw barely had time to bash them aside and skitter back. Getting to his feet, he favored his hurt ribs, trying to keep his left arm close to his body.

The driver and the other three swordsmen were closing in. The men on

horseback were cranking their crossbows, getting ready for another volley. He suspected they wouldn't use the same bolts, and next time he wouldn't be as lucky.

The Claw took one more step back then launched himself into the oncoming guards. The first man slashed at him with his short sword. Catching one between both gauntlets, he twisted, breaking the sword in half. The other blade slipped harmlessly past as the guard lost his balance, tripping and falling to one knee. The Claw growled at the sharp burning in his own side. It hurt, but the pain faded as he concentrated on the fight in front of him. Turning, he slit the guard's throat in a single swipe, dropping the

man lifeless to the ground.

Two other men came at him, one from each side. Dropping into a crouch, he put all of his weight on his left leg, sweeping his right out. The move caught both men behind their knees. The guards tumbled, landing hard on their backs, spread eagle on the ground. Slashing just below the cuff of their chain mail tunics, he gutted them both, spilling their innards—leaving them alive but helpless as he moved on to the next guard.

Darting underneath the first horse, the Claw slit the strap, and the saddle slipped off sideways. The rider grabbed at the reins, pulling to hold himself up, but it was no use. His feet tangled in the

stirrups, and the man fell from his mount. The bolt he had been loading into his crossbow dropped from his hands, landing harmlessly on the dirt road.

The horse, unnerved at losing its rider, pranced and whinnied. The rider still held the reins, yanking the poor beast's face to the left. Skittering sideways, the mount stepped down on top of its fallen rider—right on his head, smashing it like a pumpkin.

The Claw rolled away, out from underneath the frantic horse. Getting to his feet, he watched as it reared back then took off at a run, dragging the limp body of its tangled rider with it down the road.

The other rider, fumbling with his

crossbow, gave up on the endeavor, tossing it away and pulling his sword. He kicked his heels in and galloped toward the Claw at full speed. Twisting away from the attack, the Claw leaped into the air. Grabbing hold of the rider's shoulder, he pulled himself up onto the back of the horse. The blades of his gauntlet bit deep into the man's flesh, and the guard curled into a ball, dropping his sword and falling sideways off the horse.

Grabbing hold of the reins, the Claw climbed into the saddle and turned the mount around to face the carriage. A pair of eyes peered out of the upper compartment for a flash, then the curtains over the window were jerked shut. Of

the guards, only the driver remained standing. He held his blade out before him, but it shook in his grip as he surveyed the carnage on the ground.

The Claw eased the horse forward, and the driver raised his hands in the air.

"I surrender."

"Drop your sword," said the Claw.

The driver nodded nervously and did as he was told.

"Now leave," said the Claw.

"L-leave?"

"Go back to the docks." The Claw rode up beside the driver, looking down at him through the dark holes in his mask.

"And tell everyone there about what happened to you today. You tell them that the Elixir trade is finished in

Erlkazar."

"Uh... uh, y-yes," stammered the driver.

"Certainly. As you command."

"Go now. Before I change my mind."

The man turned and ran back toward the water and the seedy side of Llorbauth.

The Claw climbed off the horse and approached the carriage. The doors on the flying coach were still closed, and the curtains were pulled tight against the windows.

"In the name of the King Korox Morkann, I command you to exit the carriage."

Nothing moved.

The Claw cleared his throat. "You are to be taken to Llorbauth, where you will be tried for trafficking in black magic."

Still nothing.

"You saw what happened to your guards when they resisted. This is your last warning. Come out and surrender, or I will take you by force."

The latch clicked, but the door stayed shut for a long moment. Then, slowly, it creaked as it opened. It was dark inside with the curtains pulled tight, and though the door was open, the passenger didn't immediately appear.

The Claw was struck cold by a terrible thought. "Invisible," he muttered.

Leaping up onto the edge of the carriage, he reached his arm inside the coach, swiping around blindly. Nothing. Nothing.

Then his blades caught, and an

earsplitting screech filled the car.

"Damn, damn, damn!" shouted a voice.

"I'm cut! I'm bleeding!"

Then the air crackled, and the hair on the back of the Claw's neck stood on end. A bolt of blue-white energy shot out of the coach. The Claw barely had time to throw himself backward as the magical lightning whizzed past him and impacted the road. Rocks and dirt flew everywhere, covering the bodies of the fallen guards.

The Claw landed flat on his back, the front of his cloak singed. Jumping to his feet, he closed on the carriage, not stopping to brush the dirt from his chest. A hand shot out of the open door, pointing a wand at him with its shaky

fist.

Not waiting for another blast, the Claw swung down with his right gauntlet, catching the wizard's hand under its razor-sharp blades and raking four deep gashes along his forearm. The man squealed like a stuck pig and dropped his wand as he clutched his bleeding arm.

Grabbing the wizard by the collar of his robe, the Claw dragged him out of the passenger compartment and dumped him onto the ground in front of the carriage.

The man was thin and rather sickly looking—not exactly as the Claw had imagined him. He wore fine, red velvet robes and sported a well-waxed moustache on the front of his narrow

face. Lying on the ground, he pressed his robes against the pumping wounds, moaning.

"Please," he said, sobbing and rocking side to side. "I've done nothing. You have the wrong man."

The doors to the lower compartment were still wide open. The inside was full, stacked to the ceiling with sealed crates. Smashing his fist through the wooden top of the first crate, the Claw pulled out a flask of the brownish Elixir. "So," he said, holding up the proof. "You're not involved in the Elixir trade?"

"That's not what it looks like." The wizard held up his one good hand. "They're just... just healing

potions."

The Claw popped open the cork on the flask. "Really? Healing potions?" He looked down at the gushing wounds on the man's right arm. "Looks like you need one now."

Grabbing the wizard by the back of the head, he forced the open bottle into his mouth. "Drink."

The scrawny man struggled against the bigger man's grasp, twisting, spitting, and gasping for air. The Claw gripped a handful of hair and tilted his head back, forcing the flask deeper into his mouth. The thick brownish liquid spilled out the sides of his mouth and drizzled down his cheeks. But despite his attempts to keep it out, the wizard eventually swallowed

several large gulps.

The Claw tossed away the empty bottle and shoved the peddler back onto the ground. Scrambling backward away from his attacker, the wizard gagged and coughed, gasping for air.

"Are you—" The wizard convulsed and vomited all over himself—"crazy? You almost killed... almost..." His head began to loll back and forth on his shoulders. His eyes grew dim, closing part way. "Almost... almost killed... killed... me." Slipping backward on the viscous liquid, the wizard tried to hold himself up. He tried to stand, but only got part way to sitting, a confused look on his face.

The Claw lifted the wizard by the front

of his robes. Placing his hand on the scrawny man's forehead, he pried his eyelid up with his thumb. The wizard's pupils were completely black, fully dilated, and his eyes were darting back and forth.

The Claw looked down the road, where the trees blocked the view to the docks beyond. The princess could take care of herself. Right now, duty called.

Lifting the wizard off of his feet, the Claw flopped the man's incapacitated body over the saddle on one of the horses. He ripped a strip of the man's robe off and tied a bandage around his arm. He pulled a tinderbox from under his cape, lit a piece of parchment, and tossed it inside the open door of the

carriage. The dry wood of the Elixir crates ignited, and soon the flames reached out to wrap the rest of the carriage in their embrace.

The Claw grabbed hold of the reins and lifted himself onto the horse. Adjusting the limp body of the wizard on the saddle behind him, he took one look back. "Healing potions, huh?"

The coach erupted in flame as the Elixir caught fire.

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Chapter Nine

A complete slaughter. Not a single man or horse returned alive. The horror of the situation lay heavy on the shoulders of King Korox. He'd been pacing the length of his audience chamber for some

time, receiving reports from his scouts and weighing his battle options. He sat now in his throne, his heart darkened. Evacuation, it seemed, was a very real option.

The sun was rising, and he had not yet been to bed. His head was full of thoughts—of the men who had been lost; of Five Spears Hold, the closest, safest location to send refugees if and when he gave the evacuation order; and of the newest threat posed to his kingdom, the hulking, blackened citadel that blotted out the daylight and cast fear upon the hearts of every citizen in Llorbauth.

"You cannot blame yourself for what happened."

Korox looked up to see Senator Divian

standing at the entrance of the audience chamber.

"Can't I?"

The senator smiled. "Well, you are the king, so I suppose that means you can do whatever you please."

He smiled back, weakly. "That's what I'm told."

The senator sat down on the steps of the dais, at the foot of the king's throne. "It wasn't you who killed those men. You were only trying to protect the people of this kingdom."

"Tell that to those soldiers."

"Oh, come now," the senator scolded. "You know better than most that the life of a soldier is a perilous one at best. Those men knew what they were getting

into. They were men of honor, men of duty, and they proudly served Korox Morkann, the Warrior King."

"You make me sound so glorious for having sent an entire unit of men to their deaths."

Senator Divian placed her hand on his leg. "It was not your actions that struck those men dead. And that may not be the only hard decision you have to make in the coming days."

The king scratched his head. "But you were against the decision to send men out there in the first place."

The senator shook her head. "That's not true. At the time, we did not know what we were dealing with or what that thing wanted."

"We still don't," reminded the king.

"No," she conceded, "but I think there is little doubt that whatever it wants, it means to do us some harm if it doesn't get it. And for what it's worth, I think you did the right thing—for ErIkazar."

The king took in a deep breath and nodded. He sat in silence, the senator at his side, mulling over the choices he'd made and would have to make.

Whitman's voice broke his quiet contemplation.

"My lord!" The scribe's boots made a loud clapping sound across the marble floor. "My lord, there appears to be a message for you outside the palace gates."

"A message? From whom?"

Whitman stopped in front of the throne. "From... from that thing—the ruler of the Obsidian Ridge."

The king leaped to his feet. "Why was it not brought to me?"

"Uh..." Whitman fumbled for a moment.

"My lord, it's... it's—"

"It's what, Whitman? I don't have time for your mumbling. Spit it out."

"The message is inscribed on a giant slab of stone. It cannot be moved."

The king looked at the senator, questioning her with his eyes. She shrugged, just as confused as he.

"You say it's at the palace gates." The king made a move for the door, his bodyguard Quinn right behind him, Senator Divian a close second.

Whitman followed. "Yes, my lord."

Down the steps into the great hall, the king collected followers like rats to a piper. They fell into step behind, wondering, he assumed, what the message from the Obsidian Ridge would bring to light.

Outside of the keep, a crowd of servants and court functionaries were already gathered. Though the drawbridge was down, and the heavy wooden doors were open, the portcullis that protected the gateway was shut—a sign that not all was well in ErIkazar.

"Step aside!" shouted Whitman. "Make way for King Korox!"

The crowd, previously too preoccupied with the sight before them, now turned

and parted. They bowed their heads, many dropping to one knee before the king.

Korox looked at each one of them as he passed, nodding his acknowledgment. He knew these people, some better than others, but he knew them. He had grown up with many of them, and had seen them have many emotions. He had watched them celebrate the new harvest, cry over the death of close friends, rejoice at the birth of a new child. But as he looked upon them now, he saw something new—he saw fear. He knew how they felt. And though it was comforting to know that he was not the only one afraid of the floating black citadel, he also knew that these people were looking to him to

bring them safely through this time of uncertainty.

Reaching the portcullis, Korox gazed out between its rough iron bars at a huge black obelisk. Carved completely out of obsidian, the enormous stone stood three times the height of a man, and it rested now just on the other side of the drawbridge. Words, written in Common, were inscribed on its surface, but from where he stood, the king couldn't make out what they said.

Korox turned to the nearest palace guard. "How did this get here?"

The guard fumbled for the words. "It just... just... did, my lord."

"What do you mean, 'it just did?' It's a huge stone obelisk. Did it drop from the

sky?"

The guard shook his head. "No, my lord. One moment, it wasn't there. Then as the sun rose over Shalane Lake, it... it just was."

"And you saw no one? No creatures, no soldiers, no wizards, no one appeared with it?"

"No, my king," replied the guard. "Only the obelisk."

The king nodded. "Well then, raise the portcullis," he ordered. "I want to get a better look."

The order echoed over the heads of the people, shouted from one guard to the next, until it was answered by the grinding of heavy chain. The huge metal gate that protected the entrance of the

palace complained as it was lifted into the air. With each crank of the wooden gear, the portcullis drew higher, the pointed ends looking like the jaw of a gigantic beast, ready to chomp down on any who drew near.

The king didn't wait for it to reach its full height. Ducking under the partially open gate, he made his way down the drawbridge, into the early morning. The senator, Quinn, and Whitman all followed. Captain Kaden rushed to catch up, fastening the last few buckles of his plate mail as he shouldered his way through the crowd, joining the others as they left the palace.

As they drew closer, King Korox began to recognize the words inscribed on its

surface. The chiseled letters only became legible when the light hit them at just the right angle, reflecting off the inner surface of the carving and casting the words in contrast to the darker stone. Drawing up to the edge of the obelisk, the king sidestepped, tilting his head to get the sun's early rays into the right position.

King Korox Morkann of Erkazar,
Underestimate my power at your folly.
Further resistance or acts of aggression
will not be tolerated.

On the moon's rise in four days time,
deliver to me your eldest daughter,
Princess Mariko.

Sacrifice the princess, or you shall
forfeit the lives of everyone in your

kingdom.

Arch Magus Xeries

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Quinn caught the king under the arm, holding him up as his knees went weak.

In all the time he had been serving Korox Morkann, the Warrior King as many called him, he had never seen the man falter as he did now.

The king grabbed Quinn's shoulder with his other hand, steadying himself.

"Where is my daughter?" he asked.

When no one answered, he repeated himself, this time more forcefully.

"Where is my daughter?"

Captain Kaden echoed the king's concern. "Has anyone seen the princess?" He pointed to the closest

palace guard. "You there. You were on duty this morning. When was the last time you saw the princess?"

The guard shook his head. "Not today."

"How about you?" shouted Kaden at one of his Magistrates. "Have you seen the princess?"

"No," replied the soldier. "Not since the black fortress arrived."

Quinn could tell the king was growing more and more alarmed. His eyes were beginning to narrow, and the edges of his lips were curled down, a sign that his initial shock was now turning to anger.

Straightening, King Korox took his weight off of Quinn. "Well, someone find my daughter. Right now!"

Every palace guard within earshot took

off in a different direction. The crowd of gawking courtiers scattered—some helping to search for Princess Mariko, others just simply trying to get out of the way.

Captain Kaden lowered his head in a bow to the king. "With all due respect my lord, you don't plan to turn the princess over to that... that beast, do you?"

King Korox's voice boomed as he replied. "This is my daughter we're talking about here, son. I'd just as soon give up my own life than hers."

"Then what do you plan to do?" asked Senator Divian.

The senator always stood too close to the king for Quinn's comfort. She

gripped his arm now, a look of stern disapproval on her face.

"You must be careful what you decide, Korox," she continued. "It is not just your daughter who is in danger. The lives of every man, woman, and child in ErIkazar are at stake here."

The king looked at her hand on his arm. The anger on his face had clearly not yet subsided. "This is neither the time nor the place for this discussion."

He raised his gaze to meet the senator's, his eyes narrowing as he did.

Quinn gripped the hilt of his sword, unnerved by the mounting tension between the king and his advisor.

Senator Divian relented, letting go of the king and nodding her understanding.

Korox turned to the head of the Magistrates. "Captain—"

Kaden cut him off before he could finish. "I'll find her, my lord." Then he took off into the palace at a full run.

Taking one last look at the stone obelisk, the king marched back into the great hall, leaving the senator by herself at the end of the drawbridge. Quinn followed behind.

The moment his foot touched the inside of the palace, King Korox began shouting.

"Mariko!" His words boomed as he stormed through the halls. "Mariko where are you?" No one else spoke. His unanswered calls echoed off the stone walls, making Klarsamryn seem cold

and empty. "Mariko!"

"Perhaps we should split up, my lord," said Quinn.

Korox continued his march through the palace—a man obsessed, not slowing his pace.

"There are plenty of Magistrates here," continued Quinn. "I'm sure you will be safe while we search, and we can cover more ground if we're looking in separate places."

The king came to a stop. At the end of the hall, the man with the pointy beard and curled moustache had appeared—the man the king had called Vasser.

"No," replied the king, obviously preoccupied by the presence of the bearded stranger. "For now I need you

by my side. Wait right here."

Korox left Quinn behind as he met with the mysterious messenger.

Vasser gave Quinn a wide smile, then he leaned in and whispered something into the king's ear. He talked for some time then pulled a piece of vellum from his pocket, unfolded it, and began pointing at several different points.

Torches behind Vasser and the king partially illuminated the vellum. Every time the shadow of Vasser's head lifted away, Quinn could see right through it. From what he could tell, it looked to be a map of the five baronies—Llorbauth in the center.

Vasser pointed to the docks, then to the south—maybe Duhlnarim? Then back

again at Llorbauth. Whatever he had said caught the king by surprise, and Korox took a huge, unbalanced step back, his eyes wide with fear. Looking like a toy soldier, his legs wooden and stiff, the king spun around on his heels, turned, and continued his march down the hall.

"Quinn!" he shouted over his shoulder, resuming his earlier pace. "With me!"

The king's bodyguard rushed to catch up, running past Vasser as he did. The man nodded and gave a small bow, his face the very picture of concern. This man was trouble, but Quinn had no time to deal with him now. Letting him go for the time being, he caught up with the king as he turned the corner.

It was obvious to Quinn that they were

headed for Princess Mariko's chamber. Surely by now they had already been checked by the palace guard, but perhaps the king just needed to see for himself.

Barging through the door, the king stepped, into his daughter's room. On any other day, he would have knocked and announced himself, always very respectful of Mariko's privacy. But today was like no other day.

Inside, as Quinn had suspected, the princess's bed chamber was filled with palace guards and court functionaries.

"Where's Genevie?" shouted the king.

Everyone in the room came to a halt. The sudden appearance of a shouting king flustered them, and they tried with only varying degrees of success to follow

courtly protocol. Several bowed. One man stumbled over a stool, seemingly blown backward by the sheer force of the king's words. But none of them answered his question.

"The princess's handmaiden!" shouted the king. "Have any of you seen her?"
Silence.

"Does anyone in this palace still have a tongue?" The king was growing more and more furious, his cheeks and forehead turning bright red. "Answer me." He took a menacing step toward the nearest palace guard.

"I... I haven't seen her, my lord." The guard dropped his eyes to the ground, cringing as if he might be struck.

"Has anyone seen her? Where is she?"

Everyone in the room shook their heads. No one knew.

The king flew back out into the hall to Genevie's bed chamber. Not bothering to stop, King Korox kicked the door in with the heel of his boot, drawing his sword as he crossed the threshold.

Quinn had never seen Korox pull his blade inside the palace. His heart pounding in his chest, the king's bodyguard quickly drew his own sword and bolted through the ruined door.

Unlike the princess's chamber, this room had no windows. There were no torches or candles lit, and the only light came in from the hallway. Leaping over a table, Quinn landed on the floor in front of the king, his blade out, ready for whatever it

was that had caused the king to pull his sword.

But there was nothing. Genevie was not there, and the room appeared to have been unused for some time.

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Chapter Ten

A full day had gone by, and no sign of the princess or her handmaiden. The king was beside himself. Mariko had never been missing for this long. She had spied on many of Erlkazar's most dangerous criminals, and the king knew of the potential danger when he sent her out. He worried about her each and every time he did so, but she was cautious, and every time before she had come back. This time, however, he feared his

daughter had been betrayed. The news from Vasser had been inconclusive, but with Mariko missing, he had nothing else to go on. For now there was little more he could do. He had teams scouring Llorbauth for his daughter. He had sent missives to his brother-in-law, Lord Purdun, and to each of the other barons, asking for their help in locating the missing princess and the handmaiden. He had even tripled the patrols around the palace. Outside of going to search for her himself, all he could do was wait for news.

In the meantime, he still had the Obsidian Ridge and a potential evacuation of Llorbauth to deal with.

"Lady Herrin to see King Korox

Morkann," announced Whitman.

"As if I needed a reminder," he said under his breath. Lady Herrin, her clothing adorned with hundreds of tiny golden coins, jingled as she entered the audience chamber.

Her bodyguards, more heavily armed than Quinn, clanked along behind her.

Approaching the dais, she took one look at Whitman, smirked, then bowed to the king.

"Lady Herrin," said the king, "to what do we owe today's visit?

"My lord," replied the merchant, "I came as soon as I got word of your daughter's disappearance. Have you found her? Is she safely back in the palace?"

The king was caught off guard by the old

woman's concern for his family. "That is very kind of you to ask, Lady Herrin." He smiled at her, feeling a sudden new warmth for someone who before today had been nothing but a pain in his side. "But I'm afraid the princess is still missing. I cannot tell you how difficult it has been for me—"

"Well what are you going to do about that black fortress floating over Llorbauth? Everyone is afraid to leave their homes. And all this talk of evacuating the city to Five Spears Hold is killing my business. If you cannot find your daughter, then how will you turn her over to this Magus Xeries?"

The king was stunned silent.

"Well?" the old merchant bellowed. "I

expect an answer. You can't just sit here while the rest of us go broke. You have a responsibility—"

Lifting himself slowly to his feet, the king reached his full height before speaking. "Get out of my chambers, before I have you thrown in the dungeon!" He pointed to the doors, speaking this last word through gritted teeth. He came down two steps, drawing closer to Lady Herrin. "Your words and actions are a thinly veiled attempt to undermine me—and I will not tolerate it." He took another step, coming up to the merchant's face, looking her right in the eye. "I am the King of ErIkazar, and you will respect my authority, or you will face the consequences. Have I made

myself clear?"

Lady Herrin stumbled back a step, and her bodyguards pulled their swords.

The entire room erupted in the sound of metal grinding on metal as Quinn and forty Magistrates drew steel and converged on the armed men. In moments Lady Herrin's men had been disarmed and slammed to the floor, held to the ground by their necks, surrounded by the points of more than three dozen blades.

King Korox continued, seemingly unfazed by the commotion. "How dare you come into my house and make demands of me during this time of crisis. How dare you weigh the loss of your profits on the same scale as the life of

my daughter."

Lady Herrin stood before the king with a look of offended horror on her face. Korox scowled back at her.

"Get out," spat Korox, "or you will have much more than floating citadels and slumping sales to worry about." ,

With that, the king turned, walked up the dais, and sat down on his throne.

"Good day, Lady Herrin." He nodded at Quinn. "Let them up."

Quinn pulled back and ordered the other men to step away from the downed bodyguards. The Magistrates gave the merchant and her entourage a wide berth, but they kept their swords drawn.

Lady Herrin, her lip curled up in disgust, continued to glare at the king. "You will

not get away with speaking to me like that, Korox. This is not over. You will be sorry."

"Confiscate their weapons and escort them to the gate," ordered the king. "Inform the guards that they are not allowed back into the palace without a personal summons from me or Senator Divian." The king paused. "And be quick about it. We have real business to attend to."

Jingling as she spun, the old merchant and her bodyguards were physically removed from the audience chamber by a host of Magistrates.

Quinn placed his sword back in its scabbard and approached the throne.

"Are you all right, my lord?"

King Korox put his head in his hands and let out a large sigh. "No, Quinn," he said. "I do not think I am."

"Well, for what it's worth, the men have had a bet going for some time."

The king looked up. "A bet? What does that have to do with anything?"

Quinn smiled. "They've been wagering how long it would take you to have that old bag hauled out of here."

The king chuckled. "Who won?"

"No one," replied the bodyguard, his smile growing wider. "We all thought you'd have done it ages ago."

Just then the doors to the throne room burst open again, and Captain Kaden came marching in.

The king stood, unable to contain

himself. "Captain, what news of the princess?"

Kaden approached the throne, dropped to one knee, and bowed his head. "I'm sorry, my king, I have not been able to locate her."

The king slumped back down. His wife had died only a few tendays after he had taken the throne. He would never get used to his life without her. The only comfort he had been able to find was that he still had his daughter. Mariko was all he had left, and now she too had been taken from him.

It wasn't fair. He was the king. There were so many things he could control. But the disease that had taken his wife was not one of them. And now the

princess was missing, and he didn't know where to look or even for sure who to blame. What good was being the Warrior King if he didn't have an enemy to fight?

"I am truly sorry, my lord," continued Kaden. "The effort is in full force. I have my best men out looking for her right now. And I pledge to you that I will continue my personal search tirelessly until we find her. Do not lose hope. I will bring Princess Mariko home safely."

The king nodded. "Yes, Captain, I'm sure you will."

"But, my lord, I have not come here to discuss your daughter. I have other news."

The king was puzzled. "And what would that be?"

"The Obsidian Ridge, my lord. It's on the move."

The king leaped from the dais and dashed for the steps that led up to his private chambers. The balcony that had provided him with the perfect view of the Llorbauth valley now had become the best vantage point to track the black citadel that menaced the city.

"Quinn, Kaden, with me!" the king shouted as he charged up the stairs.

The men followed their king, and all three arrived at the top, winded from the climb.

Dashing to the open doors, the king stepped out onto the veranda to see the

Obsidian Ridge slowly drifting to the east. It had moved several acres since last he had set eyes upon it. The shadow it cast over the valley had moved directly over the docks.

"In the name of Torm, what is it going to do now?" King Korox rubbed his forehead as he wondered aloud at what new horror his kingdom was on the brink of experiencing.

The floating castle drifted out over Shalane Lake, then came to a complete stop. Everyone in the king's chamber held their breath as they watched, waiting to see what was going to happen next.

But nothing did. The Obsidian Ridge remained hovering in the air, the edges

of its jagged exterior gleaming pitch black in the late morning sun.

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The room went silent as the Matron entered. She had been in deep contemplation over these recent developments, and she had finally come to some conclusions.

It was time to share her thoughts with the rest of the council.

All the prominent members of the Erilkazarian underworld were present, and they sat around a long oval table at the center of the dark room. There were no windows, no connection at all to the outside world, only the weak light of mage-lit stones arranged in candelabra on the table. The floor of the room was

sunken, the center where the table sat was several steps down from where someone would enter. And the walls were built of thick stone, thicker than many of the castles in this part of Faerûn.

The doors that led into the chamber were built from solid steel. It took the strength of four men to pull them open or slam them closed. At the moment, all of them—except the one leading to the Matron's private study—were shut and locked. If someone had cared to try to exit through the study, they would have found that there was no physical or magical way out. The walls were built of the same stone as the rest of the room, and the magical wards that protected the area

from scrying also protected it from the spells and artifacts that allowed wizards to walk through stone or solid materials. The Matron stepped down into the center of the room and, adjusting the veil across her face, took her seat at the head of the table. Around the outside of the main chamber, arranged along the walls like ornamental statues, were three dozen armed bodyguards. The men and women seated at this table all had at least one thing in common—they took their personal safety very seriously.

"Thank you all for coming on such short notice," said the Matron. "We have many things to discuss."

A chorus of grumbled agreement filled the room.

The Matron raised her hand and the room fell silent again. "By now you have heard that the master of the Obsidian Ridge has made a demand of the king." She slowly moved her gaze over each and every member of the underworld present before her. "That he turn over his daughter, or ErIkazar will be destroyed." Again grumbling.

"Even if the king were willing to make such a sacrifice, he is, as you all know, unable to do so at this very moment," said the Matron.

"Then we should make his life easy and turn over the princess for him," shouted a burly, bearded half-ore at the far end of the table.

The comment brought a number of laughs

and a small round of agreement.

"I'm afraid that is impossible," said the Matron. "The princess is no longer within our reach."

A tall, dark-haired woman wearing a gown that appeared to be laced in the front with thick spider's silk stood up from her chair. "What do you mean, she's no longer within our reach? Did you lose her?"

The Matron bristled at the accusation. "We did not lose her."

"If you did not lose her, then where is she?" pressed the dark-haired woman.

"I have told you," said the Matron in a calm, even voice. "She is outside of our reach."

"Why would you let this happen? Did

you not have a plan for using her to our advantage?"

The Matron smiled. "Of course I did."

"Then perhaps you can explain," responded the spider woman, "how she can be of use to us if she is outside of our reach?"

The Matron took a deep breath and then lifted herself out of her chair. The mage-lit stones on the table flared then subsided, making the room seem darker than it was before. The woman in the spider-silk gown quickly glanced around the table. None of the other invitees would make eye contact with her. Looking at the Matron, she bowed her head and sat down.

"The princess was merely a way for us

to manipulate the king," she started, clearly pleased by her display of power. "His recent involvement in the Elixir trade has begun to take its toll on our profits. The kidnapping of the princess was a message to the king. Any further meddling in our affairs will not be tolerated. If he wants to hit us where it hurts, then we will do the very same to him. No one is safe. No one is outside of our reach, not even the Warrior King, Korox Morkann."

"But things have changed, Matron," said a dark-skinned man near her end of the table. He spoke respectfully, but loud enough for the others to hear. "There is more at stake now. The Obsidian Ridge threatens all of ErIkazar. It threatens all

of our businesses and our lives."

"He is right," agreed another man at the far end of the table. "If Erilkazar is destroyed, who will we sell to? Surely we must change our course."

The Matron balled her hands into fists and took a deep breath. She glared at the collection of underworld figures, daring them with her eyes to challenge her again. When no one spoke, she continued.

"The appearance of the black citadel has only strengthened our ploy," she explained. "Not only do we have something the king dearly wants back, but now he has further pressure to negotiate with us in a timely fashion."

"But Matron," said the dark-skinned

man, "you said the princess is outside of our reach. How can we negotiate with the king if we no longer have what he wants?"

The Matron smiled. "But we do have what he wants. We tell him that we have his daughter. That the only way he will get her back and save his entire kingdom is for him to grant our businesses protection above the law. We will tell him he will get his daughter back when he has not only given us his blessing but also his good name as endorsement to our Elixir."

"This is preposterous." The spider woman stood up again. "First you tell us the princess is not in our possession, then you tell us she is. You keep talking

in circles. But even if you do have her, what's stopping the king from going back on his

word once he has what he wants? There is only one way to keep the seat of power in line—fear. We must assassinate the king, turn his daughter over to the master of the Obsidian Ridge, and reap the benefits of the panic that ensues."

This brought grumbles of agreement around the table.

"Yes, she is right," said an elderly man sitting next to her. "The king and his line must be taught a lesson. The damage they have done to our Elixir operations cannot go unpunished."

"The king is useful to us alive," said the

Matron. "We know him, and we know how to manipulate him. If we kill King Korox, another man will sit on that throne, and we will know nothing of him. We will not waste the valuable knowledge we have now simply because it gives us a shortsighted gain."

"We cannot sit here and do nothing," replied the spider woman. "At the very least the Magistrates and their nightly raids must be stopped."

The Matron shook her head. "The Magistrates we can handle. It's the Claw we need to worry about."

Simply mentioning the Claw inside this chamber seemed blasphemous.

The spider woman slammed her fist against the table. "But surely we must do

something about the—"

The Matron cut her off. "Do not cross me," she said. She pointed her finger at the woman. "Up until this point I have been lenient with all of you, but my patience is beginning to fray." She pressed her chair away, the legs grinding across the floor as she forced it back. "You do not need to know everything at this moment. For now, it is enough that you are aware of my wishes." She shook her finger, a mother warning her children. "The king is not to be harmed unless I give the word. We will use him and his daughter the way I have intended. Is that understood?"

The figures around the room nodded their understanding.

Gathering her purple robes around her, the Matron walked up the steps. "This meeting is over." Turning as she got to the edge of her private study, she looked down upon the prominent underworld figures. "You shall be summoned when I wish to tell you more."

With the wave of her hand, the doors of her study slammed closed, and the locks on the heavy doors that led out of the room dropped open.

Chapter Eleven

Quinn watched the king pace back and forth across the sitting room floor. Each time he crossed in front of the open balcony doors, he would look out at the obsidian- citadel floating over the water, just outside of the docks. It was as if the

man thought that maybe, just maybe, if he willed it to be, the whole thing would simply disappear.

Despite his best efforts, the Obsidian Ridge didn't budge.

The sound of footsteps drifted up the stone stairway, adding their rhythm to that of the king's pacing. Then the guest who belonged to the footsteps arrived—unannounced—inside the king's sitting room.

"King Korox," said Senator Divian, barging into the room, "might I have a word with you?"

Quinn stepped between her and the king, blocking her path. He didn't go for his weapon, but he left himself enough room to grab it if the need arose.

The senator pulled up short. "What is this?" She looked past Quinn to the king. Quinn didn't budge. "I'm sorry, Senator," he said, raising his hands to make it clear he meant her no offense, "but you came in unannounced. I'm afraid I'm going to have to search you for weapons." He took a step closer. "Please lift your hands over your head. This won't take but a moment."

The senator took a step away from him. "You will not lay a finger on me." Her voice dropped very low. "Touch me, and you will regret it."

"Quinn," the king said. "It's fine. The senator can be trusted."

"I'm sure you are right, my lord," replied Quinn, not backing down. "Senator

Divian is without a doubt above reproach, and I give her my sincerest apology. But since we have a magical fortress floating outside our window, illusions and doppelgangers are not outside of the realm of possibility."

The senator dropped her hands and stood up straight, tugging the front of her robe down and tightening her cloth belt. "Yes, of course," she said, clearly miffed at having her trustworthiness called into question, but also seemingly swayed by Quinn's argument.

"I will not touch you," continued Quinn, running a hand through his blond hair, "but perhaps the senator could humor me by answering a few quick questions." He took a step back, toward the king, and

tried to smile. "Just to let us know that you are indeed who you... well, are."

Senator Divian crossed her arms over her chest and sighed. "Very well," she said. "Ask your questions."

"When did King Korox's wife die?"

"That's common knowledge," she said, glancing at the king. "Just after he took the throne."

"Yes," replied Quinn. "And what did she die from?"

The senator, a little taken back by the question, gave Quinn a sideways look. "That... that too is well known," she said. "She contracted a rare and difficult to treat disease, which ultimately proved to be fatal."

Quinn nodded. "Yes, and how did she

contract it?"

Senator Divian uncrossed her arms. Her posture seemed to soften, as if she were saddened by this line of questioning. "She was... she was doing research, at my behest, in the catacombs just outside of Dajaan." Her gaze dropped to the floor, and her shoulders slumped. "We never learned what she contracted it from."

Quinn stepped aside. "I am sorry for bringing up such painful memories, Senator. Please forgive me." He bowed to her, and took a position at the edge of the room.

Senator Divian nodded but didn't say anything.

After a moment, the king crossed to her

and touched her on the shoulder. "Perhaps we should talk in my private chambers," he said.

Nodding her agreement, she followed him out of the sitting room.

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King Korox closed the double doors that led into his private chambers and turned to face the senator.

"I apologize for Quinn," he said. "We're all very much on edge with this... thing hanging over our heads. He is no exception."

Senator Divian took a deep breath and tried to regain her composure. "Can I ask you a question?"

The king nodded. "Of course."

"Do you blame me for the death of your

wife?"

King Korox was stunned by her candor.

"How can you think that?"

"It's just that—" She shook her head. "It's nothing." She wrapped her arms around Korox's waist and laid her head on his chest.

The king returned her embrace. "She knew the dangers of going into the catacombs. And she went willingly. I do not blame you for anything."

The senator looked up at the king and smiled. "I just didn't want to think that..."

She paused, looking into his eyes.

Korox leaned down and kissed the senator, cutting off the end of her thought.

"Thank you," she said, releasing the king

from her embrace. "I'm sorry. Sometimes I just feel a little awkward. Though it is not common knowledge to most people that your late wife was helping me with research, it is common knowledge to you. I would hate it if you thought my actions were responsible for you losing your wife."

"Do you think I would invite you into my private chambers if I did?"

She shook her head. "No. I do not think you would." Turning away from the king, she strolled to the other side of the room—to the other doors that led out to the private terrace. Throwing them open, she looked out at the forest and the roads beyond, leading south.

Korox watched her as she moved. "But now I have a question for you."

"And what is that?"

"Do you think it is too soon?"

The senator looked back at the king.

"Too soon for what?"

"Too soon for us?" he said. "The queen has been gone for less than a year. I don't wish to betray her memory."

"I think the queen would not want you to be alone," replied JDivian. "I like to think she would approve—that she would have picked me to look after you in the event of her death."

"Do I really need that much looking after?" he said, chuckling.

The senator turned back to the view, nodding. "Oh yes. More than you know."

The king came up behind and placed his arms around her. "From here you can't even see the Obsidian Ridge. If only this were the case in every window of the palace."

"Have you thought about what you are going to do?" she asked. "When you find Princess Mariko?"

The king sighed. "You mean if I find Princess Mariko," he said. "It's been two days, and still not a sign of her."

The senator continued to look out at the view, talking

over her shoulder. "Either way, if you're not going to give this Magus Xeries what he wants, then we need to prepare our alternatives." She turned around.

"And what do you think those are?" He

curled up his fist, unfurling one finger. "Fight? Our army is useless against such a foe." He unfurled a second. "Flee? The evacuation plans are progressing as fast as they can. Still, I'm not even Sure we can move everyone far enough away to avoid his wrath." The king lifted a third finger. "We've already tried negotiating." He threw both hands in the air. "What else is there?"

"Magic," she replied.

The king shook his head. "We don't even know the true extent of this man's power yet. For all we know, he's not even cast his first spell."

"Perhaps," she replied. "But I've been thinking. What if all of this is just parlor tricks meant to scare us into

submission?"

The king gave her a forced smile. "I know what you are trying to do." He touched Divian on the shoulder and let his fingers slide down her arm. "But while downplaying the power of the Obsidian Ridge may comfort me in the short term, the simple fact of the matter is that we both know Xeries means what he says. You yourself said there are powerful wards protecting the black mountain from magical spying and infiltration. If you can't break through, then I'm afraid there is no one in ErIkazar who can."

Divian squeezed his hand, trying to smile back. "Yes, there is powerful magic surrounding that place. But what

we do not know is if Xeries put them there himself, or if they are the result of artifacts he possesses."

The king tilted his head. "Even so, just to possess such things must mean he has some power. At the very least he is tremendously resourceful."

"True," said Divian. "But so far, all we've seen him do is make a stone obelisk appear out of thin air. An apprentice wizard could do that."

The king shook his head. "Divian, you can give up on this now. Your effort is appreciated, but I know you don't believe that. It would be foolish to underestimate this man—if he is indeed a man—after what we saw happen to that unit of soldiers. And you are not

fool."

"I am just worried about you. That's all," she replied. "Even kings need hope."

"Yes, we do. And I thank you for recognizing that," replied Korox. "But to muster enough magical force to drive Xeries out of here, even if he isn't as powerful as we think... it would require us to gather nearly every mage in Llorbauth, and then some. We'd be dealing with magical forces that quite frankly haven't been mustered since the Time of Troubles."

"While I will admit that I did come here to lift your spirits, I am not entirely convinced that my idea is without merit." She slipped her hand around his waist again. "Gathering the spellcasters—a

convocation of mages—is not a bad plan. Besides, what other choice do you have?"

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Chapter Twelve

The burlap sack slipped from Princess Mariko's head. A dim corridor, lit by fading mage-lit stones, came into view. The walls and floor were slick and damp, and the air smelled of mold and dry blood.

Finally managing to chew through the cloth gag her captors had tied around her mouth, the princess spat the remnants to the floor.

"You'll never get away with this," she growled. Her hands were tied at the wrist behind her back. Greasy lowlifes

surrounded her on all sides, their sickly complexions looking jaundiced from the glow of the torches they carried. Though she didn't know the names of these people, she recognized their faces from her nighttime visits to the docks.

"Oh, no?" said the man leading the way through the dingy hall.

"No," she snarled. Mariko did, however, know the name of the man who led them—Jallal Tasca. "And aren't you supposed to be dead?"

Jallal stopped and spun on his hooves. Pushing his way through his guards, he put his face right in front of hers; so close Mariko could smell the boiled ham on his breath, pieces still stuck between his sharpened teeth.

"And where'd you learn that?" Jallal balled up his hairy fists, biting off each word as it rolled out of his mouth. "From your lover perhaps? Did the Claw tell you that?"

Mariko was momentarily stunned. "What are you talking about?" Her words were unconvincing, even to herself.

Jallal smiled. "Surprised that we know about your little romance? Did you think you could keep it a secret forever?"

A large rat scurried through the rubbish littering the hallway. It squeaked as it traversed the long, pockmarked wall, sniffing everything twice as it passed but finding nothing worth its time in the piles of discarded refuse. It disappeared around a long, curving corner.

The princess watched the rat until it slipped out of view, then she looked back at Jallal. She pointed toward the rat with her chin. "Friend of yours?"

"Laugh it up, Princess." Jallal turned away and resumed leading his group down the hall. "You don't have long to live anyway. Might as well enjoy what little time you have left."

The group started to move again, and one of the guards behind the princess prodded her forward with the flat edge of his sword. She stumbled a bit, not ready for the shove, but quickly caught her balance.

"You're going to pay for this, Jallal," she said. "I'm going to get out of here."

"I'm sure you are, Princess. I'm sure you

are." Jallal's words dripped with sarcasm.

The princess tugged on her bonds as she walked. They were tight, and she couldn't budge. "And when I do, I'm going to hunt you down like the mongrel you are." As her frustration rose, she spoke through her teeth, each word growing louder and more intense. "And I'm going to personally flay the skin from your body, piece by piece."

This last bit made everyone cringe.

"So un-princess like," taunted Jallal. "And who's going to get you out of here? Hmm? Is the Claw going to come to your rescue?"

"I don't need anyone to rescue me," she said. "I'll get myself out." She struggled

with her bonds, feeling the rope loosen a bit with her repeated movements. "Besides, if you think you can catch the Claw by using me as bait, then you've sorely underestimated both of us."

Jallal chuckled. "I hate to damage your self image, Princess. But you're just one small piece of the puzzle."

The hallway took a long, sloping curve to the right and headed downward. The group came upon the rat, still searching through the refuse on the ground. Its little nose bobbed up and down, as it sniffed its surroundings. Then suddenly, it stopped, sitting back onto its hind legs and clawing at the air.

"What's its problem?" said the guard

behind Princess Mariko.

A large dark splotch suddenly peeled away from the wall and fell to the ground. The dimly lit hallway made it difficult to determine what was happening, and at first, Mariko thought it was just a piece of loose stone or a large patch of moss on the damp rock that had lost its grip and was sloughing off onto the floor. Then that piece of moss unfolded to twice its original size, and snapped tight, wrapping itself around the rat like a thick rug.

"Cloakers!" shouted one of the guards. The ceiling and walls seemed to melt. What had appeared as only shadows in the dark corridor, dripped away from the stone, unfurling and falling on the group.

The cloakers looked like huge bats, but instead of little ratlike bodies with ears, claws, and tails, they were all wing and teeth. Unfurled, some were easily twice the size of a man, and they descended on the hallway, blanketing anything they touched and wrapping it up.

Princess Mariko dropped to her knees, ducking under the huge wings of one of these beasts. The guard behind her was not as quick, and he disappeared underneath the creature's embrace.

"Get it off me! Get it off me!" The man squealed as he struggled to get free. The cloakers black body stretched around the guard, distending with each punch and elbow the man threw.

Two of the other guards had been

wrapped up in similar fashion. One had been caught around the legs, and she swung on the creature, a dagger in each hand, slicing into the beast's flesh but seemingly making no progress in getting it to let her go. The second was completely consumed by the cloaker, his muffled screams indicating that he wasn't faring well either.

Jallal and three of his henchmen had managed to avoid being caught. They were free but preoccupied with trying to stay that way as four other cloakers flapped around them in the hallway.

Mariko didn't wait around to see how it turned out. Not even bothering to get up, the princess somersaulted forward, hugging the wall and tumbling right past

the fight. Coming up on her feet, she didn't look back, dropping her head and sprinting down the corridor.

"After her!" Mariko heard Jallal scream as she disappeared deeper down the hall.

His words were like a gust of wind, pushing her along with their urgency. Mariko picked up speed as she ran the gently downward sloping passage. Her lungs burned and her legs ached, but she kept going, knowing that every step took her farther from her captors and that much nearer to escape. The walls drew in closer as the hallway spiraled down, and the light grew dimmer—the mage-lit stones were fewer and farther between here, and in several places it looked as

if they had burned out or broken, leaving long sections of near-complete blackness.

Each time she hit one of these dark patches, the princess cringed and silently prayed to Helm to keep her safe. If she were to run into another hive of cloakers there would be little she could do to defend herself. Her hands were still tied behind her back, and though she could probably cast a spell, she would have to do it without looking. She really didn't want to have to fight a cloaker by turning her back on it.

Coming around the next corner, the passage straightened out and widened into sort of a crossroads—four passages heading off in opposite directions.

Without even thinking, Mariko took a hard left and ran down another short hall, then into a much larger room. Dozens of square pillars, each a few paces apart, held up the high ceiling.

Dashing into the corner, Princess Mariko dropped into a crouch and stopped to catch her breath. The room was quite dark. What little light there was—weak and purple—seemed to come from a long, sprawling crack in the ceiling, maybe twenty or thirty feet up. The pillars cast shadows across each other, filling the space with a crisscross of long, jagged shapes.

There was a strange feeling in this place. It was a sort of hopelessness, punctuated by a burning anxiety that it might be

worse to live in a place like this than to simply die here. There had been a burlap sack over her head ever since she had woken up from that night in the slaughterhouse. But she knew when they had brought her to this place—wherever it was—because she had been filled with that terrible feeling the moment she arrived.

Leaning her back against the wall, Mariko took several large breaths, trying to calm and quiet herself. She tugged against the rope holding her hands together. It was loosening, but not enough to get her hands free. She was going to need something to cut through her bonds. Letting herself slip to the ground, she felt around and found a

small stone. Gripping it in one hand, she touched it with the fingers of her other. Closing her eyes, she spoke a few words, quietly, under her breath. Getting back to her feet, she tossed the stone to the ground. It glowed brightly where she dropped it, and the corner filled with a yellow-orange light.

The flagstones and bricks were worn and pockmarked. The surface of one whole wall was marred by long, irregular grooves. They looked as if they were scratch marks—the last remaining evidence of some clawed beast that had been

cornered here and had tried to dig its way out. "Just what I needed."

The jagged bits of stone that had been

torn away from the wall lay in dusty piles in the corner, and Mariko kicked at them, looking for one she could use. Finding one to her liking, she pushed the sharp chunk away from the others and sat down next to it, so she could reach. Then she went to work, sawing away the hemp that held her wrists together.

As she worked, a series of light tapping sounds began on the far side of the room. They came in irregular patterns, slower at first, then quicker and more frequently. The noises echoed off the walls, bouncing around between the pillars. Mariko couldn't be sure exactly where the sounds originated, but wherever they were, they were in the room with her.

Quickening her sawing motion, she gave her bonds another yank. The fibers that held her wrists slipped, and the rope snapped. Her hands were free, and Princess Mariko hopped to her feet, grabbing up the magically lit stone as she did.

Stepping out of the corner, she put her back to the closest pillar, taking cover from whatever was making the clicking noises. Peeking out from around the edge, Princess Mariko tossed the stone into the middle of the room. The glowing rock bounced to a stop atop a huge circular flagstone. The darkness peeled back from where it landed, revealing the rest of the chamber. The pillars radiated out from this single large stone, reaching

for the walls and corners as they lined up across the room. Other piles of dusty stone littered the ground—each at the base of a pillar.

Despite the extra light, the princess couldn't find what was making the clicking sounds, and they continued, growing louder and more regular. They filled the whole room, seemingly surrounding her on all sides. Whatever it was that was making them was closing in.

Pressing herself against the pillar as tight as she could, she gripped the jagged stone she had used to cut herself free in one hand like a dagger, ready to fight. The light on the wall, cast by her magically lit stone, grew long spindly

shadows. The clicking noises slowed, coming now from the opposite side of her pillar.

Tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap.

The princess held her breath, and a tingle ran down her spine, as something cold and thin touched her hair and brushed against the back of her neck. Turning her head, Mariko swallowed hard as she gazed down on the brown, hairy tip of a giant spider's leg. It was hugging the pillar with all eight legs, each easily long enough to wrap around the huge stone column.

Slowly turning sideways, the princess reached back and grabbed her hair, pulling it away from the spider's leg that held it pinned against the pillar. Once

free, she took one huge step away and spun around. With the pillar between her and most of the spider, Mariko could only see the creature's legs and the parts of its bulbous body that stuck out from the sides of the stone column. The spider was easily four times her height. Gripping the pillar as it was, its back legs touched the floor—its front legs easily reaching the crack in the ceiling. Staying as close to the wall as she could, Princess Mariko moved deeper into the room. She figured if she could get to the next pillar, she could zigzag her way across to the other side, keeping herself concealed from the hairy beast. She didn't know what she'd find when she got there, but it couldn't be much worse than

what she had here.

Two quick steps, and she turned around another pillar— right into the face of a second massive spider. The creature was already standing on the ground. It was so big it didn't quite fit between the stone columns. Two of its legs were bent back, touching the pillars on either side, its body tilted. Any other beast would have looked encumbered, maybe even trapped in such a situation. But the spider only looked like it was at home, wedged in the confined space, its legs pulled back ready to pounce. Slime dripped from the beast's fangs, as they worked their way up and down in anticipation inside the creature's huge mouth.

Mariko held her hands up, and started to back away. "Nice spider," she said.

Spinning around again, she bolted even deeper into the room. She got maybe four or five good steps before being knocked down from behind, her legs pulled out from under her by the spider's spindly limbs. Falling to the floor, Mariko held her arms out to catch herself and skidded across the stone.

Scrambling to get back to her feet, the tapping sound began again, filling her ears and making her skin crawl. Halfway up, Mariko was knocked sideways. She rolled onto her back, up against the wall. A huge spider leg came down on her shoulder, pinning her to the floor. She whipped the jagged stone in her hand

around, taking a large gash out of the creature's leg. The thick, natural armor made a popping sound as it crushed under her blow. A thin, reddish-brown fluid gushed out of the newly formed wound, splashing across the princess's shoulder.

If the spider was affected by the blow, it didn't show it. Another-of its legs came down on the princess's other arm. The tips of the beast's legs were sharp, and they dug into Mariko's flesh, holding her in place from the sharp pain. The princess let out a yelp. She didn't want to, but the weight of the spider pushing the sharp ends of its legs into her arm and shoulder was excruciating. She squirmed to get free, but it was no use.

She was stuck.

The spider quickly skittered out from between the pillars, using its other six legs to pen Mariko. It positioned its fat, round body over hers and lowered it onto her stomach. The weight of the creature nearly crushed the princess, and she struggled to breathe. Letting up on its front legs, the beast held the princess in place with just its own gargantuan abdomen. It looked down on her with its eight beady eyes.

Mariko grabbed at the wall and the floor, trying to pull herself free, but she couldn't get a good grip. The stones were worn smooth by the claws and nails of earlier victims. All she could get her hands on were two

piles of dusty, broken stone, lying at the base of the wall and beside the nearest pillar. With each failed attempt, the princess grew more frantic.

The first spider climbed down, wedging itself now between the wall and another pillar—facing Mariko and the spider that held her down. With the exception of the tapping of their legs against the stone, neither of the beasts had made any noise. Now they both began to make a high-pitched hiss. A thick, stringy substance that looked purple in the dull light of the room, dripped from the spiders' fangs, splashing in small puddles on the floor beside the trapped princess.

Mariko swung her broken bit of stone

again, catching the spider right in the mouth, breaking away one of its fangs. The sharpened bone clanked as it hit the floor and skidded off into the darkness. The creature let out an angry screech that echoed throughout the room. It flailed around, clearly unhappy, then reared back and dived for the princess, burying its other fang into her neck.

Mariko screamed. She beat at the creature's face with her fists, but it was no use. She could feel the poison pumping into her body. Her head started to float, and her arms felt heavy. Her legs and stomach cramped up, and she tried to curl into a ball.

Looking up, the spider's eyes seemed to waver, and the dim light in the room

flickered.

Her body went limp, and she laid her arms on the ground beside her, unable to struggle any further.

"Claw," she said. "Please... please..."

With her last bit of strength, she reached to her neck, gripping the locket the Claw had given her, and undid the clasp.

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"Where in the Nine Hells could she be?"

Jallal Tasca growled. This was not going well.

First the cloakers, then the princess escaped. What else could go wrong?

Coming around a bend in the hallway, Jallal and his guards stepped into an open room—a crossroads with passages leading off in four different directions.

He threw his hands in the air. "Any guesses?"

He turned to look at the others who accompanied him. None of them had been seriously hurt in the cloaker attack, but they just stared at him, not responding, clearly unhappy about their current situation.

The scream came from the hallway to the left.

Jallal lifted his sword and bolted toward the sound. "Come with me!"

At the end of the passage the group entered a high ceilinged room, awash in a pale purple light. Against the right wall, a pair of huge spiders faced each other, hunched over something—or someone.

Drawing closer, Jallal came around a large stone pillar to see the limp body of Princess Mariko, pinned to the ground by a huge spider's fang.

"Damn," cursed Jallal, his anger starting to rise. "The Matron is not going to be happy about this."

Chapter Thirteen

"We're all going to die," Whitman muttered as he left the palace, heading down the darkened road toward the docks. He clasped his hands together, fidgeting with them on the long walk. "We're all going to be eaten, torn to shreds by those... those vile... disgusting... repulsive... repugnant... unseemly... dirty... hairy beasts." His knuckles were white from his own grip,

and his palms were damp with worried sweat.

As he went, his mind wandered through all the terrible, disgusting ways a man could be killed. Torn to shreds by slaving, diseased beasts ranked pretty high. He relived the scene in his head, watching from afar, as he had, the death of the entire unit of soldiers who had approached the Obsidian Ridge. He didn't want to end up like one of them. He didn't want anyone else to end up like that either.

Crossing over from the dirt and stone road onto the wooden slats of the wharf, Whitman wrapped his cloak tighter around his chest. It was not particularly cold here. In fact, the damp air coming

off the water was quite refreshing on a warm, spring evening. But something about the docks always gave Whitman the shivers.

Down a few blocks, he turned into a darkened dead-end alley. At the end was a single, wooden door with a plaque attached to it. On the plaque was the relief carving of a woman, her long hair flowing around her face, a tiara on her head—the symbol for the temple of Waukeen.

Knocking on the door, the king's scribe waited, his eyes darting around the shadows, nervously watching, assuming someone was waiting in ambush in every corner. After a few moments, the latch on the other side slid noisily across the

wood, and the door opened.

"What are you doing here?" asked a voice from the dark interior.

"I'm here to see the Matron," Whitman said in a stern voice. "Let me in."

The door swung wide, the burly guard stepped aside, and the king's scribe was allowed in.

Three armed men stood in the hall. One shut the door while the other two searched Whitman, patting him down for weapons.

"Believe me," he said, as they checked under his cloak, "there is nothing to find. Even if I had a weapon, you'd still all be safe."

The men finished their search and left him be. "He's got nothing."

Whitman adjusted himself, annoyed by the intrusion. "I wouldn't know how to use it anyway."

"Go inside," said the guard who had opened the door. "I'll let the Matron know you are here."

Whitman did as he was told, heading down the corridor and descending a long set of steps. He had never been inside this building before, but he had heard the stories. The meetings of the underworld council took place here. For a criminal, this was a sort of a holy shrine. Every infamous figure in the Erilkazar underworld was said to have walked down these steps. Several had even died here—killed as a punishment for wronging another member of the council,

or perhaps for simply disappointing the Matron.

At the base of the stairs, four guards waited. As Whitman approached, they took hold of one huge steel door, and together they pulled it open. The heavy hinges groaned as they rotated and let the metal door swing wide.

Whitman nodded to the men as he stepped through the doorway. A huge, wooden table dominated the inside of the room. Mage-lit stones sat in sconces on either end and in the middle, filling the chamber with cold, bluish-white light. The door closed behind him with a tremendous clang, and Whitman stepped down from the entrance to the middle of the room.

Besides the table, the chairs, and the sconces, there was nothing else in the room, except four huge metal doors—three that led out to the corridor where Whitman had just come from, and another on the opposite side of the room. That door swung open, smooth and silent, and out stepped a woman, a tight purple robe adorning her body, a veil over her face.

She stepped down into the room, the only noise of her passage the light brushing of her hem against the stone floor.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, taking a seat at the far end.

"We have to talk," replied Whitman.

"You compromise yourself by coming."

"I'm aware of the consequences," replied Whitman. "But the situation is growing dire. We're running out of time."

The Matron tapped her fingers against the wood table. "This is why you came to me?"

"Matron, we are gambling with the lives of everyone in ErIkazar. We must turn over Princess Mariko, and we must do it now."

The Matron stood. "I am aware of the situation, Whitman. But I disagree with your assessment."

"Then you are blinded by your greed. We are risking too much. The stakes have gotten too high."

"You're overreacting."

"You saw what happened to the soldiers

the king sent out to negotiate with the Obsidian Ridge."

"I know what happened."

"Are you prepared to let that happen to all of us? Never mind the Elixir business. Are you willing to lose every one of your followers? Every one of your associates? Every customer in the kingdom?"

"There are risks with every venture," replied the Matron. "But there are rewards too."

"What reward? What is all of this worth to us?"

The Matron took a deep breath. "Freedom," she replied. "The freedom to run our trade the way we want to, without the meddling of the monarchy."

She thought for a moment. "And for control. The right to control our own destinies and marketplace without interference."

"You risk all of this for a little bit of freedom? For the ability to run our business without the fear of reprisal?"

"Don't be so shortsighted." The Matron slammed her fist against the table. "Some of the largest conflicts in the history of this world have been over freedom. What we're talking about here—it's not just about a little more breathing room, or even about greed. It's about the future. It's about establishing a foothold here in ErIkazar, where we cannot only run our businesses, but also decide what rules we live by. Us.

Ourselves. Not some silver-spoon-fed monarch who did nothing more to earn the right to govern than be born."

The Matron came around the table. "But I tire of this argument. It seems I say the same thing every single day, and each time I do, my conviction for our course of action just grows stronger." She stopped when she reached the opposite end. "Is there something useful you can tell me?"

"There is one thing." Whitman paused, pondering his next words.

"Well?" she said. "Don't keep me waiting."

"Senator Divian has been bending the king's ear about some sort of plan she has to fight the Obsidian Ridge."

The Matron perked up. "Tell me more."

"She wants the king to try to unite all of the kingdom's

spellcasters, a convocation of mages, in an effort to counter Arch Magus Xeries."

"I see." The Matron rubbed her chin.

"The king is rightfully nervous about Xeries's magical power."

"Does he think the senator's plan has merit?"

"He's not sure there are enough wizards in Erlkazar to match the power of the Obsidian Ridge, but considering the alternatives, it's the best plan he feels he's got at the moment."

"He's right. There probably aren't enough lawful spell-casters in Erlkazar."

"I'm sure that's why he's worried."

"This might prove useful," she said. "Tell the king that I can give him everything he wants—his kingdom and his daughter, both safe and sound. But there will be accost." She rubbed her hands together as she turned and walked back toward her study. "Tell him to turn over the Claw—to me. In return, he will get his daughter back, and we will help him fight the Obsidian Ridge. An alliance between the underworld and the throne." She smiled. "Tell him he'll have all the mages he needs."

Whitman laughed. "You know I can't just march back into the palace and give the king a message from you."

"Not looking like that you can't." The Matron shook her finger in the air.

The door from the outside corridor screeched open, and the four guards stepped inside.

"But when they're finished with you, you'll look the part."

Whitman got to his feet and started to back away from the guards. "What's the meaning of this?"

The Matron laughed. "Tell the king you were taken, beaten, and returned with a message. He'll believe you."

Whitman skirted around the table, pulling out chairs and tossing them behind him in an effort to get away. But he was too slow, and the guards seized him easily. "Don't touch me!"

he shouted, as they lifted him onto the table. "You can't do this to me!"

The Matron stopped when she reached the open door to her study and looked down on Whitman, held as he was against the table.

"And next time you feel the urge to come here, against my will, perhaps you will remember today and think twice." With a wave of her hand, the huge metal door swung closed, latching quietly.

Whitman struggled for a moment longer, then stopped, looking up at the ceiling, away from his tormentors. The first blow landed against his ribs, sending a flash of pain shooting up his side and across his body. The second, on his cheek, knocking loose a tooth and filling his mouth with blood.

Having control of nothing else, Whitman

decided to close his eyes. The damage was going to be done, whether he watched it or not.

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"And what of the evacuation plans?" King Korox leafed through a pile of reports and correspondence. "Any progress?"

The messenger who had delivered them stood at attention. "Those who would leave their homes are on the way south to Five Spears Hold."

"Unguarded?" The king raised his voice. "The northern corner of Tanistan is crawling with goblins and bandits. Little good the move will do them if they lose their lives in the process."

A heavy gauntleted hand landed on the

messenger's shoulder. "A unit of the regular army was sent along as an escort," said Captain Kaden, arriving in the Magistrates' barracks. "They will arrive safely. The trouble is we have to be prepared to defend Klarsamryn. We can't afford to spare more than one unit as escorts, so we're only able to move a small group of people every few days." He turned to the young messenger. "You may go. I'll take it from here."

The messenger bowed, looking more than a little relieved. "Thank you, sir." He exited the barracks.

"At this rate it'll take us all year to get everyone to safety," said the king.

"Unless we completely abandon the city

in a full-scale evacuation, then I'm afraid you're right."

The king shook his head. "If we did that, there would be no way to cover our tracks. Xeries could simply follow us. Then we'd be at his mercy and away from our homes. No, if it's going to work, it has to be done quietly." He stopped, thinking for a moment. "And what of the court mages? Have they discovered anything?"

Kaden shook his head. "They've been working-through the night, but I'm afraid there aren't enough of them to counteract the powerful wards of the Obsidian Ridge. So far, they've found nothing, my lord. At least nothing more than Senator Divian was able to discern."

"That thing must have a weakness." King Korox slapped his hand against the wooden post of a soldier's bunk. "If only we can find it."

"The arcanists are poring through the royal libraries as we speak, looking for spells that may help us learn more. Perhaps they will turn up something."

"Perhaps," agreed the king. "What other news?"

"Not much. We've managed to contact a few older elves who corroborate Plathus's story. They remember hearing about the Obsidian Ridge appearing over Calimshan. No one we've spoken to so far actually witnessed the floating citadel with their own eyes, and all are wary of speaking about it."

"Have you dispatched riders to Calimshan? We need to find someone who can tell us more about this menace." Kaden nodded. "Yes, my lord. They left early this morning."

"Good. Good," replied the king. There were so many thoughts running through his head. Not the least of which was Mariko. What could she be going through right now? The thought of her being tortured or mistreated was too much to bear, and he had to turn his mind to something else, just to keep himself from going completely mad.

"My lord," said Captain Kaden, interrupting the king's thoughts. "I know you have many important things to do,

but I think it would be prudent for you to spend a little time practicing with your sword."

This caught the king off guard. "There is too much to do, Kaden. I will practice when this is over."

Kaden bowed his head. "Forgive me, my lord, but you have not been on the battlefield in some time, and a little practice never hurts."

The king shook him off. "I will be fine, Kaden. I have practiced enough in my lifetime for the both of us."

"While I'm sure that is true, I really must insist," said Kaden. "We do not know what dangers lie ahead of us, and the Magistrates may not always be available to look after your safety." He paused. "

may not always be available to look after your safety."

"That's why I have Quinn."

"Not even Quinn could fight off an entire army of those beasts. Besides, I think you could use something to take your mind off of these matters—if only for a short while."

Korox raised his hand to silence Kaden, but the idea of practicing his martial arts did seem like a good way to help shake the haunting images from his head.

"Very well," he said. "Meet me in the fencing yard."

"Me, my lord?" asked Kaden. "But—"

"Yes, you, Kaden. This was your idea. Now you get to see exactly how little practice I need."

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Chapter Fourteen

Both hands on the hilt of his sword, Korox Morkann whirled on his attacker. His adversary dropped to the ground, rolling backward and out of the way, just barely avoiding the blade.

The king stepped in, following up with a second, quick strike. His weapon struck Captain Kaden in the ribs, and the leader of the Magistrates—no longer encased in his heavy plate mail—fell to the ground.

"Well done, my lord," said Kaden, lying on his back, looking up at the king. "You are faster than I gave you credit for."

Korox nodded. "I told you I didn't need any practice."

"I'm not convinced of that yet," said

Kaden. He got back to his feet and dusted himself off.

The king lowered the linen-wrapped bastard sword he'd been using. "Next time, son, don't pull any of your blows."

Kaden rubbed his ribs, wincing. "I don't plan to, my lord."

"When you are ready, we'll go again," said Korox. He walked to the wall of the barracks and dropped his sword against the weapon rack. He picked up a skin of water and took a big swig, wiping the cool droplets off his lips with the back of his hand. "It's a beautiful morning," he said, looking up at the clear spring sky draped over the southern half of Llorbauth.

The winter weather in ErIkazar was

mild by most standards. The warm water coming off the Deepwash kept the air from getting too cold, which meant there was rarely any snow, except in the high mountains to the west. All in all, Llorbauth wasn't a bad place to be during the cold months of the year. But though it was nice in the winter, it was always quite dark. The end of winter meant the return of the daylight. Spring was here now, and the beautiful summer would follow shortly.

Usually, the sweet air and the beautiful weather at the beginning of spring filled Korox with a sense of peace. Today, it just made him sad. He wondered if this was the last time he would watch his home unfold from its winter slumber,

and if his daughter had missed it.

"My lord?" Kaden's voice brought the king out of his daze.

"Hmm?"

"I said, 'I'm ready when you are,' " repeated Kaden.

The king turned away from the weapon rack to see Kaden in the middle of the practice field, a pike held in his hands.

"Oh, yes, I'm sorry." Korox realized he'd already picked up a pike of his own.

"Are you well, my lord?" asked the captain. "Forgive me for saying, but you seem... well, less focused than usual."

The king nodded. "Yes, that is probably true." He rested both hands on the shaft of his pike. "I have dealt with many things as the King of Erkkazar. There

have been many difficult decisions to make. But none has been more maddening than being asked to choose between the life of my daughter and the safety of my kingdom." He stood up straight as he steeled himself, trying to find the strength to turn his thoughts into words. "No father should ever be asked to make that choice."

Korox stood silent for a moment, contemplating the unthinkable. "I want nothing more in this world than to find Mariko and bring her home safely." He shook his head. "But if we do find her. If we rescue my daughter from whatever fate has befallen her, then I will have to make that choice." "My lord, uh..."

The king shook him off. "I know, Kaden. It must not be easy for you either. It is unfair of me to burden you with these things." He took a wide stance and lowered his pike. "We came out here to get a brief respite from this topic." The king lunged, pulling up short. "Defend yourself."

Kaden bowed his head and took up his pike.

No sooner had the two men traded blows, their weapons clanging loudly from the impact, than their sparring was interrupted by a pair of Magistrates.

"King Korox! King Korox!" The men hurried into the practice yard, a badly wounded man strung between them.

"Dear Bane! It's Whitman." "

The king dropped his pike and rushed to meet the men carrying his personal scribe. "Put him down over here." Korox directed them to a small patch of grass growing beside one of the barracks.

The Magistrates did as they were told, lowering the wounded scribe onto the ground as gently as they could.

"What happened?" asked Korox, bending down and examining Whitman.

"We found him on the road early this morning," said one of the Magistrates.

"Looks like someone dumped him. He was unconscious, clutching this in his hand."

The soldier produced a crinkled piece of vellum.

Korox took it from him. The letters

scrawled across it were written in blood. It said simply:

If you want our help, give us the Claw.

The king handed the note over his shoulder to Captain Kaden.

"Why do they think we'd want their help?" asked Kaden. "Are they volunteering to stop producing the Elixir? What

makes them think you'd turn over the Claw?"

The king turned to the captain, annoyed.

"Captain, I'm just as much in the dark as you." He looked up at the other two Magistrates. "Get me a healing potion, and notify Senator Divian that I will need her or one of her clerics as soon as possible."

"Yes, my lord," replied the soldiers in unison.

One man dashed off down the road toward the palace. The other entered a nearby barracks and came quickly back—a vial of healing potion in his fist.

"Let us hope he's got some more answers for us," said the king. "Help me sit him up."

Captain Kaden lifted Whitman by his shoulders until he was upright.

"Gently now. Just enough so he can drink." The king uncorked the vial and poured the liquid into the scribe's mouth. Whitman choked on the thick potion at first, but it didn't take much coaxing to get him to swallow the rest of the healing magic.

The partially dried scabs on the beaten man's face faded, and he gagged a bit as he sputtered back to consciousness.

"No! No! Please stop!" Whitman flailed on the ground, startled, then he calmed himself as he seemed to find recognition in the faces of the king and Captain Kaden.

"What... ? Where... ?"

"Whitman, you're safe now."

The scribe let out a sigh of relief. "Oh thank the gods. Each and every one of them."

Captain Kaden laid Whitman back down on the grass, letting him recline.

"What happened?" demanded the king.

"Who did this to you?"

"The—the Matron." He coughed hard

between the words, spitting up phlegm laced with blood. "They took me from—from my bed. Her henchmen—they beat me."

"They took you from your bed? They abducted you from inside the palace? How could that happen?" Korox looked back at Kaden.

The captain shrugged. "We've tripled the patrols, and all the entrances are warded against intrusion."

Whitman nodded. "I don't know how—how they got in. The last thing I remember was being awakened from sleep. There were four men. They held me down. I was gagged and taken from the palace, down to the docks. They took me into a dark room. And they—they

beat me. Told me to deliver a message to you."

The king handed his scribe the piece of vellum. "You mean this?"

Whitman looked at the scribbled words. "Yes—" His coughing fit this time was much longer, and he nearly choked.

The king and Captain Kaden tried to lift him back to sitting, but he waved them off, regaining his composure. "There's more."

"More?" said Kaden. "Did they tell you where the princess is?"

"No. But they do have her." Whitman felt his bruised face, poking at his mostly closed-over right eye. "The Matron told me to tell the king that if he turns the

Claw over to her, not only will Princess Mariko be returned, but the underworld will also summon all of its mages to help the king fight the Obsidian Ridge." He looked up at King Korox with his one good eye. "She said if you give her the Claw, then you will have your daughter and an alliance that will give you all the mages you need to fight Arch Magus Xeries."

Korox flinched and pulled away from Whitman. "So she knows of our plan to fight Xeries. How could she know about the convocation of mages?"

Whitman looked to the ground and shook his head. "I do not know. But she knew, and she wanted you to know that. That's why I was beaten." The scribe began to

sob.

The king put his hand on the man's shoulder. He felt a pang of guilt. For Korox, this was the worst part of being the king—knowing that sometimes other people were hurt on his behalf.

"She's got Mariko." The king closed his eyes and shook his head. He hadn't thought it could get any worse. But it had. He turned to Kaden. "If the Matron can abduct a member of my court from his bed and knows of plans we've only just talked about, then surely she has more reach into the palace than we had thought."

Korox tried to wrap his brain around Whitman's story. The pieces just didn't add up. If four men could get into and out

of the palace without getting spotted, then why didn't they just come for him? If the Matron had that much reach, then why abduct a junior member of the court? Only then to return the man at some time later, beaten to a pulp, with a ransom note and an offering to help?

"Does she want to scare me?" The king was thinking out loud. "Let me know she can get to me anytime she wants? If that's the case, then why offer an alliance?"

And how could she know about his plans to fight Xeries? Outside of himself, only Kaden, Quinn, and Senator Divian were aware of his thinking on the matter. The idea was Divian's, and he'd known her too long to think she was the one who would jeopardize the plan by revealing

it to the underworld. Kaden and Quinn were the two men the king most trusted, leaving his own life in their hands on a daily basis. If either one of them turned out to be a spy for the underworld, then everyone in the entire palace was suspect. Was there no one he could trust?

Then it hit him. There was someone else who knew of that conversation, someone else who could have told the Matron their plans.

That someone was Whitman.

The king looked to the Magistrate who had brought him the healing potion. "Soldier, I want you to go to the front gate of the palace. Ask the guard there for an accounting of all persons who

entered or left the palace last night and early this morning."

"Yes, my lord," replied the Magistrate, and he hurried off.

The king nodded to two other soldiers. "You two, take hold of this man."

Without hesitation the Magistrates grabbed hold of Whitman, pinning him down.

"What... what are you—?" stuttered the scribe.

Korox stood in front of Whitman, his shadow looming large over the prone man. "Anything you want to tell me before that solider returns?"

Whitman's eyes grew wide. "My lord, what... whatever do you mean?"

Korox could feel his anger rising. "Don't play me for the fool, Whitman."

"My lord, I would never—"

"When that Magistrate returns," continued the king, "I suspect he's going to have an accounting of you leaving the palace last night—not gagged and carried by four men, but under your own power."

Whitman looked up at the king, swallowing hard.

Korox reached for the hilt of his sword. It wasn't there, and he realized he'd taken it out while he was sparring with Kaden. "If you're lying to me, Whitman," he growled, "if you're helping the underworld in any part of this, so help me, I'll beat you with my bare hands."

The doors on all the barracks burst open, and Magistrates poured out. Apparently alarmed by the sound of the king's raised voice, they arrived in various states of dress, all of them carrying weapons.

Seeing nearly a unit of the King's Magistrates appear as if from nowhere must have scared the scribe, because his eyes grew wide and he started to thrash around—a desperate, guilty man making one last attempt at freedom.

Korox leaned over, his face nearly touching Whitmans, his fists already in balls. "Did you tell the Matron about the mages' convocation?"

The beaten man burst into tears, and he curled up into a ball, defending himself

against a coming blow. "It was me. Please don't hurt me. I can't take anymore. I admit it. I told the Matron about the plans to defeat Xeries. I've been working with her all along. Please. Please. Just don't hurt me."

King Korox Morkann spun around with his right fist, catching the scribe squarely on the jaw, knocking a pair of teeth out of the man's mouth with his powerful blow.

"Where—"

He swung again, his massive frame blocking out the morning sun, and burying Whitman in the king's shadow. The scribe's head flopped around on his neck like the chained ball of a flail.

"Is—"

Another blow.

"My—"

And then a fourth. "Daughter!"

With this final impact, Whitman's body began to convulse. Blood oozed from his nose and mouth. His eyes rolled around in his head, hardly able to focus.

Korox wound up for another strike, but Captain Kaden caught his arm.

"My lord!" pleaded the leader of the Magistrates. "Let him speak."

Whitman could hardly move his lips, so badly beaten was he. Drooling blood and mucus, his eyes now both swollen shut, the scribe ran his hand across his mouth, clearing out another broken tooth.

"She's... she's in the Cellar."

King Korox's heart froze, and his

stomach knotted. "The Cellar."

Without a word, he turned and headed back to the palace.

"My lord!" shouted Captain Kaden.

"What do you want us to do with Whitman?"

The king waved his hand over his shoulder, not looking back. "Take him to the dungeon. I'm not through with him yet."

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Chapter Fifteen

The king stormed into the audience chamber, his clothes still damp with sweat from sparring. A court clerk approached him as he made his way around the curved outer wall.

"King Korox, if I could just get a

moment—"

The king waved him off. "No," he boomed.

The clerk bowed once then disappeared behind a column.

Reaching the far side and the statue of Ondeth Obarskyr, Korox pushed open the door to his private reading room. Though it was early morning, the room was still quite dark. The sun coming in from the high windows cast long shadows across the opposite wall. The reflection lit the chamber well enough that the king could see all the obstacles in his way.

Crossing to the far edge, the king looked into the darkened corner.

"Where is he?" he said under his breath.

"I am here, my king."

Behind him, the Claw had materialized. It had always been disconcerting to Korox that the Claw seemingly appeared out of thin air, but now was not the time to discuss this little pet peeve.

"So, I don't need to tell you about the Matron's demand."

"No, you do not."

"And you are aware of the princess's predicament?"

The Claw nodded.

"We can speak freely here, away from other ears. What am I to do?"

The Claw took a deep breath, pausing—a very uncharacteristic moment of hesitation.

"This is not the time to withhold your

thoughts," said the king. "I need your unfiltered council, so that I can make a quick decision about both the Matron and my daughter."

The Claw bowed his head. "My lord, there is something I must tell you...." Another moment of hesitation.

"Out with it, man," demanded the king. "Mariko is in the Cellar. For all we know she may already be dead, but if she is not—and I pray for the sake of ErIkazar she is still unharmed—then I need to move fast."

"I'll get her," volunteered the Claw.

The king nodded. "I thought you might. But then what do I do about the Matron?"

"My lord, I am your loyal servant. If you were to ask me to descend to the deepest

levels of Hell and return with a devil in tow, I would do it without question. There is nothing too grand or too small, nothing I would withhold from you. But I cannot turn myself over to the Matron. Not now."

The king was puzzled. "Not now?"

"Because I am in love with your daughter, and I must get her back."

The king lowered his head. "I know."

It was the Claw's turn to be puzzled.

"You know?"

"Mariko is not the only spy at my disposal."

"I see." The Claw stared at the ground, shifting his weight from foot to foot, looking rather uncomfortable.

"We do not have the time to have the

conversation about what it means to court my daughter," said the king. "But I hope we will in the near future." He put his hand on the Claw's shoulder. "For now, let's just get her back."

The Claw nodded. "Yes, my lord."

The king crossed the room and slid open the drawer on a

desk in the corner. Reaching inside, he retrieved a small box, a magic sigil inscribed on its surface. Placing his hand on top, he spoke the princess's name. "Mariko Morkann," and the lid to the box sprang open.

"This"—he lifted a small, flat disk, about twice the size of a typical gold coin, from the box; brightly colored triangles radiated out from the center,

making it look like a child's toy—"is a portal that will take you to the Cellar. You will be able to activate it a second time to get back out, once you have found Mariko. But be careful when you use it. It can only be used once to get in and once to get out. It will not last very long. If you activate it and do not use it, you will be lost, trapped inside the Cellar." He offered it to the masked man. The Claw took it. "I understand."

The king grabbed his assassin by the arm. "I have trusted you with the most important matters of my reign. Now I must trust you with my daughter's life. Please, don't let me lose her."

The Claw bowed. "I will get her back. I give you my word."

"I know you will," said the king, his heart heavy for the news he still had to deliver. "But son, I'm afraid that"—he pointed to the magical portal disk—"is all the help I can give you. If you fail, I will have no choice but to turn you over to the underworld."

The Claw nodded his understanding.

"There is still the matter of the Obsidian Ridge, and I have a responsibility to this kingdom."

"Yes, my lord."

"I can give you enough time to leave the palace—to get to the Cellar. But then I must give the Magistrates the order."

"The order?"

"Yes." The king steeled himself. "I will tell the Matron that she has a deal. That I

will turn you over to her as soon as I can hunt you down. If she has as much reach into the palace as I suspect, then she will know if I'm telling her the truth. So I will send the Magistrates out, looking for you. You will be a hunted man, but if you are quick, you will be out of this realm and inside the Cellar before I give the command."

"I do not understand," said the Claw. "Why accept the deal if I can get the princess back?"

"Because I do not trust the Matron, but I have no choice but to accept her offer for help. While you are searching for Mariko, I can be putting together plans to fight Xeries—with the help of the underworld. If all goes well, you will

retrieve my daughter while we fight off the Obsidian Ridge."

The Claw nodded. "I see. Thank you, my lord. I will not fail."

"Good luck, son. Good luck."

Without looking back, King Korox Morkann left his private reading room, closing the door behind him. Crossing through the circle of pillars, he sat down on his throne and waved over a junior scribe.

A young man of no more than eighteen years scampered over, his arms full of parchment, a quill and ink gripped in his hands.

"Take this down." The king cleared his throat. "By official decree, I, Korox Morkann, King of ErIkazar, do hereby

order the Magistrates of my realm to find and capture the man known as the Claw. He is to be returned to me alive and with all haste." The king paused. "Use all force necessary to retrieve this man. Spare no expense. The fate of ErIkazar depends on it."

Korox nodded. "Have that posted on all barracks and delivered to the commanders of each unit."

The young man looked up from his writing, his eyes wide. He swallowed hard, then nodded, shuffling off to do as he was told.

Korox slumped back in his throne.

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The Claw stood in the king's private reading room. This was the first time

he'd been here alone, and the room, although small and packed with furniture, felt very empty.

He turned the magical, colored disk over in his hand. He wasn't sure he wanted to find out what was on the other side. The Cellar, from all accounts, was a terrible place. But that wasn't what bothered him.

It was the princess. She'd been missing for three days now. If she'd been in the Cellar all that time, there's no telling what sort of foul evil had befallen her.

The Claw wasn't frightened by much, not even the thought of his own death. But finding the woman he loved torn to shreds on the floor of the Cellar would be more than he could handle.

He placed the disk on the floor and readied himself. There was only one way to find out if she was still alive. And the faster he got there, the more likely he could save her. Giving the disk a spin, he watched the colors blur and melt into one another. They lifted off the surface, seemingly knitting together in midair.

A shimmering portal formed beside the disk. It swirled, a giant replica of the spinning trinket, suspended over the ground by nothing at all. Picking up the disk, the Claw stepped through the portal—out of the palace and into the Cellar.

As soon as both feet touched the ground, the portal winked out of existence behind him. The chamber he had entered

was completely dark. It smelled damp and musty, like the mineral caves under the ruins of Castle Trinity, and the only sound was of dripping water, somewhere off in the distance.

The Claw slipped the portal disk under a flap of fabric beneath his belt then unfastened his left gauntlet.

"As you wish, Princess Mariko," he said, and the sigil on his palm lit up.

The Claw found himself standing inside a long, narrow

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room. Patches of fuzzy yellow mold covered the walls and floor. The few flagstones still visible were worn and broken, missing altogether in many places. Pools of dirty water had

collected in the divots. The light from Princess Mariko's magical gift reflected off their surfaces, illuminating the dripping cracks in the ceiling.

The Claw took in the whole chamber, swinging his palm from one end to the other. The portal had brought him to the inside of a sealed room. There didn't appear to be any doors or windows—no way out at all.

"First things first."

Kneeling down, the Claw retrieved a small dagger from his boot. Using it to puncture the leather on his off-hand gauntlet, he cut a square hole in the palm—the same size as the illuminated sigil. It took him some time. His gauntlets were well-crafted, and the leather

resisted being severed. But eventually he succeeded. Satisfied with his work, he returned the gauntlet to his left hand and made his way down to the far end of the room.

The stones on the floor moved and shifted under his weight. It seemed they hadn't been walked upon in some time. As he drew closer to the end, it looked as if there had at one time been a door leading out of this chamber, but it was now all bricked up. The yellowish mold seemed thin here, giving way to more of the foul water. A large puddle flooded most of this part of the room, growing ever bigger from the slow drip in the ceiling.

Stopping at the edge of the puddle, the

Claw scanned the bricked-up doorway with his illuminated palm. The brick was a different color than the rest of the wall, but it wasn't new by any means. Turning his attention to the ceiling, he scanned the crack that seemed to be the only way in or out of here.

The puddle below him thrashed violently, splashing filthy water in every direction. Something wrapped around his legs, and he lost his balance, pulled from his feet. One moment he was standing, the next he found himself looking up, his body soaked, lying flat on his back in the puddle.

The water rose from the ground around him, forming into a pair of huge hands, and they swung down on the Claw,

hitting him squarely in the chest. The air rushed from his lungs.

Rolling to one side, the Claw scampered to his feet, turning to face the black, watery hands. Around those hands, a humanoid formed, lifting itself straight out of the puddle as if using the water to create a body. Its features were dull and ill-defined, slowly taking on more shape. Finally, standing in a pool of water only half the size that it once was, the Claw faced what looked like a drow woman.

Not yet having caught his breath, he took a feeble swipe at the newcomer. Without moving, the woman's body turned liquid, dripping away from his strike and avoiding the attack. The Claw stumbled,

his momentum moving into his swing, and he was rewarded with another pair of vicious blows, this time to the head. The counterstrike from the watery creature sent him tumbling to the corner of the room. Tucking his head, the Claw rolled with the fall, coming up against the wall with his feet and stopping himself from smashing into the mold. Kicking away, he quickly got back to his feet, circling away from the creature. Though it had the form of a female dark elf, this was no drow. The creature's body was fluid, oozy. Not quite water, but it could reorganize itself as if it were liquid. The Claw had heard of such beasts, but he thought they were just the ramblings of drunken adventurers, telling

tall tales over an ale at the inn.

The watery thing lunged, reaching for his right hand. The Claw backed away, bringing all four blades of his left gauntlet squarely down on the creature's shoulder, severing its arm from its body. The arm splashed to the floor into a puddle of goo that resembled a jellyfish washed up on a beach.

The creature screamed and pulled away, grasping at its stump. It spouted off some words that he didn't understand— all hisses and clicks. Whatever she was saying, he was certain it meant she was not happy with him.

As he watched, the creature regrew its arm. Then the rest of its features solidified, turning from slimy ooze into

fabric, metal, flesh, and leather. It wore a steel breastplate, polished to a high shine, with copper chain sleeves. Underneath its armor, the drow creature had formed a purple velvet shirt that shone through the sides of the breastplate and the rings of the chain. Below that, it sported a thick leather belt that held up a single short sword in a metal scabbard. And of course, its skin was a shiny, onyx black.

The Claw shook his head. He found himself looking into her dark eyes as she stared at him. Funny how charming she seemed, even though he didn't understand her language.

The creature came at him again, punching her fist at his left gauntlet.

Though she had a sword, she hadn't drawn it, and the barehanded attack caught the Claw off guard. He tried to pull back, but the drow woman was quick, and her fist collided with his. When it did, her hand flowed out, becoming little more than a blob of gelatinous gunk enveloping his entire left hand—bladed gauntlet, wrist, and all.

The room grew dark, as the magical light on his palm glowed through the drow beast's flesh, illuminating her face and chest but little else. The Claw shook his arm, trying to break free, but it was no use. She had him. The ooze around his hand seemed to dry up, hardening to an almost leatherlike state, trapping his weapon inside the creature.

Struggling for a moment longer, the Claw finally gave up. "Won't let it go?" he growled, pulling his right hand back into a fist. "Fine. I'll cut it out."

The Claw yanked the creature forward with his left hand, and buried the blades of his gauntlet into its gut with his right. Though it appeared to be wearing polished steel armor, it gave way like oozy flesh. Unable to dodge in time, the beast

was pinned, and the Claw pulled his arms apart, tearing the drow woman in half. She screamed as her body came apart, then she slumped and sloughed off, dripping away from the Claw's gauntlets and splattering on the floor like chunks of uneaten food.

The Claw shook his hands to clear all the ooze from between his blades. Bits of the creature slipped slowly from his weapons, raining down on the ground and splashing in the filthy water. Kicking at the chunks of the creature's remains, he satisfied himself that it was indeed dead.

"Now," he said to himself, "to find the princess."

Reaching into his belt, he pulled out a small compass. Lifting its lid, he examined the needle. Unlike most compasses, this one didn't have the cardinal directions inscribed on its surface. In fact, there were no markings on it at all, just a glass top, a black bottom, and a silver needle—which

pointed toward the corner of the room. It was brighter now that his palm was no longer encased in ooze, and he followed the direction of the compass to the mold-covered wall. There were two footprints on the wall from where he had pushed off after being knocked on the head by the ooze creature. The mold had come away where he had hit, revealing something other than stone underneath. He tapped at it with the tips of his blades, and it made the low, solid thump of wood.

Taking a step back, he let loose with a kick, right above the footprints. The wood behind creaked under the blow, and the mold flopped from its surface, exposing an arched door with black iron

bolts holding it together. Wet and covered in mold, it didn't give the Claw much trouble. With just a few more kicks the wood came apart, crumbling into rotten splinters, sending a million tiny spiders scattering in all directions.

The Claw's skin crawled at the sight of it. "I hope none of you get any bigger," he said as he leaned down and slipped through the door. "Nothing I hate more than spiders."

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Chapter sixteen

Genevie walked across the drawbridge and through the portcullis into Klarsamryn. She waved to the guards as she passed, trying to smile. It made her nervous to see so many armed men at the

gate. She couldn't remember the last time there were so many Magistrates in one place.

Crossing through the great hall, she hurried her way through the palace's stone hallways to the princess's chamber. Retrieving her key from the pocket of her robe, she slipped it into the lock and let herself in.

The room was mostly dark, but her half-elf eyes could see clearly. Obviously, no one had been looking after the princess's chamber. Chairs were out of place. The linens on the bed were unmade. And the doors of the wardrobe were wide open. Even the lid of the wooden chest where they kept the winter blankets was askew. It appeared as if someone has

ransacked the place, looking for something.

This just wouldn't do. Weaving her way through the disheveled furniture, Genevie went to the window and threw wide the drapes, letting in the late afternoon light.

"You've got a lot of explaining to do," growled a voice from behind her.

Turning around, Genevie dropped to one knee. "My king," she said, following it up with an elaborate bow.

A single hand wrapped around her left arm and dragged

her to her feet. Genevie tried to pull herself from the soldier's grasp, but the Magistrate's powerful hand held her tight.

Genevie twisted in pain. "My lord, make him stop. He's... he's hurting me."

"Oh," said the king, crossing his arms over his chest, his eyes growing dark.

"These men haven't even begun to hurt you."

The Magistrate dragged Genevie out of the princess's chambers. Just outside the door stood six armed guards and a court wizard, all of whom drew their weapons and fell into step behind Genevie as she was dragged away. Stopping at the end of the hall, the king himself kicked open another door and pointed.

"In there," he ordered.

The Magistrate not-so-gently threw the handmaiden into the room, following behind. The king entered as well.

Genevie crashed into a set of wooden shelves against the far wall and collapsed to the floor. She had been in this room before. Little more than a closet, this was where the servants and staff who took care of this floor kept their buckets and mops. There were no windows here—no light and no way out except through the open door into the hallway—both of which were blocked by the king and the Magistrate.

Genevie pulled her legs into her body and covered her head with her hands.

"Please, my lord, don't hurt me. I—"

"Where have you been, Genevie?" asked the king. He was pacing back and forth between the walls of the tiny room.

"We've been looking all over for you."

"I-I-I—" Genevie stuttered. Her whole body was shaking, and she was gasping for air between giant sobs.

"Out with it, Genevie," said the king.

"You go missing on the same day my daughter disappears. Were you with her when she was taken?"

Genevie shook her head, unable to get out any words.

"Then where were you?" The king bent down, placing his huge face in front of hers. "Well?"

Genevie kept quiet, just lying on the ground, her arms, curled around her body as tightly as she could draw them.

"Answer me!" shouted the king. He grabbed her by the front of her robes, lifting her into the air. "You were my

daughter's closest confidant, and you sold her out, didn't you? You and Whitman, you did this together. You were the only other person who could have known where she was going to be. You knew about her late nights. You knew when she came and left the palace. And you sold her out!"

"No! No, it's nothing like that. I would never hurt the princess. Never." Genevie spat out the words in desperation, trying to get free.

The king slapped her across the face with the-back of his hand. "Then Whitman comes back with an offer from the Matron. And you conveniently show up." He let her go, dropping the half-elf to the floor.

Genevie scampered into the corner, curling herself up into a ball.

"On the same day, no less." Korox continued his pacing. "You disappear without a trace. No word from you. Nothing for three full days. In the meantime, the entire kingdom is looking for you and the princess. This is more than a little suspicious."

"I was... I was... with my grandson. He... he's sick. And... and he needs medicine, and I couldn't—"

Korox interrupted her. "You know what I think, Genevie? I think you're lying. I think you helped Whitman concoct this whole plan, and that you were in on it from the beginning."

The king grabbed a wooden bucket from

one of the shelves and slammed it to the ground. It shattered as it hit the stone floor, pieces ricocheting all over the closet. Genevie tried to pull herself up even tighter into the corner, tucking her head into her lap and covering herself with her arms.

"You know what else I think?" shouted the king. "I think you might actually be the Matron. I think all of this is some sort of plot to take over my kingdom. And I think that you just might try to hurt my daughter if it meant you could seize control of Erilkazar."

From out in the hall came a great commotion. People were running back and forth, and there were shouts.

The king turned his attention away from

Genevie. "What's going on out there?"

He stepped away, and the half-elf could see one of the soldiers at the door shrug. Then someone arrived, shouting for the king.

"King Korox! My lord! You must come quick. Another obelisk has arrived."

Genevie couldn't see the messenger, but she was thankful for the reprieve.

"Watch her!" ordered the king, his meaty fist poking in from out in the hall, one of his sausage-like fingers pointing down at her. "Don't close the door. Don't take your eyes off of her. Ward the room against any of her magic, and if she tries to escape, cut her arms and legs off. I need her head still attached, so she can answer questions, but the other limbs are

expendable."

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King Korox didn't know what to think. He marched down the hallway to the great hall.

None of this made any sense. Where had Genevie been? A sick grandson as an explanation? She disappears as the princess is kidnapped, and her excuse is that her grandson is sick? Perhaps Korox's instincts were right. If she was conspiring with Whitman, and her returning now, of all times, was all part of their plan, then they had miscalculated. If she was the Matron, it would explain how Mariko was seemingly so easily captured. But why would Genevie come

back here? She had what she wanted. Did she get nervous when she didn't hear from Whitman? That wouldn't make any sense either. Why risk coming into the palace without guards or mages? Wouldn't she want to negotiate the terms of her offer to help? Was she here to kill the king? The Claw had overheard the Tasca brothers talking about a plot on his life, and so far they hadn't seen any attempt. Then how did Mariko's disappearance factor into all of this?

There were just too many questions and not enough answers.

The messenger led him to the front gate, where a group of people was once again gathered.

"Make way for the king!" shouted the

messenger.

Storming out onto the drawbridge, Korox tried to pull himself together. Twice in one day he'd raised his hand against people whom only a few days before he had considered trusted allies. His confidence in the people around him was eroding quickly, and he was starting to act like a desperate man—not a commanding, confident king.

Stepping out onto the wooden slats, King Korox looked up once again at a huge obsidian obelisk.

One of the soldiers standing by greeted him. "King Korox," he said, bowing. "Unlike the last one, this stone appeared right in front of our eyes."

The king nodded, approaching it and

placing his hand on its side. The jet black stone was slick and warm to the touch. Two words were chiseled onto the face of the stone.

Moonrise tonight.

"The first message said four days," whispered the king. "It's only been three."

The crowd behind him let out a collective gasp, and several people pointed off to the east, toward Shalane Lake. The king turned too, watching in horror as the Obsidian Ridge moved. It swept past the docks, gliding to a stop over the fields at the low point of the valley, not far from where it had first appeared. The arched portals on its sides slid open, and from them, the black

beasts began to pour out.

The creatures fell from the sides of the floating citadel. They dropped to the ground, rolling then unfurling, collecting in the shadow of the Obsidian Ridge.

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Chapter seventeen

The needle on the Claw's compass led him into a long dark corridor. The floors were damp, the stone walls worn, and the passage he traversed wound around a long curve, gently sloping downward as it headed deeper into the Cellar.

Staying against the outside wall of the curve, the Claw moved quickly but cautiously. He had already passed the bodies of several dead cloakers, cut to shreds in the hallway. Whatever had

done that was presumably still roaming free. Unless it had run into something larger. Either way, he needed to stay sharp.

The compass pointed ahead and to his left, but the corridor curved to the right. The needle apparently didn't account for walls. The farther he went, the more the needle swayed, and he began to worry that he wasn't on the right path. His only hope was that there would be another passage or a large chamber at the end of this hall.

His worry was cut short by the sound of heavy metal armor clanking down the passageway. It was close, and it picked up speed, heading right for him. The Claw closed his palm. His magical light

went out, and the hallway went completely dark.

Crossing to the other side of the passage, the Claw pressed himself up against the inside of the curve. Pulling his cloak tight, he blended in and held still. The noise grew closer, sounding like a single man wearing heavy plate.

Then, suddenly, the sound stopped. The passageway grew silent except for the ringing memory of the clanking metal. The Claw squeezed his hands into fists. He could feel his heart pounding in his chest. Had he been spotted? He couldn't take the chance.

Pushing himself away, the Claw rolled into the middle of the hall and took a

fighting stance.

"As you wish, Princess Mariko."

The magic lit up the passage—illuminating a huge, gleaming suit of armor standing right in front of where the Claw had been only a fraction of a heartbeat before. Its surface was inscribed with hundreds if not thousands of tiny, intricate runes. It filled most of the hallway with its massive bulk and floated almost a full foot off the ground; its heavy boots no longer touching the stone floor.

The helm turned toward the Claw, as if it were looking at him. A faint purple light began to glow inside, beaming out the eyes and mouth of the visor. It grew in intensity, as if awakened by what it

had found. The seams at the elbows, knees, neck, and feet also began to glow, and the Claw could see right through it at the joints. There was nothing inside this armor—no human, no creature, no nothing, just magic and malice.

A helmed horror.

This construct had to be over a thousand years old. The horrors were the first denizens of the Cellar, placed here as guardians by the wizard who had created the place. There were legends of these ancient things protecting a rare and powerful treasure. The stories had them wandering the halls of the Cellar, keeping out greedy adventurers and fortune seekers. But that was from another era, a time before the Cellar

became a prison and a punishment.

The construct cast its floating purple shadow on the ceiling, the floor, and both walls. Then it lifted its right hand, the hilt of an ornate sword gripped in its gauntlet. The blade

suddenly sprang to life—humming and vibrating as it came into existence. It appeared to be made from a dull, gray metal. The surface was inscribed with long, thin, even lines that spread from the tip to the hilt. In between each of the lines were a series of circles and dots. To the Claw, they looked like notes on a piece of sheet music, but they were more sinister.

The construct pointed the sword at the Claw and advanced, taking steps but

making no sound as its feet walked magically upon the air. The Claw took a step back, not sure how to attack a creature that was nothing more than protective armor and magic.

The horror swung with a metered purpose. The Claw slapped the blade aside with one of his gauntlets. The metal made a melodious screech as it slipped harmlessly past.

The construct attacked again, swiping its sword level to the floor and crossing the entire passageway with its long reach. The Claw continued his retreat, tossing himself into a back flip like an acrobat, landing on his hands and continuing over until he stood on his feet, two full body lengths away.

The horror broke into a run, charging down the hall. Its magical blade came down, and the Claw dodged away. Diving forward onto his belly, he skidded along the stones, narrowly squeezing through the space under the ancient defender's floating feet. Rolling over onto his back, he slashed at the creature's legs as they ran past. His sharpened gauntlets screeched as they bit into the metal, sending sparks flying but doing apparently little other damage.

The Cellar guardian stopped its charge and turned around, lowering itself to the ground. Taking its sword in both hands, it came again, its heavy feet clanking as it did. Bearing down with all of its might, it filled the confined space with

magical steel. The Claw didn't have time to get to his feet, so he rolled to one side, smashing himself into the base of the wall.

The horror's blade clipped the edge of his cloak but missed the rest of his body. The sword slammed into the wall with tremendous force, which was followed by a cacophonous roar.

The impact had released some sort of magic from the blade, and the passageway shook. The Claw covered his ears with his hands, feeling as if he were in the very center of a huge thunderstorm. The sound echoed down the hallway, crumbling stone and sending debris flying.

The Claw could feel the ground under

his shoulder moving as the flagstones shifted from the tremendous noise. Then the ceiling started to collapse. Handfuls of dirt rained down on him, and he scampered to his feet, trying to cover his head with his cloak to keep the dust out of his eyes.

Taking off down the passage, the Claw attempted to escape from the fight. Right behind him, the horror yanked its blade out of the wall where it had buried itself into the crumbling brick. Then it gave chase, its metal frame pounding the vibrating floor.

There was a tremendous crash as the ceiling continued to cave in. A crack shot through the stone, running in every direction, and huge boulder-sized chunks

dropped to the floor, shaking the walls as they collided with the ground. The Claw ducked into a crouch, running at full speed down the corridor. The horror was right on his heels. Behind both of them, rocks fell from the ceiling, chasing them down the hall as the passage filled in.

The corridor continued to curve down and to the right. The Claw followed, having no other choice, hoping that he wasn't running from one terrible fight into another. The ground shook, and the ceiling fell. The crack spread faster than the Claw could run, and dirt rained down ahead of him. Pieces dropped at his feet, and he hopped over them while he made his escape. Behind him, he

could hear bits of stone clanking off the metal hide of the ancient construct. They sounded like huge hailstones bouncing off the iron rooftops of the shanties just outside the Llorbauth docks.

Coming around the next corner, the passage straightened out and widened into sort of a crossroads—four passages heading off in opposite directions. The Claw launched himself forward, hurling himself out of the hallway and into the open space. Landing in a ball, he somersaulted once, came to his feet, and spun around, his gauntlets out like the claws of a tiger, ready to fight.

The helmed horror appeared at the end of the hall, its blade clutched in its huge

hand. Stones rained down around it, denting the creature as it tried to escape. The advancing crack in the ceiling shot out over the archway that led from the room into the hall. The keystone crumbled, and the end "of the passage collapsed, dropping to the floor in a collective mass, sending dirt and the sound of crushing metal spewing out into the room.

The Claw cowered back, covering his face and protecting himself from the floating debris. The crossroads, brightened by mage-lit stones in sconces along the wall, went •dim from the cloud of black dust. The Claw coughed through his cloak, sucking air through the fabric to block out the floating filth.

There was a light tinkling sound as the heavier particles settled back to the ground—the last sprinkling of the stone rain. The Claw moved toward the mouth of the hallway he'd just come from. His eyes burned and itched from the dust, but slowly the air cleared. Where the archway had been only a few moments before, there was now a huge mound of crumbled stone.

He couldn't see the construct, even a piece of it, through the pile, but he was certain nothing was going to make it out of there alive—or still moving. He checked the ceiling, wary of having to dash away from falling stone. But the cave-in had stopped at the end of the passage, and the crossroads was spared.

He was safe—for the moment.

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King Korox stepped back into the storage closet where Genevie was being held. Upon seeing him, the half-elf recoiled in fear.

"I have very little time for this," said Korox. His head hurt and he rubbed his temples. "So I'm going to ask you some simple questions, and you're going to answer them." He looked right at Genevie, his tone threatening, his words sincere. "Do you understand?"

The handmaiden nodded.

"Good. Then we will start." The king paused, looking for the right way to phrase his first question. "How many mages can you gather before nightfall?"

The half-elf woman looked puzzled. "I don't... I can't gather any."

The king slammed his fist into a wooden shelf, shattering it and sending the pieces dropping to the floor. "I don't have time for your games. I know you're the Matron, and I'm willing to make a deal with you. That is what you offered, isn't it? That was what you sent Whitman here to tell me. That you wanted some sort of an alliance? So name your price. What is it you want to release my daughter and help me defeat Xeries?"

"My lord, please forgive me, but I am not the Matron. I don't know any mages or about any deal, and I do not know where Princess Mariko is." She stood in the corner, looking at the king with wide,

wild eyes.

"Damn you!" he shouted, pointing at her with one thick finger. "I will have no more of this! You will deal with me now, or you will die."

"I told you," Genevie sobbed, terror on her face, "I have no mages. I don't know where the princess is."

There was commotion behind the king. It sounded as if the guards were holding back someone who wanted to get into the closet.

"Let me pass!" came a voice. "The king is making a terrible mistake."

Korox stopped shouting and lowered his finger. "Vasser? Is that Vasser?"

"Yes, my lord," came the voice. Then, "You see. I told you the king would want

to see me."

The guards stepped aside and into the closet came Vasser. He lifted his very large hat from the top of his head, and swung it out before him as he gave the king an elaborate bow.

"Before you get carried away, my king, allow me to tell you what I know."

Korox nodded.

Placing his hat under his arm, Vasser slipped past the king and stood beside the half-elf woman. "I have been following the princess's handmaiden—among others—for some time. Three days ago, however, she managed to give me the slip, and I've been looking for her on your instruction ever since. This morning I discovered that she has been

in the south, purchasing medicinal herbs to give to her grandson." Vasser looked down on the terrified half-elf, her cheek swollen from where the king struck her. "He has a rare disease that will require a very expensive spell to cure. In the meantime, Genevie has been getting a copper weed poultice from a druid in Duhlnarim, to soothe her grandson's symptoms while she collects the coin to pay for the spell."

"So you're telling me that her disappearance was a complete coincidence? That it had nothing to do with the princess's kidnapping?"

Vasser nodded. "That is what I am telling you."

"She..." The reality of the situation hit

King Korox, and a heavy pang of guilt set in. "You're telling me she's innocent?"

"Not entirely," said Vasser. "She is guilty of stealing candlesticks and bits of silverware from the princess's chamber."

"I was going to repay her. As... as soon as I had the coin." Genevie held her face in her hands. "I'm so sorry, my lord. I'm... I'm ashamed of what I have done, and I should be punished."

The king was completely deflated. "I am the one who should be ashamed." He dropped to his knees in front of the handmaiden. "You're not the Matron, are you?"

Genevie shook her head. "No."

"Your only crime is that you tried to help your sick grandson."

The half-elf nodded, not looking at him. The king tried to take her hand, but Genevie flinched away.

Korox's heart sank. He had never done anything so vile as this before. He had never acted in a manner so unbefitting a king. He no longer felt as if he deserved all of his riches and power. If Bane were to appear before him and demand that he turn over all that he had, he would do it right now, without complaint. Nothing he could ever do, no matter how much good it would bring, could possibly make up for the thrashing and accusation he laid on this poor woman today.

He pulled his hand away from the half-elf. "I know that what I have done to you is wrong. And I am certain that my apology does not excuse me for my behavior. Nor, I suspect, will it make you feel any better." He paused. "But I give you my apology all the same."

Getting to his feet, the king stepped out into the hall. "Get her a healer, right away. And send a message to the temple of Ilmater," he said to the wizard who had been summoned to ward the room against magic. "Have them send a high priest to cure Genevie's grandson. Whatever it costs, no matter the expense, I will pay for it personally." He glanced back into the lightless chamber Vasser was helping the old half-elf get to her

feet. "And I want her to have a bodyguard. For the rest of her days. No one will ever be allowed to lay a hand on her in anger, ever again."

Chapter eighteen

The Claw sneezed. The dust in the room was making his nose itch, and he scratched it with his shoulder, rubbing the tough cloth up under his mask. The blades on his gauntlets made some of the simple things quite a bit more difficult, but it was something he'd learned to live with.

There were three passages left in the crossroads after the hallway collapsed. The silver needle pointed to one on the Claw's fight. Eager to get out of the dust cloud, he turned and followed the compass.

The passage emptied into a much larger room. A series of large stone pillars, each the same distance from the next,

dominated the space—all of them radiated out in circles from the center of the chamber. There was a crack in the ceiling, out of which a purplish glow emanated.

As he walked deeper into the room, the silver needle moved, pointing farther to the right. He must be getting close! Weaving his way around a pair of pillars, the Claw stopped in his tracks. The bulbous body of a gargantuan spider blocked his passage.

A cold chill ran down his spine. He tried to shake it off, but it was followed by another, and then another. There was no getting used to it. He hated spiders, and this was the biggest one he'd ever laid eyes on.

From where he stood, it looked as if the creature was jammed in place. It held perfectly still, not twitching so much as a leg. Moving to his left, he watched the needle on the compass as it swung again, pointing right at the spider.

A cold chill gripped the Claw, squeezing his stomach with fear. He continued to circle around, his hands gripped tight, hoping he wouldn't find what the compass was telling him he would. Slipping around another pillar, every hair on his body stood on end—a second huge spider.

Just like the first, its body was seemingly trapped between two pillars. It too held completely still, not a twitch,

a tap, or a click. From where he stood, the Claw couldn't see either of their heads, but it certainly looked as if they were both facing the same thing.

Giving it a wide berth, the Claw moved around the rear of the trapped vermin. Steeling himself for what he was going to find, he peered around the pillar and into the space that seemed to hold these two huge spiders' attention.

The floor was awash in reddish brown filth. Stringy bits of gooey flesh and large chips of chitin littered the ground. From what he could piece together, the spiders had been cut in half and pounded flat. They had no faces, no fangs, no front legs, nothing left except their round lower halves. They had literally been

squashed like bugs—only they were really big bugs, and whoever had done the squashing apparently didn't have feet large enough to smash more than half.

The Claw had never seen the inside of a spider—other than on the bottom of his boot. But he had seen what a dead human looked like. And nothing on the ground in front of him even remotely resembled the body of a princess.

Glancing down at the compass, the needle no longer pointed at the spiders. Instead, it faced the wall to his left. He was both relieved and frustrated. He had been terrified of coming around that pillar and finding Mariko's body, half devoured, enshrouded in spider silk. At least he knew that wasn't her fate.

At the same time, he'd been following this compass for a long time now, and it always seemed to point into walls. You would think someone could invent a magic that could take physical barriers into account.

The Claw stepped up to the wall and pounded on it with his palm. "Lazy wizards," he grumbled. The wall was completely solid.

He scanned the bricks from ceiling to floor. There were deep scratch marks in several locations, as if something tried to dig its way out of this room. But there were no secret passages or hidden doors that the princess might be hiding behind.

Then something caught his eyes. Bending down, he pushed aside some of the

spider guts and lifted a silvery chain with a pair of interlocking circles dangling from the end—the locket he had given to Princess Mariko. The compass had taken him right to it.

"Damn!" The Claw shouted, kicking the wall. His words echoed through the chamber.

Finding the princess just became a whole lot tougher.

He had a way in. He had a way to find the locket. But that was all. He was out of tricks, and time was not on his side.

The edge of a sharp dagger pressed up against his neck. "That'll be enough shouting," said a woman's deep voice. "Put your hands out where I can see them."

The Claw straightened up and did as he was told.

"Well now," said the woman. "It's not every day that you see something like that, now do you?" She slapped one of his bladed gauntlets with a second dagger. "Must be kind of rough, you know, if you need to scratch your eye or something."

The Claw nodded. "I was just thinking that myself."

"Were you now?" The woman started frisking him, feeling around his waist, his calves, and near his boots, but keeping her other blade firmly against his neck.

The Claw started to nod yes, but the sharp edge of the dagger bit into him. He

could feel the sting as the metal separated his skin, and he decided it was better to hold still.

"That's a good boy," she said, clearly noticing his discomfort. "No moving till I say so."

The Claw let her continue her search. In the pouch on his belt she found the compass that had led him to the locket, three small healing potions, and two flasks of alchemist's fire.

"You're pretty well armed," she said. "You weren't sent here as a prisoner, were you?"

"No," replied the Claw, trying his best to not move his throat much.

"Judging by the make of your clothes and the magic on them blades, I'd say you

work for someone with a lot of coin. Perhaps even the king himself."

"Impressive," said the Claw. Whoever this person was, she reminded him of Princess Mariko—smart, sharp tongued, and dangerous.

She stopped her search and placed her second blade on his neck. "Now listen real good," she said, whispering in his ear. "I'm gonna release you. And you're gonna turn around. But before you get any bright ideas about sticking me with those pointy gloves of yours, just know this—I can cut off your manhood from thirty paces with just one of these." She wiggled her daggers on his neck. "If you want to know what I can do with two, just use your imagination."

The blades slipped away from his neck, and he could feel her step away. She didn't make any noise as she moved.

"Turn around," she said, "and keep your back to the wall."

Doing as he was told, the Claw turned around and finally got a look at the woman who had held him at knifepoint. She was tall, almost as tall as him, with ragged blonde hair. Her slim half-elf build was accentuated by a suit of black leather armor, fitted tight against her frame by a series of straps and buckles. Her outfit would have been quite impressive, had it not been worn thin at the knees, elbows, and neck, and its snapped buckles retied with bits of leather. Tattered sleeves

and torn seams on a woman this capable could mean only one thing: she'd been down here for quite some time.

The half-elf stood in front of the destroyed spiders, one dagger pointed at him, the other poised above her shoulder, ready to throw. She looked him over, sizing him up, but every few moments she would look behind her, scanning the room, like a burglar watching for guards.

"Well now," said the Claw, "it's not every day you see something like that." He indicated the intricate strap and buckle system on her suit of armor. "Now do you?"

She looked down at herself and chuckled. "No," she said. "I suppose you

don't."

"Must be kind of rough," he said, breaking a smile. "You know, taking it off and whatnot."

"Don't flatter yourself," she said, an evil smile on her face. "Just because you're the first man I've laid eyes on in half a year doesn't mean I'm going to rush into your arms as soon as you look at me all sideways."

The Claw blushed under his mask. He hadn't meant that the way it sounded.

"What's your name?" he asked, trying to change the subject.

"Evelyne," she said. She looked him over once again. "And what do they call you?" "They call me the Claw."

"The Claw? Well, that's catchy. So

listen, Claw, now that we're all friendly, why don't you go ahead and take off that mask of yours, so I can see your face?"

"Why would you want me to do that? You don't know me."

Evelyne smiled. "But of course I do. You're the Claw. King Korox's personal assassin."

"Well, you have me at a disadvantage then. Since all I know about you is your name."

"Oh, you're at an even bigger disadvantage than that. If you haven't noticed, I've got you at knife point. And even

better, I know my way around, and I'll bet both my blades that you don't have a single solitary notion about where you

are right now."

He nodded. "You got me there," he said.

"So now what?"

"Now you take off your mask, so I can see your face. Or we go back to where we were, and I kill you." She cocked her arm even farther, getting ready to throw her blade.

"Wait. Wait." The Claw dropped into a crouch, ready to defend himself. "I've caused you no harm. You don't want to kill me."

She took a step closer. "A girl can tell a lot about a man by looking at his face. So I want to see it now, if I'm going to parley with you. If not, you can die."

"You're making a mistake—"

His words were cut short by a

tremendous hiss. Then the room erupted in sound as a pair of nearby pillars were torn from the floor and ceiling and hurled across the chamber. Three greenish tentacles appeared from behind the pile of spider muck. Each was capped with the head of a serpent or drake—long slithery tongues and mouths full of teeth. They sniffed at the air, focusing in on Evelyne with their white eyes.

Beside the heads, three more tentacles appeared. Thick and round, they had the suction cups of an octopus on one side, and the scales of a snake on the other. They tapered to a point, and one of them held in its grasp a shattered piece of stone, wielding it like a club. The other

two stretched out, reaching over twenty feet, to grab hold of another pillar with their soft suction cups. They contracted, pulling into view the creature's rubbery sphere of a body.

The beast's round, gray-brown mass must have been at least twice the height of a man. A dozen smallish stalks protruded from the creature's surface—clear white eyes attached to the ends. It held itself suspended over the floor with just the two large tentacles wrapped around the pillars. The other tentacle and the three heads converged on Evelyne, surrounding her from all sides.

"Get back!" she shouted, waving her daggers at the snapping, hissing heads. "You know I don't taste good."

The tentacles came at her, all at the same time. She managed to bat one away, and slice another, but the other two were too strong, and Evelyne became quickly overwhelmed. A hissing serpent head clamped onto each arm, biting down and immobilizing her.

The Claw sprang into action, tumbling into the center of the fight and raking his blades down the entire length of one tentacle. A single long slice of flesh fell from the creature's body, the suction cups making a slight squish as they hit the floor.

The head attached to that tentacle hissed and reeled back, releasing Evelyne from its grip.

The Claw ran to the other side. Jabbing

out with his fists, he pierced the snakelike hide and jammed his blades deep into the tentacle. The creature let out another hiss and pulled back, letting go of the half-elf's other arm, but yanking the Claw off his feet—his gauntlet jammed deep inside the beast's body.

The Claw was dragged across the filth-strewn floor, reddish-brown guts flying everywhere, as he tried to pull himself free. The creature flailed, its hissing turning into more of an angry screech as it flung him side to side, trying in vain to dislodge the bladed human. It smashed him into the ruined half bodies of the giant spiders, sending them rolling and wobbling across the uneven paving stones, leaving a trail of gore behind.

The creature slammed the Claw against the wall—upside down. Pulling himself over, he kicked his feet into the air, bracing them against the solid stone. With all of his might, he yanked down on his blades, using the wall as leverage. His razor-sharp gauntlets slipped through the flesh and came out the other side, and the Claw fell to the floor, finally free.

The round, rubbery abomination pulled back. Its tentacle was almost completely severed in two. Wrapping it against its body, the head hissed in the Claw's direction. Then the entire beast convulsed, its round core expanding and contracting in an undulating motion. Its eyes, protruding

from its body on narrow stalks, darted this way and that, scanning the entire room.

Lowering its body close to the floor, it seemed to strain its muscles, as if laboring with something difficult. The pillars it held between two powerful tentacles cracked under the pressure, sending stone and dust tinkling to the floor. With one final push, the creature opened its backside and deposited a huge, silvery-white sack on the ground. Then the beast retreated, gripping the pillars with its tentacles and pulling itself through the room.

Ooze dripped from the side of the sack, and it began to move. Something inside poked at its edges, making strange

shapes in the stretchy, elastic sides of its cocoon. Then a hole appeared, and a pair of long thin tendrils slipped out, forcing the opening to widen. Two more tendrils, then four more after that, groped their way out as the sack was turned inside out and a large spider appeared.

Maybe half as big as the smashed vermin whose guts were now caked on the flagstones of the chamber, this new spider had silvery legs that ended in bladed tips—natural swords attached to each of its eight spindly legs.

Evelyne dashed past him, grabbing his shoulder. "This way!"

Rolling back to his feet, the Claw followed. He didn't need to be told twice.

Evelyne led him deeper into the room, hugging the wall. The tentacled creature was on the other side of the chamber. The Claw could see it through the pillars as they ran. Its body opened to deposit a second silvery sack on the ground.

Behind them, the spider's legs tapped out a rhythm of sharp clicking sounds as they scampered across the floor. Evelyne dashed ahead at full bore, her arms pumping. She was quick, so was the Claw, but the spider with its eight legs was faster, and it gained ground.

They reached the corner of the room, the spider bearing down on them. It was dark here, darker than the rest of the room. Even the purple glow from the ceiling didn't reach into the recesses of

this chamber. Evelyne gave a quick look over her shoulder, then dived head first into the darkness.

The Claw was startled. What sort of magic was this? She'd led him into the farthest corner and disappeared, trapping him behind a spider and a spider-making monster. Slowing his pace, he steeled himself for a tough fight. If he ever found this Evelyne again, she was going to be very sorry she—

"Don't stop! Just jump." Evelyne's voice came out of the darkness, coaxing him on. It sounded hollow, almost echoed, as if she were inside a well. "Hurry!"

The spider was nearly on him. It ran with six legs, swiping its front two out trying to corral him. Not having much

choice, the Claw leaped into the dark corner, the spider's limbs nearly on his back.

Flying through the air, he braced for impact, half expecting that he'd knock himself cold running full speed into a brick wall. But instead, he slipped right through. A large chunk of the wall was missing here in the corner. The absent piece was broken in such a way that it was covered perfectly by the shadows.

Jumping from the solid stone into dark nothingness was tremendously disorienting, and the Claw opened his palm, trying to see where he was before he impaled himself on a piece of stone—or worse, another spider.

He fell for a moment longer, then his

magical light revealed the dirt floor. It came up fast, and he crashed to the ground with a tremendous thud.

"Not very sturdy there, are you?" said Evelyne, helping him to his feet.

"You might not think that," he replied.

"That wasn't bad fighting back there," she said, with a wink. "Maybe I won't kill you just yet."

"Thanks," said the Claw. "I appreciate that."

They were inside what amounted to a large hole in the brick wall. The floor was big enough for four or five men to stand around comfortably without bumping into each other much. The crack they had jumped through was up high in the wall, maybe twice his height from

the floor. He could just make out the faintest bit of purple glow, rimming the broken stone above him.

As he looked on, the spider's legs shot through the opening, probing the air and the stone.

"Are we trapped in here?" asked the Claw.

"No. There's a passage," she replied, taking him by the arm. "It's small, and we'll have to crawl, but it'll lead us out of here."

"What about the spider? Holes in walls seem like the last place we want to fight one of those things."

"It won't leave that room. It's bound to the deepspawn that created it."

The Claw looked up at the spider. So far

it wasn't making any real attempt to follow them, only waiting at the opening. "So that thing's called a deepspawn?" he asked.

"No," replied Evelyne, dragging him toward the crawl-space. "It's called Clusterfang."

"A deepspawn with a name." He was shoved toward an opening in the wall, down near the floor. "I can't wait to hear this story." Dropping to his knees, he held his palm out and followed the light into the darkness.

Chapter Nineteen

Everything shook. Only slightly, but it shook all the same. The walls hummed with power. The floor swayed like the deck of a ship on a gentle sea. The

chandeliers, "decorative reminders of a time long past, swayed gently, constantly.

Resting his bone-thin arm on the chiseled obsidian throne, Arch Magus Xeries twirled the stem of his wine goblet between his fingers. He watched the red liquid inside swirl. Its surface trembled, never smooth, shifting like everything else.

On the dais in front of him, an image fluttered—Erlkazar, the plains of Llorbauth. His pets gathered below, waiting. And they would continue to wait, just as he would.

He had not been patient as a younger man. He had, in fact, hated waiting for anything. In truth, he didn't much like it

now. But as an immortal, waiting had become a simple fact of life.

He had grown better at it, through practice. He had had a lot of practice waiting, though he wasn't as rash and reactive as he had been long ago. There was a limit to all of his learned patience. Xeries was approaching that limit now.

"Do you remember our first ride through the countryside here?" he asked, not taking his eyes off of his wine.

"I've... never been here before," replied a weak, shaky woman's voice.

Xeries turned his attention to his left, where his wife, his queen, sat. Their thrones were carved from the same piece of obsidian, chiseled from the same huge piece of stone as the floor

itself. They were attached to each other and to the floor. And when Xeries and his queen sat in their thrones, they could feel the vibrations of the entire citadel, amplified above all other places.

"I know you haven't," he said to his wife, his voice echoing as it always did. "I wasn't speaking to you."

"Oh," she said. She wore a long, black veil that covered her face and shoulders. When seated, its hem collected in her lap.

"This was my home, long ago," he said, looking down on the image at his feet. "Well, a piece of it anyway. As a young man."

"Is that why we are here?" she asked. She wheezed a little as she spoke these

words.

"In part," he said. "I need something they have. Something to help me."

His wife's voice grew cold. "Something to maintain your immortality, you mean."

Xeries "stood, his knees popping and creaking as he did. He shuffled down from the dais. His body was bent from age, and he sported the wicked marks and deformations of a man who had dabbled with powers well beyond his control.

"Have you not lived a good life?" he asked. "Have you not been given everything your heart desires?"

"You have shown me places and given me baubles," she replied. "But you have taken more than your fair share in

return."

"I have loved you more than I have loved any of my other wives. Does that not please you?"

"That is not true." She spoke these words so forcefully that it caused her to cough. She struggled for air with long, gasping breaths. When her lungs were clear, she continued. "What you call love is merely a memory. The memory of your

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first wife. I have been little more than a replacement. And not even that. I have been a means to an end for you."

Xeries picked up a glass bottle and filled his goblet fuller. He had servants who would do this for him, but there

was something enjoyable about pouring his own wine—something left over from the days when his first wife was alive.

"Then why did you marry me?" he asked, not looking at her.

"You seduced me with your promises of riches and power."

"Did I not deliver?" "Does it matter?"

Xeries thought for a moment. "No. I suppose it doesn't."

He gazed at the highly polished obsidian floor. He did not think of himself as the bent-over wizard who looked back at him from the reflection. His thin, pale skin, wrinkled and baggy, hung from his narrow frame. His cheeks stuck out at odd angles, and disfigured lumps protruded from his chin, forehead and

ears—the leftover remnants of the day things all went wrong.

There were bits and pieces of Xeries in this man. But it was not really him.

The man looking back from the floor was something Xeries had become. Something he had transformed into, not entirely on accident. His mind wandered back to that day, so many hundreds of years ago....

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Xeries could see her face as clear as if she had been with him yesterday. She was so beautiful. Golden brown hair, almost blond but more like the color of spun honey. Intelligent and kind, wise and patient, she was everything he had ever hoped for.

They married young. He, the fourth son in line for the throne of Tethyr. She, the eldest daughter of a rich and powerful baron. They made magic together, both literally and figuratively. It was here, the kingdom now known as ErIkazar, where they had first concocted their plans. Back then, it was called Elestam, and it was little more than annexed wilderness on the outskirts of Tethyr. Xeries's father, King Strohm II, had only just made this overgrown patch of land an official part of the kingdom within the last year.

Xeries and his wife had been married since before the annexation. They had ventured out for a long ride, exploring the newest piece of what could one day

be part of their lands.

"Do you wish you were in line to become king?" his wife had asked him.

"I am in line to be king," he had replied.

They rode side by side, their horses picking their way through the pass at the top of the Cloven Mountains. An entire unit of King Strohm's army accompanied them.

"Yes," she said, "but you're the fourth son. Your oldest brother will become king, and his son will inherit the throne." Xeries nodded. "That is how it usually works, yes. But that doesn't mean I'm not in line for the throne. If for some reason my three brothers and father are no longer fit to rule, then I shall become king."

"And I would be your queen," said his wife, a wide smile on her face.

He smiled back. "Yes, Shylby, you would be my queen."

Shylby cocked her head. They had only been married a few years, not a long time by most people's standards, but he knew well what that look meant. "You have an idea," he said.

She nodded, her smile turning a little more devious. "If we were to live longer than anyone else in the family, we would be the rightful heirs to the throne."

Xeries spun around, looking to see if any of the soldiers could hear them talking.

"Shh!" he said. "Someone may hear you. These soldiers all work for my father."

Shylby laughed. "You don't think I'm

plotting to kill your family, do you?"

That was exactly what he had been thinking.

She shook her head. "No. I said we had to outlive them, not kill them."

"How are we going to do that?"

"I have heard of a spell that can be cast upon two lovers," she said, leaning over in her saddle to place her head upon his shoulder. "If their love is pure, they live on forever, together in each other's embrace. Then we could be together forever and always."

"And we would live long enough to inherit the throne," said Xeries, finally understanding. "No matter how long it took."

"Precisely," said Shylby. "And then all

of this"—she waved her arm out, taking in the entire valley below the Cloven Mountains all the way to the Deepwash—"shall be ours to rule. Together."

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It was nearly two years later before they had everything they needed to begin their spell. Their lives had been consumed by research and the procuring of rare magical components. But they had spent that time together, and they had only grown closer.

"The very last part of the ritual requires absolute concentration," Shylby said. "The words have to be spoken in unison."

Xeries nodded. "I know."

"If either of us misses a beat, the spell

will backfire."

Xeries took a breath. "Are you sure you're ready to do this?" he asked as the two of them laid out all the things they were going to need for their daylong ritual.

"Of course I am."

Shylby smiled. To Xeries, Shylby's smile was the most intoxicating thing in the world. It calmed him. It warmed him. And it wiped away any doubt he had. "Are you?" she asked. "Yes," he said, feeling tremendously lucky to have met and married such a wonderful woman. "I'm ready."

Taking their candles, they lit the censers and began the ritual. Since they needed an entire uninterrupted day to cast their

spell, they had chosen a remote barn on the outskirts of Shylby's father's land. No one would find or bother them there, almost a full day's ride from the baron's keep. It was the perfect place.

Ground herbs and botanical oils were poured into the flame, one at a time, each in its proper order and accompanied by the correct words. They had rehearsed, over and over, the many different verses of the spell. Oftentimes reciting them like poetry to each other, as if the archaic sounds from this long unspoken magical language were sweet nothings.

The day passed, and finally they were ready to speak the last few words of the spell that would bind their souls, their spirits, and their life-forces together—

bringing them immortality. Xeries and Shylby stood over a large stone altar in the middle of the room. It was filled with water, and they looked down at the reflections of themselves.

They were so young, and both so beautiful. Shylby with her long, honey-colored hair, tied up now in braids. Her smooth porcelain skin, unbroken and unblemished. Her eyes were pure blue, like a clear sky on a new summer day.

He too was quite handsome. His chin covered in trimmed, brown hair. His face tanned from the sun. His eyes clear and kind, a peaceful man with only love in his heart.

Shylby gave him that same smile as they moved to the final stage of the spell,

speaking the words in unison.

Bind us heart and soul Bring us together
as one Neither living apart

Our love the string that ties us May we
live forever together Or live not at all
apart

Magic swirled around the barn. Mores
of light lifted from the censers. Scents
and sounds filled every corner. Their
spell was reaching its climax, growing
in intensity just before it would break
and wash over them both.

Like a wedding ceremony, the two
lovers were to speak their devotion to
each other, then kiss, consecrating their
immortal love.

"I shall be with you forever," they said
to each other. "Or I shall die—".

The door to the barn burst open. _
Startled by the sound, Xeries turned to see a man, his body lit from behind by the late afternoon sun.

"Alone," said Shylby, her voice intoning the last word of the spell without his. Xeries heart froze. He had failed to speak the word in unison, and the ritual was broken.

The next few moments were a blur to him. He remembered hearing Shylby scream. The torrent of loose magical energy lifted him into the air. He felt himself thrashed around, then as if he were gripped from the inside by a million hands, his body bent and disfigured. His back bowed. His face grew boils. His chest caved in. His arms

stretched, and his knees knocked together.

He dropped back to the floor, every inch of his body wracked with pain. He squirmed on the ground, trying to claw his way out of his own skin. But it was no use. There was nowhere for him to go.

When the pain began to subside, Xeries tried to move, but he could not get to his feet.

"Shylby! Shylby, are you hurt?" His words sounded strange, as if both he and Shylby were speaking them at the same time.

Shylby lay on the floor beside the stone, water-filled altar. One look at the love of his life, and Xeries found a new level

of misery. The aches in his own flesh were nothing compared to the torment he felt over seeing Shylby, her face and body turned nearly inside out. She twisted and flopped, writhing in pain, her mouth agape, open for a perpetual scream that never came out.

Pulling himself across the rough wooden floor to lie beside her, Xeries scooped Shylby up in his arms. Her beautiful honeyed hair had fallen from her head in huge clumps, leaving weeping bald flesh in its place. The smooth, perfect skin on her face had been tortured and burned. Huge blisters consumed every inch, covering her eyes and nose. She tried to touch her face, but she no longer had fingers. Her arms were warped, and her

hands had melted into little more than smooth stumps.

Watching her struggle was the most horrific thing Xeries had ever endured. Not in his wildest nightmares could he imagine feeling so powerless, so tormented. Shylby's pain seeped into him, more every moment, and it was then that he knew that nothing worse could ever happen to him. Nothing he could ever experience could be as bad as this. Unable to see him, talk, or touch, Shylby flailed for a moment longer. Her ruined hands found his neck, and she pulled herself as best as she could up against him. She labored to breathe, moving her mouth with tremendous effort. She gasped, struggling with all her might.

"Alone," she whispered, her voice all but gone.

Her body convulsed, jerking uncontrollably. Xeries squeezed her against his chest. Holding onto her was all he could do as she slipped away, her spirit taking a long time to leave her tormented body.

Xeries continued to clutch her to his chest long after she passed. His body twisted and in pain, nothing else mattered to him. Shylby was gone.

"What is happening in here?"

Xeries looked up at a man wearing dirt-spattered clothing. He drew closer, hunched over and carrying a pitchfork.

"What?" said Xeries, confused, not sure where the man had come from. His voice

still sounded strange.

"Who are you?" The farmer lowered his pitchfork and pointed it at the young man. "What are you doing here? I heard your strange noises and saw what you did, so don't lie to me, boy."

Xeries's memory came back to him then. This was the man who had opened the door to the barn at the end of their ritual. "You killed her," said Xeries, his sadness growing into anger. His words echoing each other as if Shylby were still there speaking them in unison with him.

"I saw what you did to her," said the farmer. "Don't try to blame nothing on me."

"It was you," said Xeries, reliving the

moment in his head. "You interrupted our spell. You were the one who made me slip." He laid Shylby's head down on the floor and slowly got to his feet, not taking his eyes off of the man.

The farmer started to twitch, clearly nervous. "You better tell me who you are before I run you through." He shook his pitchfork.

"You killed her," Xeries said, pointing an accusing finger at the man. "You took her away from me. You ruined everything."

Shoving his arms out at the farmer, a torrent of magic spilled from his hands. The air rippled and distorted as a shock wave blew the man backward, sending him smashing through the wooden wall

of the barn.

All of his sadness and frustration came bubbling to the surface. "You killed her," repeated Xeries, walking toward the man he'd just sent sailing away. "And now, I'm going to kill you."

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"Have you heard me?"

Xeries watched the last of his memory play inside his head before answering.

"No. I was... somewhere else."

"We're here so that you can replace me. You've brought me here because I'm no longer useful to you, and you're going to cast me away, just as you have all the others. Isn't that right?"

Xeries returned to the dais and climbed the steps. Setting his goblet down, he

stood in front of his most recent wife.

"I am not casting you away. We are here because this is where I was a young boy. This is where my bloodline started." He took hold of the veil and began lifting it over her head.

She tried to take it from his grasp, but her hands were shaky and slow.

"Please don't. Don't look at me."

The veil came over her head, pilling up on the stone back of her throne. Underneath, her face was terribly wrinkled. Her cheeks were deep craters, her eyes nearly falling from her head, and her veins bulged as if they wanted to burst through the skin. She looked drained, like a shriveled fruit, sucked dry from the inside out. This was not the

effect of a long life, running its course on the human body. This was something else.

"Do you see what you have done to me?" she said, looking up at him with bloodshot, dried up eyes.

"But your sacrifice has given me eternal life," he said. "Does that not please you?"

"Does it matter? You have drained me, and I am no longer of any use. Now you will find another, and you will drain her too, all the while professing your love." Xeries nodded. "That is my burden, yes."

"It is not a burden if you make someone else carry it," she said, gathering her veil and dropping

it again over her withered face.

Xeries sat back down in his throne, and resumed his waiting. His wife's life force would not last much longer, and he would need a new bride to drain, very soon. His patience was indeed running thin.

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Chapter Twenty

King Korox paced the battlements on the outer wall of the palace. A fortress, it wasn't. Llorbauth had been selected as the capital for two reasons. First, it was centrally located to the rest of the baronies, so travel to the capital and communication with the king would be easier. And second, because Korox's father, King Valon didn't want his seat of

power to be dominated by the threat of invasion. Choosing a palace on the edge of the kingdom meant they would constantly be on alert—ready to repel attackers at any moment. Deciding on a location in the center of the kingdom meant that it could be safe without so many defenses.

He wanted the citizens to feel as if their king lived among them, not holed up in a stone and metal castle, unapproachable and unseen. He believed in the strength of his army and of the speed of his scouts. He believed that the business of the kingdom should be conducted in a place of safety. And the architecture of the palace reflected that.

Korox might have thought his father

short-sighted, except that he himself never would have imagined his kingdom invaded by a floating magical citadel. So he walked the few defenses that they had, looking for ways to improve them and working out a strategy for fighting the growing horde of gibbering black monsters massing under the Obsidian Ridge.

He spoke with each of the unit commanders and gave encouragement to the soldiers manning the wall. From up here, he could see down on the entrance to the palace. The drawbridge was being lowered, and the contingent he'd sent to the docks was returning.

Korox was eager to hear if they had any news. He'd sent them to deliver a

message to the Matron, which in and of itself was not an easy task. They had been given five sealed envelopes, each an exact replica of the others. Inside was a simple letter from the king, addressed to the Matron, accepting the terms of her offer. He would turn over the Claw as soon as his Magistrates were able to locate and apprehend him. In return, the Matron would begin collecting her mages to help with a convocation. The exchange of the Claw for Princess Mariko would happen as soon as possible.

The five letters were delivered to the five most notorious criminal lords in Erlkazar, each being asked to pass it along to the Matron. Korox hoped that at

least one of those letters would make it to its destination. There was little else he could do, other than post handbills all over the docks.

Working his way down into the great hall, the king greeted the contingent. He was relieved to see that all five messengers had returned.

"How did you fare?"

Five very young men, all sporting the official twin wyvern crest of the king, bowed before him, nervous from the attention they were receiving.

The oldest among them, no more than eighteen years, stepped forward, cleared his throat, and spoke.

"The letters have been delivered, my lord."

"Any trouble? Any response?"

The young man looked to the ground.

"No trouble."

The king put his hand on the boy's shoulder. "Son, this is no time to shy away from the details. You have done your job, and you have done it well." He lifted the messenger's chin, looking him in the eye. "Now you must tell me everything.

Even if you think I do not want to hear it." The young messenger nodded.

"My lord, at least two of the letters were torn to shreds upon delivery," he said.

"Two others were opened and read aloud. The men reading them laughed and threatened us. But we were not harmed."

"And the last?"

"It was received, and we were asked to leave. No trouble, but we do not know the fate of it."

The king smiled. "You did well. All of you. There is a commission to the Magistrates for any of you who so wish it."

The boys looked to each other, clearly excited.

"But I have one last task for you before you take on your new duties," said the king. "Gather up all the royal messengers in the palace. Send them out in all directions. Spread the word. We need every spellcaster in Erhkazar to come to our aid. I'm calling a convocation. If Xeries wants a fight, we will give it to

him."

"Yes, my lord," said the oldest. "Thank you, my lord."

The drawbridge had not even finished being raised when it began coming down again. The king looked up from his messengers to see Lady Herrin and her entourage riding into the palace. She had with her what appeared to be a lynch mob of wealthy merchants, all wearing gaudy clothing, all frowning and pinched, like they were holding their entire fortunes in their buttocks by simply squeezing them together.

"This is an outrage!" shouted Lady Herrin before she was even inside the palace.

The king looked to the Magistrate

captain who was on duty at the portcullis, then he pointed to the cadre of merchants.

Lady Herrin and her horde were surrounded by soldiers and forced to stop, just outside of the great hall.

Being stopped by armed guards didn't seem to bother her, and she continued to shout at the king.

"Get your men out of our marketplace!" she demanded. "The Magistrates are making people nervous, and our businesses are suffering."

"The Magistrates are there for your protection!" replied King Korox, shouting at her as she shouted at him, not bothering to close the distance. "If you haven't noticed, the kingdom is under

attack."

"How are we supposed to operate with your thugs roaming between the stalls, looking into every alleyway, and scaring our customers?"

"Your customers have nothing to fear from the Magistrates, and neither do you. That is, unless what you are selling is illegal. Tell me Lady Herrin. Are you trying to sell illegal goods? Elixir perhaps?"

"You listen to me, Korox. You need us, and you-know it. And we won't stand for you telling us what we can and cannot sell. So you just keep your Magistrates out of our marketplace, or you will get no favors from us." She turned her horse around. "Keep your nose out of our

business, or you will be sorry."

She gave her mount a nudge. "We're leaving," she said to the other merchants. Each member of her contingent took their turn riding up to the wall of soldiers, glaring at the king, then riding off.

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"Rumor is that Clusterfang was an ally of the Twisted Rune," explained Evelyne, crawling along in the tunnel behind the Claw. "There should be an opening to your right. Check first to make sure nothing's there before you go in."

"That thing? In with the most secretive organization in all of Faerûn?" Ahead and to his right, just as the half-elf had said, was an opening. Palm first, he

poked his head inside and looked around. "All clear," he said, and he pulled himself into a small chamber with nothing in it except a heavy wooden door.

"That's the rumor I heard," said Evelyne, coming out of the tunnel into the cramped room. "Then again, I suppose information in this place is not the most reliable."

"Where did you hear this rumor?"

"A little gnome told me."

"A gnome?"

"Yeah, a gnome," she said, stretching her limbs. "He showed up here a few months ago." "And where is this gnome now?" Evelyne shrugged. "Dead."

He'd only known her for a short time, but

the Claw was already realizing that Evelyne had a bad habit of leaving out the tantalizing details from her stories.

Finishing her stretches and dusting herself off, Evelyne said, "Well, it's been a pleasure. See you around some time, if you don't get killed."

"Wait," said the Claw. "I need your help."

"Uh, no thanks." Slapping him on the arm, she turned and headed for the door.

"No really," pleaded the Claw. "I need to find something, and you're my only hope."

"Now why would I want to go and do a fool thing like help you?"

The Claw was at a loss for reasons. "Well... because I asked?"

"Yeah, right." She pulled on the door.

"Wait. Wait. What is it you want?"

Evelyne stopped, the door cracked open.

"You mean other than to get out?" She thought for a moment. "I guess that's it really. Just get out. And as long as we're day-dreaming, I don't ever want to get sent back here. Never ever."

"How did you get put here? The king doesn't hand out sentences to the Cellar lightly."

Evelyne shifted her weight. "That's no business of yours. Let's just say I deserved it."

"How long have you been here?"

"A year," she said. "Give or take a few months. It's hard to tell time in a place like this." "That's a long time."

"I'm a patient woman," she said. She pulled the door open wide. "I'll be seeing you."

"What if I told you I could get you out of here?" Evelyne stopped. "I'm listening."

"What if I could not only get you out of here, but I could also get you a full pardon—get you cleared completely. That you could go back to your old life, no longer a criminal."

"You could do that?"

"Only if you help me."

She rubbed her chin, considering his offer. "What is it you're searching for anyway?"

"The woman I love," said the Claw. — Evelyne shook her head. "You came down here to find your woman." She

took a deep breath and let it out slowly, still thinking. Then she threw her hands in the air. "Hells, what else have I got to do? Very well. You've got a deal. Escape from this place and a full pardon." She put her hand out. "Shake on it."

The Claw put out his hand, but Evelyne pulled away.

"On second thought," she said, looking at his bladed gauntlets, "maybe it's safer to make this a verbal agreement."

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"That'll teach you."

Mariko looked out through blurry eyes. She blinked. "Where am I?"

"You're in the Cellar, and you're lucky to be alive."

The princess shook her head. It felt thick, full of liquid, and there was a dull throbbing in her temple. "The Cellar?" It was hard to think with all the cobwebs in her brain.

A sudden chill ran down her spine. It was starting to all come back. "The spiders?"

"They would have eaten you, had we not arrived when we did."

Mariko sat up on the hard stone. Her head spun, and her stomach lurched. Before she could do anything about it, her innards revolted, and she vomited all over the ground.

"You might want to try moving a little slower. You got a pretty big dose of venom from that spider."

Mariko laid herself back down on the cold stone and closed her eyes. The violent revolt inside her body slowly subsided, but the throbbing in her head was now worse, and she did still feel a little queasy.

"What happened?" she asked.

"You don't remember?"

She tried to think back on the last thing she remembered. She could hear the clicking noises, and see the spider clinging to the pillar. After that it was hazy.

"Not... not really."

"It'll come to you."

The princess felt a heavy hand on her shoulder. "You need to drink this." The hand gently rolled her to her side, and

she felt the edge of a vial touch her lips. Opening her eyes again, she looked down on the milky liquid. "What is it?" "It's more anti-venom. You've been drinking it in small doses for almost a full day now."

The princess nodded and took the vial, drinking the potion inside. When she finished, she wiped her dry lips on the back of her hand and looked up at her caregiver. As her vision came into focus, Jallal Tasca's distorted face came into view.

"I never thought I'd see you trying to keep me alive."

Jallal chuckled. "Let's just say you are more valuable to us alive as a bargaining chip than as a dead

adversary." He stood up from where he was crouching beside Mariko. "But don't let it go to your head, Princess. You're still going to die. Just not yet."

Jallal turned and walked away, his hoofed feet clicking on the stone floor. "Come get me when she can stand without vomiting," he said to the two nearby guards. "And keep your eyes open for any unwanted guests. Who knows what could be wandering these halls?"

Chapter Twenty-one

In the dying rays of the sun's light, a burly half-ore lifted a crate of Elixir and carried it to the end of the dock. He handed it to a dark-skinned human.

"Start a new row," growled the half-ore.

The dark-skinned man grunted as he took the heavy crate and placed it on the floor of the boat, next to another stack of crates. "How many more are there?"

The half-ore turned around and knelt on the dock, taking a breather to count the remaining crates. "A lot," he said.

"A lot" doesn't tell me very much, Kleegor."

The half-ore wiped the sweat off of his face with his hairy forearm. "It's more than we've loaded already, Talish."

"That is a lot," replied the dark-skinned man.

Kleegor got back to his feet and retrieved another crate. Then he returned to hand it to Talish. "Did you get one of those letters?"

"You mean the ones from the king?
Yeah, I got one."

"What did you do with it?" asked Kleegor.

"What do you think I did with it?" said Talish, straining to talk as he put the crate in its place. "I made a show of tearing it up in front of the messenger, then I took it to the Matron. How 'bout you? You get one?"

"Yep."

"Did you read it first?"

"Yep."

"Yeah," said Talish, "so did I."

"What do you think? You think he'll really turn over the Claw?"

Talish shrugged. "Dunno."

Kleegor grabbed another crate then came

back. "What if he doesn't? Or what if the Magistrates don't find him?"

"I dunno. What if? So we don't have the Claw, so what?"

"So, will the Matron turn over the princess to Xeries? Even if she doesn't have the Claw?"

Talish looked up at the sky. "It's getting pretty late, huh?"

"That's what I mean," said the half-ore.

"Those... things... those black beasts have been waiting under the Obsidian Ridge all day."

"And?"

"And," said the half-ore, a little perturbed, "they have pretty big teeth." "I noticed."

"And what if the Matron does get the

Claw before moonrise?"

Talish rolled his eyes. "I dunno. What if?"

"Well," said Kleegor, "will the king sacrifice his only daughter?"

"I sure wouldn't," replied Talish. "Not for this place." The half-ore made another run down the dock, hurrying back. "So what if we were to go ahead with our original plan?" "What plan?"

"You know, to assassinate the king."

Talish put the crate down and turned back to Kleegor. "What good would that do?"

"Well," said the half-ore, "if the king is dead, then the Matron will have no choice but to turn the princess over to this Xeries."

"Why do you think that?"

"Who else is going to negotiate for the safety of the princess? The queen has been dead for almost a year. And there's a huge floating citadel menacing the kingdom that will go away if we just turn her over." Kleegor puffed up his chest, rather proud of himself for his reasoning skills. "Seems like we can just wash our hands of the whole thing and go about our business."

Talish nodded. "Yep. Except what about the Claw? If we can't negotiate with the king, then who will turn him over to us? Kleegor brushed him off with a wave of his hand. "We can deal with that. The Claw is no problem."

"The Claw is a bigger problem than you

think."

Both Kleegor and Talish nearly jumped out of their skin as the Matron appeared beside the stack of crates.

"Matron! We. We, uh... we didn't see you there."

"I am aware of that," she said, walking toward them.

Throwing her hands toward the ground, she spoke a short prayer. With each step, she grew, her body becoming twice the size of the half-ore, then three times, then four.

Kleegor and Talish cowered in her shadow as the giant-sized Matron loomed over them.

"We will do things the way I have planned them. The king is off limits. No

one is to touch him. Is that understood?" Talish nodded, dropping to his knees and bowing his head to the deck of the boat.

"I meant no disrespect, Matron," said Kleegor. "I just thought maybe we didn't need to deal with the king anymore. It's getting close to moonrise. Maybe we could just handle the Obsidian Ridge all on our own."

The Matron grabbed Kleegor by the front of his sweaty, tattered shirt and lifted him into the air. "We will handle the Obsidian Ridge when the king is in my pocket and the Claw is dead and buried."

"Yes, Matron," said the half-ore.

"I am not going to let some parlor

magician with a few neat tricks show up and ruin my plans. If this Xeries has a deadline, then let him have his deadline. He will get his after we get ours. Is that understood?" Kleegor nodded.

"Good," she said, tossing him to the dock. "Now get back to work!" With that, she turned and walked away from them both, shrinking back to her normal size as she did.

Kleegor dusted himself off. "Time is running out, Talish," he said, his snout turned up in an angry sneer. "We need to do something, and we need to do it now."

Talish nodded. "Just don't let her hear you say that."

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Princess Mariko stumbled along as best as she could. Her body felt heavy, her arms weak, and her head still hurt. The antidote she had been drinking regularly had helped, but the spider's venom was still taking its toll on her.

"Hurry." One of Jallal's guards shoved Mariko, and she stumbled, catching herself against the wall.

She muttered something under her breath and glared at the woman who had pushed her.

"You have something to say to me?" growled the woman.

Mariko closed her mouth and shook her head.

"That's what I thought. Now move it."

Mariko did as she was told, marching on

down the dark corridor.

As the contingent disappeared around another bend, a symbol appeared on the wall where the princess's hand had been. It was dim at first, but then it grew in intensity. The symbol pulsed slowly on and off, lighting the hallway then letting it go dark.

+++++

"Is there a reason why we can't travel through the regular hallways?" The Claw slipped sideways between two narrow walls.

"Yes," said Evelyne.

The Claw waited, but Evelyne didn't elaborate. "That reason is... ?"

"Because everything else travels through them," she said, a little perturbed. "And

this is a shortcut anyway."

"A shortcut to where?"

"To where I think your friend will be."

"What makes you think the princess will be in this place?"

Evelyne stopped. "Do you want my help or don't you?" "I do."

"Then trust me on this."

"I trust you. I just want to know where we're going."

Evelyne pressed on, stepping through an opening in the wall, crossing a small room, and squeezing herself into another crack. The Claw followed.

"Let me ask you something," continued Evelyne. "If you'd just been thrown into this place and you figured you were going to be here a while, what would

you do? Where would you go first?"

The Claw thought about it. "I guess I'd look for shelter first, a safe place to sleep. Then I'd probably look for fresh water."

"So that is where I am taking you," she said. "To the only source of fresh water in the Cellar."

They walked on in silence for some time, eventually coming out of the narrow passage they had been traversing into a cavern. To the Claw, it looked like a natural cave. Stalactites hung from the ceiling, liquid dripping from their tips into pools or forming stalagmites below. A glowing, blue-green moss that partially illuminated the cave covered the walls, and the whole place smelled

like rotten eggs.

"Don't tell me this is your source of fresh water."

"Shh!" Evelyne put her finger up to quiet him and her other hand up to her ear.

The Claw listened for the sounds in the cave. He could hear the water dripping into the puddles and the echoes from the drips rippling down the stone walls. But there was little else.

"What do you hear?" he asked.

"There's someone here." She listened for a moment longer. "Just one. Could be your princess."

The Claw pushed past her, but Evelyne grabbed his arm.

"Could be something else too," she said. The Claw nodded then slipped into the

shadows behind a stalagmite, his body disappearing. Slinking through the darkness, the Claw worked his way down the length of the cave. Deeper in, the dripping water dried up, and the sounds of the echoes grew quieter. Until finally, he was able to make out what Evelyne had heard..»

It sounded like footsteps, but something about them wasn't right. Definitely only one person, walking on two legs, but the pattern was off, as if... he couldn't quite place it. A little farther in, and the Claw saw why.

In the middle of the cave, headed away from the dripping water, was a lone man—his muscular legs ending in hooves. He wore stark white robes with chain

mail underneath, and he carried a wicked-looking blade in his right hand. From this distance, it was hard to tell for certain, but to the Claw, it looked as if it were some exotic blade from the Far East.

Slipping from one side of the cave to the other, the Claw took advantage of the dim shadows cast by the patches of glowing moss. He didn't know who this stranger with the foreign blade was, but maybe he knew where to find the princess.

The Claw drew in a little closer.

"I hear you," said the hooped man. He stopped walking, but he did not turn around. "You will not surprise me."

The Claw stepped out from behind the

stalagmite. "I mean you no harm. I am just looking for someone."

"You have found someone," said the man.

"I am looking for a woman," said the Claw. "A princess."

The man's ears perked up. "A princess? What ever would a princess be doing in a place like this?"

"If you have seen her, just tell me which direction to head," said the Claw. "Then I will leave you alone and be on my way."

"Now why would I want you to do that?" asked the man, finally turning around, revealing a woman's silhouetted face emblazoned in gold on the front of his robes—the symbol for the temple of

Waukeen.

His face was long, like the snout of a wolf, only much more compact. Sharpened teeth jutted out from under his curled lips as he spoke. A pair of short horns shot out from his forehead, and he held his blade easily in one hairy hand, dangling at his side.

"I do not wish to fight you," said the Claw.

"Who said anything about a fight?" The man stood still for a moment, eyeing the Claw. "Do you know who I am?"

The Claw shook his head. The man looked familiar somehow, but he didn't recognize him. "I don't think so."

The man stepped closer. "Well then you should get to know me," he said.

With lightning speed the man's blade left his side, whispering as it cut the air.

The Claw only had time to raise his gauntlets to block the strike. His right hand connected with the man's sword, followed by a harmonious clang and clatter as all four blades broke free and dropped to the cave floor. The horned man's sword came to a rest at his side, unblemished.

The Claw stumbled back in shock. The high wizard Ellhimar had constructed those gauntlets. Nothing had ever so much as tarnished the edge, yet this stranger's sword had taken the blades clean off.

"Who are you?" asked the Claw.

"It will come to you," replied the horned

man.

A cold chill ran down the Claw's spine. His voice did sound familiar.

The horned man's blade whispered again as it split the air.

The Claw dodged back, careful not to risk his remaining gauntlet. The sword slipped past, just missing his face, and the horned man brought it around again, this time in a flat arc. The Claw dodged again, throwing himself against the mossy cave wall. The blade missed his face, but this time the razor tip bit into his mask, slicing it away from cheekbone to cheekbone, just below both eyes. A brief flash filled the chamber as the magic inside failed, and the bottom half slipped away, dropping to the cave

floor and revealing his rugged face and blond hair.

The horned man lowered his blade. "Well, well, well," he said, obviously pleased with himself. "If it isn't Quinn, King Korox's bodyguard."

Quinn lifted his right hand to his exposed chin. Though it was his own flesh, it felt stubbly and strange. His second life had been revealed—incongruous halves of the same whole. He knew the Cellar was full of many dangers, but this was not one he had considered.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Arch Magus Xeries downed the last drop of wine in his goblet and looked out over the edge of his citadel onto Shalane Lake. The moon reflected on the

water's surface as it rose—a long, shimmering band of pale yellow light.

He took a deep breath, thinking about what he was about to do. This had been his home, had been the land he wanted to rule alongside his wife. That dream had never come to pass. His disfigurement and the loss of his beloved had ended his hopes for ever becoming king.

Now Xeries stood high above the valley, looking down on what at one time he had most coveted. Would seeing this place in ruins make him happy? Probably not. It wasn't Erlkazar that was withholding from him the thing he now desired.

It was the man who ruled Erlkazar who had everything Xeries wanted.

And that man now needed to be taught a

lesson. If there was one thing that Xeries had learned in his long life, it was that threats only worked if you were willing to follow through.

Turning away from the balcony, he stepped down into his private chamber. There, in the middle of the floor, awaited one of his servants. The creature sat like an obedient dog, patiently waiting for his master to give him an order or lavish him with attention.

Unlike the army of slaving, monstrous beasts below the Obsidian Ridge on the valley floor, this creature was more calculating, more refined. Its eyes had an intelligence to them that the others lacked. Where they were indiscriminate

killing machines, mercilessly striking anything they were pointed at, unaffected by who or how they killed, this creature understood why it did what it did. It knew whose life it was ending, and it enjoyed the process.

Its sleek frame rippled with ropy muscles underneath taught, shiny black skin. Its limbs ended in razor-like claws that retracted and extended out of its paws at will. Its ears moved around its head, searching its surroundings like a bat. And its mouth could unhinge at the jaw, so it could sink its huge fangs into even larger prey.

Xeries sat down at the opposite side of the room, "Come here, my pet."

The creature obeyed without delay,

crossing the floor on all fours. Its soft feet made no noise as they padded across the shiny obsidian. Were it not for the light of the moon coming through the balcony, Xeries may not have seen the beast, blending so well against its dark surroundings.

"You know what it is I want you to do," said Xeries.

The creature nodded its understanding.

"Very good," said the arch magus.

"Make sure they know who sent you, and give King Korox my regards."

The beast bowed its head, turned, and bolted across the room. Bounding out onto the balcony, the creature leaped over the edge and disappeared into the night.

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Kleegor fumed. "The moon has risen, and still the Matron hasn't turned over the princess." He walked away from the docks, his task of loading Elixir crates finished for the time being.

"You are walking a thin line," replied Talish.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I know that look. You're thinking about doing something. Something you're probably going to regret."

"So what if I am?" replied the half-ore.

"I'm tired of taking orders and not being part of the plan."

The dark-skinned man shook his head.

"You're going to get yourself killed."

The half-ore growled. "The Matron is going to get all of us killed. She's playing with fire, and I don't intend to get burned."

"Then what are you going to do?"

The half-ore smiled a nearly toothless grin. "I'm going to do what it was we should've done a long time ago. I'm going to force the Matron to turn over the princess."

"Don't say it," said Talish as they crossed from the open wharf into the clustered streets penned in by warehouses and shop fronts.

"I'm going to send a little present to the king." Kleegor rubbed his hands together, his glee growing as he envisioned the king lying dead on the

floor of Klarsamryn, two assassins standing over him.

"You should reconsider. Maybe just wait and see what happens." Talish grabbed Kleegor's arm. "Please. The Matron warned us, and if you do something against her wishes, then she's going to think I was involved."

The half-ore wheeled on Talish. "Where did your spine

"Shh. Keep your voice down," urged Talish. He looked both ways down the alley, making sure no one was eavesdropping. "I have a spine, but you heard her. She said the king was off limits, and I don't think it's wise to cross her, not now."

The half-ore shoved his companion and

walked away. "I don't have time for cowards. I'm going to take matters into my own hands."

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"I never would have guessed that you were the Claw," said the horned man, locked in a circling duel with Quinn. "A bodyguard, sure. I can see you throwing yourself before danger to save old Korox. But you didn't strike me as the type who could kill indiscriminately."

"So now you know who I am," replied Quinn. "Time to tell me who you are."

"You really don't know?" The man chuckled. "Then for now, you can call me the demon."

The man lunged, reaching for Quinn's belly with the tip of his sword. The

polished steel left a blue-green trail of light as it moved, reflecting the glow of the phosphorescent moss. Quinn rolled to his right, tumbling away from the Strike and coming to his feet behind a stalagmite.

The demon struck again. Quinn ducked, and the exotic sword hit the mineralized stone, shattering the rock and sending it flying silently into a patch of moss.

"That's better!" shouted the horned man, swinging down on Quinn for a third time.

Backed up against the wall of the cave and with no cover nearby, Quinn slapped the blade aside with the flat of his palm. The polished steel bounced away, glancing harmlessly off the leather

of Quinn's ruined gauntlet. The demon stumbled forward, thrown off by Quinn's unorthodox defense. He hopped once then lost his balance, crashing chest first into the ruined stalagmite.

Quinn leaped from the corner, raking the demon's arm just below his chain mail with the blades on his left hand, then he darted into the open center of the cave, giving himself more room.

The demon let out a growling scream that rippled the surface of the standing puddles. The arm of his robes was now tattered, and the padded armor underneath had been shredded as well. Narrow lines of blood rose to the surface from the razor-thin slices in his flesh.

Pushing himself upright, the demon came at Quinn, a look of pure hatred in his eyes.

"Now's your chance to die in place of your king!" he shouted.

He swung his sword in a figure eight, back and forth, side to side. The blade picked up speed as he came forward, a hissing wall of sharpened steel, leaving a blue-green tracer behind as it moved.

Quinn backpedaled and nearly tripped on a loose stone. Catching his balance, he reached down and grabbed the rock, nearly the size of a grapefruit. Quickly running out of options, he hurled it at his oncoming adversary. The stone collided with the exotic blade and was cut to shreds, the pieces scattering across the

cave like a handful of thrown pebbles. "Nowhere to go now, eh, Quinn?" the demon taunted, the sweeping motions of his blade filling the cave with sharpened steel.

Quinn backed away even farther, into a deep puddle. His feet sank below the surface, the water rising over the tops of his boot?: Having little else at his disposal, Quinn kicked with all of his might, sending a wave of filthy water up and over the horned man's head.

The muddy liquid collided with the moving sword, sending a good portion of it splashing off like a sideways rain. But unlike the stone, the water was not solid, and most of it continued on, hitting the demon in the face. It filled his eyes

and nose, and the horned man coughed and spat, struggling to clear his vision. His blade came to a halt as he was forced to use one hand to wipe away the water.

Quinn dashed past, once again pulling himself out from against the wall. The tight confines of the cave were not the best place for his particular type of fighting, but he had no alternative. Taking advantage of his opponent's temporary blindness, he jabbed at the man's sword hand, trying to disarm him. But the demon pulled back, saving his hand and keeping his blade.

"Maybe I underestimated you," said the demon.

The filthy water dripped down the

demon's face, leaving long grayish-brown streaks on his cheeks, drips falling from the pointed ends of his horns. Wiping the last of it out of his eyes, he gripped his weapon in both hands and took an aggressive stance.

"At one time, I may have grown tired of this game, but"—his lips curled up on one side, revealing his sharpened teeth—"I'm rather enjoying killing you."

A rumbling sound echoed into the cave. It was faint at first, then it grew, getting closer. Soon the chamber filled with a familiar tapping noise, followed by growling, gnashing, and a tremendous hiss. A pair of giant spiders appeared in the mossy glow at the far end of the cave. Behind them, four scaled tentacles,

each with the head of a drake, and a dozen eyes on long spindly stalks protruded into the space.

"Clusterfang," whispered Quinn.

The demon frowned. "This is not finished." He clomped away, cloaking himself in the shadows as if he were wrapping them around his body. "You have not even begun to suffer for what you have done to me." Slowly, his frame dissolved into the darkness. By the time his last word had finished its echo, the demon had disappeared entirely.

Quinn turned and ran through the puddles, back to where he had entered the cavern. His feet were soaked, his boots heavy from the water. Behind him he could hear the tapping of the spider's

legs as they worked their way over the solid mineral floor.

Dashing toward the narrow passage they had squeezed through, Quinn pulled up short, grabbing hold of a nearby stalagmite to stop his forward momentum.

There in front of him, slipping sideways into the cave the same way he had, was another helmed horror. Its metallic form filled the exit, leaving no room to get by, no room for escape.

Clusterfang had taken over the opposite end of the cave, blocking off the only other way out. The deepspawn's spider minions were climbing the walls. Just watching them scamper, their bulbous bodies gliding on top of those eight

spindly legs, made the skin on Quinn's back crawl and his spine itch.

He was trapped, and Evelyne was nowhere to be found.

"I should have known better than to trust her," he muttered, glancing side to side, trying to figure out which beast he wanted to fight first. The spiders were farther away than the horror, but they were coming on fast. Neither was going to be a quick fight.

With a second weapon, maybe he could hold them all at bay. As it stood, he was going to have to try to back himself into a corner and hope he had enough reach.

The spiders were almost on him, and the horror had squeezed itself out of the crack in the wall, closing in.

"Up here! Quick!"

Quinn looked up to see Evelyne's upper body sticking out of a round hole between two stalactites, maybe twice his height off the floor.

She hung down, extending her arms.
"Grab my hand. I'll pull you up."

Bending his legs, he leaped into the air just as the first of the spiders arrived. His right hand wrapped around hers, and his left caught the edge of the hole. With surprising speed, Evelyne scampered back into the space in the ceiling of the cave.

Quinn felt the spiders' limbs feebly try to pull him back down. But it was no use. With both hands now on solid stone, the Claw pulled himself up and out of the

cavern, tumbling forward into the darkness ahead.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The moon had passed its zenith long ago, its measured descent now almost complete. One more shift of the city watch and the sun would begin to rise, filling the void left by the moon's departure.

But until then, darkness ruled.

Two half-ores, concealed by the magic woven into their armor, climbed the sheer wall of Klarsamryn. They moved slowly, silently. There were far too many guards on duty that night to be careless.

At the top of the wall, the two assassins waited, listening. When the time was

right, they nodded to one another, and as one they slipped over the edge and onto the king's personal terrace.

Without a sound they slit the throats of the two guards standing outside the door. With barely more than a whisper, they did the same to the two inside the room. Stalking across the floor, they reached the side of the king's bed where they unwrapped their specially prepared blades.

Had the king been awake, he would have seen the two half-ores silhouetted against the last of the moon's light coming in through the open glass door. He would have seen them lift their knives, dripping with poison. He would have also seen what neither of the two

assassins did—a lithe black figure bounding over the edge of the terrace. It landed at the edge of the room, even more silent than the half-ores. It strode purposefully across the marble, careful not to disturb the dead guards, then crept up behind the two assassins, looking them over once, from head to toe. Then it tore into them like sacks of grain. It bit down on one, wrenching away a mouthful of broken ribs, punctured stomach, and shredded bowels. The other it simply cut in two, jamming sharpened claws into its back, and ripping it open. Both of its victims screamed in surprise and agony, their hearts finished beating before their blood hit the floor.

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King Korox awoke to a blood-curdling scream.

His heavy wool blanket pinned his body, and a beast like he'd never seen was sitting atop his chest. He wondered for a moment if he wasn't dreaming—a jet black creature with the face of a bat, the claws of a tiger, and the teeth of a shark peering down on him with the eyes of a wizened old man. Surely this beast was a product of an overworked imagination. The creature sniffed him, shifting its claws as it did. They punctured the blanket and bit into Korox's upper arm. This was no dream. This was a beast sent by Bane himself.

"Alarm! Alarm!" shouted Korox, trying

in vain to get loose.

The creature distended its jaw, opening its mouth wide enough to wrap its teeth all the way around the king's head. It let out a satisfied purr, as if it was enjoying the panic. Then it bent down, slowly lowering its teeth. The creature let out a breath, and the foul stench of rotten meat and blood wafted over the king, making him gag.

The door to his chambers burst open, and the room exploded in light. There was a heavy commotion and the twang of crossbows. Korox could feel the creature on top of him jolt from the impact, but if it was in pain, it didn't react.

The king heard running footsteps, and in

the next second, the beast was torn from atop him. Suddenly free, Korox threw his blanket away and rolled out of bed. He grabbed the candelabrum from the nightstand and held it up like a club. But it was too late, the creature had been cut to ribbons by Captain Kaden and the dozen other Magistrates who had charged into the room.

"My lord, are you hurt?" Captain Kaden rushed to his side.

King Korox brushed him off. "No. No, I'm fine." He lifted his nightshirt to examine the puncture wounds on his upper arms. He bled some, but it was little more than a flesh wound.

The king turned his attention to the carnage on the floor of his private

chamber. Four guards lay dead, two on the terrace, two inside the room itself. It was clear from the wounds that they had been dispatched by the two half-ores now also dead on the floor.

The assassins, however, had suffered a far worse fate. Their bodies were shredded, one with a huge bite out of its abdomen.

"It's a good thing we arrived when we did," said Kaden, eyeing the half-ores.

"I'm not sure it was a matter of timing," replied the king. "If that creature had really wanted to kill me, it had plenty of time."

"Do you think Xeries is working with the Matron?" Captain Kaden toed the creature's dead body. "That would

explain why this beast and the half-ores are here."

The king shook his head. "I don't know. If the Matron kidnapped my daughter to turn her over to Xeries, then why hasn't she done that? What can she gain from all of this posturing? And why would she offer to help fight Xeries then send assassins to my bedroom?" He stepped over one of the fallen killers. "And from the looks of things, these two"—he pointed at the beast and at one of the half-ores—"didn't like each other much."

The king moved to a nearby table and poured some water into a basin from a clay pitcher. He dabbed a piece of cloth in the water and began wiping the blood

from his arm.

"There is one person who I believe, with the proper motivation, can shed some more light on this." He looked up from his gruesome work. "Have Whitman brought up from the dungeon. I wish to interrogate him further."

Through the open door, the sounds of men shouting and fighting caught the king's ear.

"What now?" he growled.

King Korox and Captain Kaden burst out into the hall. Magistrates ran past, toward the entry and the audience chamber.

Captain Kaden grabbed a Magistrate as he darted by. "What's happening, soldier?"

"I'm sorry, Captain," he said, saluting quickly. "I thought you had heard. Klarsamryn is under attack."

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Quinn found himself once again crawling through a dark tunnel, following a woman he hardly knew.

Time was running short. He'd been down here for nearly a full day now and had less than nothing to show for his efforts. If he didn't find Mariko soon... well, he didn't want to think about the options.

The tunnel opened into a wider passage similar to the one Quinn had traversed when he had first arrived in the Cellar. It seemed since he had met Evelyne, he hadn't used any of the hallways intended for actual travel.

"We can rest here a moment," said Evelyne, getting to her feet and stretching her back.

"Where to next?" Quinn examined the walls. No water here.

Evelyne shrugged. "Dunno," she said.

"That cavern was my best guess. I figure we'll just have to wander around a bit and hope we find this lost princess of yours." She touched her toes, twisted, then hitched her thumb over her shoulder. "There's another tunnel not far this way—"

"No." Quinn cut her off. "No more tunnels."

"Look, it's the safest—"

"I said no. If there is one thing I know about the princess, it's that she's not

crawling around on her hands and knees in the cracks between the walls. If we have any chance of finding her, if we're going to stumble around here blindly hoping that we run into her, then we need to cover the ground that she and her captors are using."

"Her captors? You didn't mention captors."

"Why else would she be down here?"

"Same reason as me, maybe."

"And what reason is that?" asked Quinn.

"Because I crossed someone I shouldn't."

"You mean you broke the law, and you were sentenced to this place by the king."

"It wasn't the king," said Evelyne,

smiling. "But I'm sure he wouldn't have approved of my behavior."

"Well," said Quinn, not quite sure what she meant. "Maybe we're better off leaving it at that. Come." He turned and headed down the passageway, placing his right hand on the wall as he walked. "When I was in the army, my captain used to say, 'When in doubt, follow the wall to the right. Eventually, you'll find what you're looking for.' "

"Sounds like a dumb captain," replied Evelyne, reluctantly falling into step behind him. "But I guess since we don't know where we're going, this way is as good as any."

Chapter Twenty-Four

Korox lifted his arms and let the fine

elven chain shirt with his twin red wyvern crest slip over his body. Squires dashed back and forth, bringing the king his weapons and armor. He walked as he dressed, pieces clinging to him as he went. With each step he transformed. Though he was tall and broad shouldered, he became larger than life. His boots gave him more height. His armor made him more imposing. His sword made him more dangerous, and his helm made him look mean.

Captain Kaden stood beside the door, twitching and pacing. He gripped the hilt of his sword even though it was firmly planted in its sheath. The king could tell he was ready for battle. And that was good. Korox was going to need all of his

men to be ready.

Slipping his sword into his belt, the king stepped up beside the head of the Magistrates and slapped him on the arm.

"Let's go take back our palace," said Korox.

The two men stepped out of the door and made their way down the hall.

In the short time between being attacked in his bed and pulling on his armor, the portcullis had been breached and the great hall swamped with invaders. This was the first time since ErIkazar had become a country independent from Tethyr that the halls of its capitol had been breached by an enemy.

King Korox picked up his pace. Today was not going to be the day Klarsamryn

fell.

Down the hall and through his private entrance, King Korox and Captain Kaden stepped into the audience chamber—and into the pages of history.

What had been designed as a place of peace, a place of negotiations, a place where the ruler of ErIkazar could conduct his business without being perceived as a tyrant, there now raged a horrific battle.

Malicious, misshapen beasts from the Obsidian Ridge swarmed in every corner. They blotted out the light. Anything bright or good about this room was swallowed by their darkness and evil. The white marble floor ran red with blood. The statues that adorned the

outer wall were all torn from their stands, many smashed to bits. Even the ceiling, with its painted reminder of the dark days of Eleint, was not left unscathed—a soldier's sword jutted from the stone overhead, its edge dripping with black ichor.

In the center of it all, Magistrates stood back to back, their swords striking in unison, their movements frantic as they fought for their lives. Mixed into the melee were soldiers from the regular army, their uniforms less elaborate, but their skill in battle no less sharp. And on the edge, spilling from the many secret doors that fed into and out of this chamber, came the Watchers, Princess Mariko's spies and the king's eyes in

Erlkazar.

The seat of power was under attack. Lines of battle and discipline had broken down, devolving into a free-for-all. One look at the faces of the men and women fighting to defend the throne of their king and it was clear. Everything they stood for, everything they had ever held sacred, was in jeopardy, and they fought now not just for honor and duty. They fought now because this fight was all they had left, for if they did not win, all that they knew would be gone.

King Korox Morkann pulled his enchanted blade from its sheath. With one step and one stroke, he cut down a black beast. With another step and another

swing, he cut down a second. And so it continued, Captain Kaden at his side. The King of Erlkazar fought his way to the center of this swirling melee. He fought his way through the teeth and the mass of twisted blackened muscle until he reached his throne on its dais.

Dispatching the beast that sat upon it, he placed his foot upon the seat and lifted himself up to stand above the fight. There, poised atop his throne, Korox lifted his sword high in the air, looking down on his soldiers, the Magistrates, and the Watchers.

"For Erlkazar!" he shouted.

And in the next moment, he disappeared from view, buried by a pile of shiny black flesh.

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Quinn made his way through the dark passage, the spell cast on his open palm lighting his way. He scanned ahead as he marched, not sure what he would find but hoping that he found it before it found him.

He waved his magical light over the wall at the next corner—and it lit up like the full moon on the clearest of nights.

"Trap!" shouted Evelyne, dodging back. But Quinn shook her off. "Shh. This is no trap."

Stepping up to the stone, he traced the line of light with his index finger, mimicking the lit symbol that had appeared when his own light had hit it. For the first time since arriving in the

Cellar he finally had some hope.

"What are you doing?" Evelyne came up behind him, still cautious.

Quinn smiled at her and lifted his hand, showing her the glowing symbol on his palm—it perfectly matched the one on the wall.

"It's the princess's sigil," he said. "She's alive, or was not that long ago." His smile grew even wider, and he pulled Evelyne along down the hallway. "Hurry. We're on the right track."

+++++

A gasp went up in the audience chamber as Korox disappeared under a pile of black creatures.

"To the king!" shouted Captain Kaden.

The grunted exertions of men and the sound of metal cutting into flesh grew to a cacophony. This was not the entirety of Erlkazar's fighting forces, not even close, but each of the nearly one thousand warriors who fought inside the palace had become a berserker. Each had found the strength of ten soldiers. And blood continued to spill, as those warriors fought and died.

They moved as a group, each trying to reach the same goal, converging on the back center of the audience chamber and the raised dais that was now a swarming mass of shiny black beasts. They hacked, shoved, and slashed, aware even without words that every strike counted, that every moment they were unable to see

their king meant that the chances of him coming back to them was diminished. And they fought all the harder for it.

A shout rang out through the hall. This was not the sound of a dying man. It was not the horror of a solider being torn to bits or the shriek of pain the beasts let out when pinned to the floor. No, this was the victorious shout of a conqueror, the sound of a man who led through not only his words but also his actions.

It was the defiant roar of a king.

The mass of twisting black flesh burst up and away from the throne. And in the middle, appearing from the attacking beasts like a phoenix from the flames, Korox Morkann arose.

His helm had been torn from his head.

Bits of blackened flesh streaked his armor. Blood covered his face. But he arose nonetheless, a beacon in the dark, a sight to behold in the middle of his besieged audience chamber. "To me!" he shouted.

The king cut down the black beasts with each swing of his blade. His soldiers pressed in, clearing the floor between them and him until finally they had reached their goal. Until they were beside him.

Regrouped at the top of the room, the king led his army onward. Diving back into the flood of attackers, he made them pay for their impudence—and they made him pay right back. For every beast the king and his warriors slew, two soldiers

fell.

It was a war of attrition. Had he stopped to think about it, Korox would never have fought this way. He never would have willingly sacrificed so many of his brave men and women to fight such a foe. But he had not started this war, nor had he picked this battlefield.

Slowly the audience chamber cleared. Slowly they grew closer to victory, pressing the invaders in an organized fashion out the door and toward the portcullis. If they had to, they would clear Klarsamryn one room at a time until they took back that what belonged to them.

Bursting through, they swept into the great hall, pushing back the invaders all

the while. Victory was within reach. The light at the end of the chamber came in over the drawbridge. If they could reach the entrance, they could win back the day.

Mere moments away from completing their victory, their momentum stalled. Their push came to a halt as the light at the end of the drawbridge went black and a huge second wave of beasts from the Obsidian Ridge crashed into the front of the palace.

It flooded past the portcullis, swamping the great hall, turning the tide on King Korox and his warriors.

The creatures scampered up the walls, filled the ceiling, and surrounded the remainder of the Erlkazarians in the

great hall. The king's offensive became a defensive, and the surviving warriors encircled their king, preparing to fight to the death. The beasts closed on them, their numbers growing by the moment.

Then, just as quickly as they had arrived, the creatures stopped. They held their ground, pawing at the floor, growling at the soldiers, their advance halted.

"What are they doing?" asked Captain Kaden, his eyes wide, his back to the king.

"I do not know," replied Korox, breathing hard from the exertion. "But something tells me we're about to find out."

The mob of horrific beasts parted, lining up in an organized row and leaving a

narrow passage that stretched out under the portcullis and across the drawbridge. What had been a chaotic, bloodthirsty horde had become a disciplined, organized army standing at attention.

Down the center of their ranks walked a hunched, disfigured man.

He wore the trappings of a mage—robes instead of armor, a wand in his belt instead of a sword, and wrinkles upon his face instead of scars. He walked upright on two legs, had two eyes, arms, and hands, but that was where the similarity between this figure and the rest of humanity ended.

His spine curved over itself as if it were trying to turn his whole body into a giant question mark. His back rose higher than

his head, one shoulder more elevated than the other, and was marked mostly by a large, misshapen hump. His face, covered in blackened boils, was caved in, making his eyes bulge as he scanned the waiting beasts along the drawbridge. Despite his disfigurement, the man was actually quite tall, due mostly to the length of his long, spindly limbs, which he used to great effect, moving through Klarsamryn at a rapid clip.

Arriving before the circle of Erilkazarian warriors, the man peered into the crowd. "I am Arch Magus Xeries," he announced, his voice echoing as if two people were speaking his words at the same time. "I demand to see your king." King Korox pushed his way through the

Magistrates, Watchers, and soldiers. Each one he passed, he reassured with a knowing glance or a quick word.

"Don't go, my lord," pleaded a blood-covered man. "He would have to kill us all to get to you."

"Let us hope it does not come to that," replied the king.

He moved on, his warriors reluctantly stepping aside. When he reached the edge of the compact circle, he stepped through, into the opening the beasts had made, and looked up at the disfigured man.

"I am King Korox Morkann, ruler of Erlkazar."

Xeries examined Korox, as if using some invisible test to prove the validity

of his claim. After a moment, he nodded, seemingly satisfied that this was indeed the man he was looking for.

"I will make this brief," said Xeries. "I am losing patience with you. I have come personally to collect your daughter. Where is she? I want her now."

King Korox took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. "I wish I knew," he said. "My daughter has been missing for four days now."

"Yio-do not-not toy-toy With-with me-me, morta.-mortal!" shouted Xeries, his voice rising,, exaggerating the echo and making it sound as if he were repeating himself.

King Korox looked back at the soldiers

then again up at Xeries. Even if he did know where his daughter was, he still hadn't decided if he would turn her over to this monster. Weighing his personal feelings against the needs of the kingdom, there was no one clear choice.

"I am not one to waste the lives of my people so carelessly," said Korox. "I simply cannot give you what you ask for. It is not within my power."

"Then make it within your power," demanded the arch magus. "For every day that you make me wait, a new terror will be visited upon these lands. The first day the crops will wither and die. On the second day, the water will dry up, turning everything for as far as the eye can see into a desert.

And on the third day"—he waved his spindly arms, encompassing the beasts beside and behind him—"I will unleash the rest of my army and lay waste to all of ErIkazar."

Xeries pulled his arms back into his body, making himself much smaller. "I shall take your daughter from your own hands or from the ruins of your kingdom. Either way, she will be mine."

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Chapter Twenty-Five

There she is," whispered Quinn. "She's still alive."

He had followed Mariko's trail of personal runes all the way to this... place. It wasn't a cave, or a room, or anything like any of the other spaces he

had seen inside the Cellar. If he had to describe it, he would have said it was more like a mansion, carved from stone, right in the middle of the hallway. The passage they had traversed had simply grown wider, and there it was—a huge replica of an opulent home, chiseled "Out of the natural cave.

Someone had taken great care to recreate every detail. It had open windows and balconies. It had doors and a porch. It even had a tiled roof—which was where Quinn and Evelyne now perched.

They looked down into a courtyard in the middle of the mansion. Almost a dozen of ErIkazar's lesser-known underworld figures were present. They busily moved back and forth between

three fully functional Elixir distilleries. They had managed to turn the confines and horrors of the Cellar into a hub for their illegal business. How they got here, and more importantly, how they returned, were questions to which Quinn did not have the answers.

Then he saw something even more puzzling.

He pointed down at the man standing beside the tied princess. "The fat one. That's Pello Tasca. He's the only one who's supposed to be here."

Evelyne squinted. "That one there?" She pointed to the same man. "I know him."
"How?"

"He's the one I crossed."

"You're saying Pello Tasca sent you here, to the Cellar?"

Evelyne nodded. "A did a job for him and his brother, and when it came time to be paid, they only gave me half of what they promised."

"And they sent you here because you were unhappy with their payment?"

"No," replied Evelyne. "I got even by burning down their storehouse."

"I see," said Quinn, but he didn't really.

"How did they manage to send you to the Cellar? When you said you crossed someone, I figured it was someone official, not an underworld boss."

"When the brother and his men caught up to me, they dragged me to this woman. They called her the Matron. She sent me

here. Had some sort of a device."

"Right. So the Matron has unfettered access to the Cellar." It was all starting to make sense now. "That's how Mariko was sent here. And now the Matron thinks she can run her Elixir operations safely from inside."

Quinn watched the activity down below. They all seemed preoccupied with their individual tasks, no one walking patrols or even guarding the entrances.

That's when he caught sight of the horned man, and another realization struck—Jallal Tasca.

It was him. No doubt. Though his beard was gone, his face and body transformed, Quinn could clearly see the resemblance to his brother and to the

man he used to be. Jallal was supposed to be dead. Quinn had punctured his neck and had watched him bleed out on the floor of the slaughterhouse. But something or someone had brought him back, and whatever or whoever that was had drastically disfigured the eldest Tasca.

"Let's sneak down the side, over in the corner. That'll get us close to the princess and—" He turned to Evelyne as he spoke. But she was gone, replaced by a pair of Tasca's burly guards.

A heavy club hit Quinn in the face, and his vision wavered. He tried to block the second swing with his right gauntlet, but he was not yet use to the lack of blades. The club hit him again, and the world

went black.

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A bucket of cold water hit Quinn in the face, and he started awake.

"Welcome to the Cellar."

He had been stripped to his smallclothes and was being held by the arms between two men—the same two he'd seen before being knocked cold. His head throbbed, and one eye was swollen, partially closed.

"We've been expecting you."

Shaking the water from his face, he looked up into the grinning, pointed teeth of Jallal Tasca.

"I thought you were dead," said Quinn.

Jallal nodded, a look of fake contemplation on his face. "I hear that a

lot."

"I'll bet."

"What was it that made you finally recognize me?" asked Jallal. "The water?" He slapped the side of the bucket with his hairy palm.

"When I saw your brother and your Elixir operation here," said Quinn.

"Oh this?" taunted Tasca, turning to look at the glass vats as if he'd just realized they were there. "This is just temporary, until we've dealt with you and put the king on the payroll."

"And how do you intend to do that?"

"Oh, I don't know," replied Jallal. "For you, I was thinking simple torture. Nothing fancy, just some good old fashioned pain, stretched out

for our enjoyment." His eyes revealed his elation. "A little payback for the marks you gave me."

Jallal ran his fingers over his neck and the smooth purple scars that had been left by the Claw's blades.

"And the king? You can't bribe him. Your coin and your favors are no good to a man of principles."

"Maybe so," replied Jallal. "But we have his daughter." He pointed to Quinn's left.

On the ground, beside and behind him, sat Princess Mariko, bound and gagged. She looked up at him, her eyes wide and alert.

"Are you hurt?" He tested the two men holding him, but they were both very

strong, and they held him fast.

Mariko shook her head. She shot a nasty glare at Jallal, which told Quinn the whole story.

"The king's not the only one who wants her," replied Quinn.

Jallal chuckled. "That's very sweet. Showing your devotion as you go to your death."

Quinn gritted his teeth. "Perhaps you were dead when it arrived, but there is a huge black citadel floating over Llorbauth, and the arch magus inside is demanding that we turn over the princess, or he'll lay waste to the entire kingdom."

"Yes, yes, I'd heard. How unfortunate."

"Do you really think the king is going to

give you anything in exchange for his daughter? She's safer down here than she would be with him."

Jallal scrubbed his chin. "You see, that's the beauty of all this. The Matron has already brokered a deal. We help him fight off this Xeries fellow, and he gets his daughter back."

"And you get to run your Elixir operations unfettered, is that it?"

"After we dispose of you, yes."

"Well, I guess you've thought of everything then."

"Indeed, we have."

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Like every other place in the Cellar, there was more than one way to get inside the carved stone mansion. Lucky

for Evelyne, she had noticed this one—just before those guards had arrived.

Evelyne pressed herself tight up against the cracked stone and looked out onto the courtyard. She could hear voices just off to her left.

"... how unfortunate."

Directly in front of her, a fire raged underneath a strange glass contraption that looked like a giant, see-through centipede. A short, fat man moved back and forth, in and out of her view, magically tending to the fire and casting ice spells on other parts of the centipede.

Feeling around inside her pouch, Evelyne found the two globes she had taken from Quinn when they had first

met.

"Alchemist's fire," she whispered, a smile spreading across her face.

Slipping out of the cracked stone, she stayed close to the wall and out of sight. Quinn was being held by the two burly men who had knocked him out. The horned man he'd fought in the water cavern was taunting him. The princess was on the ground by his feet, and everyone else was busy working the giant centipedes.

"Well, I guess you've thought of everything then," said Quinn.

"Not everything," whispered Evelyne. She hurled both orbs of alchemist's fire at the base of the nearest vat.

The courtyard erupted as the glass broke

and the substance inside caught flame. It bubbled and popped, spitting bits of sizzling fire in every direction like an angry adolescent hydra.

"Whoa," said Evelyne. "This should be fun."

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"I'm on fire! I'm on fire!" Pello Tasca ran backward from the ruined Elixir still, his clothes engulfed in flames. His arms flailed, trying to scrape the sticky, burning substance from his exposed flesh.

"Brother!" Jallal bolted across the courtyard to Pello's side. Knocking him to the ground, he rolled him in the dirt and beat at the flames with his hands.

Shouts and confusion filled the courtyard

as the other guards came running to help. The Elixir had ignited and was slowly seeping toward the second still, a running river of flame.

Taking advantage of the moment, Quinn kicked his legs in the air and flipped over backward, breaking the grip of the two men. They went for their swords, but Quinn was quicker.

"That's for the club in the face," he said, punching the first guard square in the jaw.

The man reeled back from the blow. Quinn followed with a second shot to the gut, which knocked the wind from the guard's lungs and forced him to double over. Spinning, Quinn shifted his weight and kicked the second guard in the groin,

dropping him to his knees.

"I'll take that." Quinn pulled the first guard's long sword from its sheath.

With two quick motions, he finished off both men.

In the center of the carved-stone mansion, the second Elixir distillery exploded, sending another rain of sticky fire out over the underworld guards. Pello, covered in a shroud of orange and yellow light, still screamed and kicked the ground.

One of the guards noticed Quinn through the confusion and shouted, "They're escaping!"

Dropping to his knees, Quinn lodged the tip of his sword in the bonds on Mariko's wrists and ankles. He yanked,

and the ropes fell away. Her hands free, Mariko pulled the gag off of her mouth.

"I guess this isn't the time for a warm reunion," she said, lifting herself off the ground.

Quinn tossed her his sword, retrieving another from the second fallen guard.

"Not quite."

That was all they had time for as the rush of the mob came on.

Quinn and Mariko worked back to back, circling around and beating back advances. They moved as one, never having fought together before but somehow reading each other's movements. They swirled, swords clanging, metal clashing, the flesh of their enemies cut to ribbons.

They made quick work of the first half-dozen guards before the third and final Elixir still erupted. Only four guards remained on their feet. Jallal bent over the now-motionless frame of his brother. Their entire operation was up in smoke. Standing, Jallal pulled his sword and came right at Quinn. "You killed me once, and now you've killed my brother." He swung wildly as he came on, his words an unearthly growl. "It's your turn to die."

Jallal's guards scattered, disappearing into the open doorways-of the mansion as he pressed the attack. Gone was his calculating, controlled demeanor, replaced by the chaotic machinations of a desperate man, bent on revenge.

"Watch you bleed! Cut you to pieces! Get my brother back!" shouted Jallal, his eyes shifting madly, burning with hatred. Quinn, still in his smallclothes, dodged each swing, giving ground and working his way into the courtyard. Flames burned at his back and he circled, giving the wild man in front of him plenty of room.

Princess Mariko slipped in behind Jallal, flanking him.

"Kill you... both!" muttered Jallal, his face turning red. He swung his blade in huge, careless arcs, turning first toward Quinn then back toward Mariko. He grunted and growled, putting everything he had into each swing.

His blade closed on Mariko, and she had

to stutter step to get back in time. Quinn dived into the gap, but the demon-man was quick, and he turned, swinging back. His exotic blade rang as it sliced the tip from Quinn's long sword.

"I'm going to take you apart, little by little, and I'm going to enjoy every single slice." Jallal lunged at Quinn.

A loud crack and thud echoed off the stone walls, sounding like a pumpkin being cleaved in two. Jallal stopped his attack. His hairy, muscular arms dropped to his side, and he stood up rail straight. A heartbeat later, he fell to the ground, a dagger buried to the hilt in the center of his forehead—right between his horns.

"Both brothers dead," said Evelyne,

appearing from the shadows. "That'll teach you to not pay your debts." She crossed the courtyard to retrieve her dagger from Jallal Tasca's skull, a smug look on her face. "All that's left is to get out of here."

Mariko spun on the newcomer, raising her sword. "Drop it!" she warned. Her eyes scanned the courtyard, searching for any of the other guards.

Evelyne put her hand on her hip, examining Mariko but unfazed by the princess's aggressive stance. "I see now why you're here, Quinn." She gave him a devilish smirk. "I'd risk my life for her too."

Mariko partially lowered her blade, still on guard. "You know this woman?"

Quinn nodded, lifting his hand to stay her blade. "It's all right, Mariko. This is Evelyne. She... lives here. She helped me find you."

Evelyne offered her hand to Mariko, stepping in much closer. "A pleasure to meet you, Princess."

Reluctantly, Mariko held out her hand. Evelyne bent down and kissed it, caressing the princess's palm with her fingers.

Mariko looked at Quinn, but he just shrugged.

With a small amount of effort, the princess managed to pull back her hand, and she took a step away from Evelyne. "Very well. Then let's get out of here."

Quinn held out his arms, indicating his

state of near nakedness. "Not without my things," he replied.

Evelyne pointed to one of the open windows looking out onto the courtyard, not taking her eyes off the princess. "It's in there. I saw the fat one stash it behind the stone facing."

Quinn looked at Mariko, waiting to see her reaction. The princess crossed her arms over her chest then nodded. Hurrying to where Evelyne pointed, Quinn stepped through an open stone doorway. True to her word, there, on top of a crate of Elixir, were his armor, robes, and gauntlets. Quickly dressing, he went back out to the princess and Evelyne. The two women stood in silence, looking each other over—

Evelyne with an air of satisfied pleasure, Mariko with a bit of confusion. As if the dangers of the Cellar weren't enough, the awkward situation between the two women gave Quinn even more reason to leave this place behind. Flipping over the band on the back of his belt, he retrieved the colorful disk that would grant them passage out of the Cellar. Placing it on the floor, he spun it as he had the first time, almost two days ago. The disk dissolved into a thousand tiny mores of light, consumed by the process, and a shimmering portal appeared.

"Come, you two," he said. "It's time to go." Mariko put her hand on Quinn's shoulder as he continued dressing.

"Is it true?" she asked. "What you said to Jallal?"

"Is what true?" Quinn had finished donning his soft leather armor and was just securing his cloak.

"That there is a black citadel floating over Llorbauth, and that someone inside it is demanding me as a sacrifice?"

Quinn stopped in the middle of tying a knot. "Yes."

"Is that why you came for me? So my father could trade me to save the kingdom?"

Quinn glanced over at the glowing magical portal, the words of the king's warning running through his head. It will not last very long. If you activate it and do not use it, you will be lost, trapped

inside the Cellar.

"We must go," he said, urging Mariko toward the portal. "We can have this conversation later."

"Yeah, have your fight somewhere else," said Evelyne as she passed the two. "This will get me out of here?" She pointed at the portal.

"As promised," said Quinn.

"You're a man of your word." Evelyne shook her head. "Not many of those down here." Then she stepped through the swirling light and disappeared.

Mariko crossed her arms, clearly not happy. "I'm not finished with this," she said, then she too stepped through the portal.

Quinn let out a sigh. "No," he said,

finally securing his cloak. "I'm sure you're not."

Picking up his gauntlet, he took his turn, leaving behind the Cellar and its inhabitants forever.

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The glowing portal grew smaller with every passing moment. What had once been a large oval, big enough to fit a paladin atop his horse, was now not much larger than a young child.

From his prone position in the middle of the courtyard, Jallal Tasca rose to his knees. The hole in his forehead where Evelyne's dagger had punched through was slowly closing.

Touching the wound with his fingers, Jallal's lips curled back into a fanged

smile. He let out a chuckle that grew into a deep belly laugh, filling the courtyard with the jubilant sounds of an evil man. Getting to his feet, he crossed the open space, his hooves crunching dirt and stone. His exotic blade glowed otherworldly, bathed in the magical light of the portal and the fires of the burning Elixir.

After his first death, he had been reborn, returned to life with new strength and desire. This second death had given him his freedom. He no longer had obligations or obstacles-only wants and needs. Right now, what Jallal Tasca wanted, what he needed, was to get revenge on the Claw.

Ducking his head, he slipped through the

opening, out of the Cellar and back to ErIkazar.

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Chapter Twenty-Six

The Matron stepped from her private chamber and descended the steps into the meeting room.

The seats around the heavy wooden table were full. All the underworld's players were here. She knew what they wanted, and she hated them for it. Weak, impatient, short sighted fools—all of them. Not one had vision. Not one could see beyond the end of the day.

How was she supposed to take charge of the entire kingdom if her cohorts couldn't resist reacting like children to every crisis? How could she plot any long-

term progress if they were all content with petty theft and minor smuggling?

Someone had to think about the future, about the underworld's relationship with the throne. There was coin to be made, lots of it, if only she could complete her alliance with the king. Weaken him, put King Korox in their debt, make him afraid—and then everything they could ever want would be theirs.

How could they not see it? How could they not understand her taking advantage of this situation? The underworld had his daughter. The kingdom was under the threat of the Obsidian Ridge. The king needed them. They held all the cards, yet these fools wanted to quit the game. They wanted to turn over the princess

and be done with it.

How could they call themselves criminals when they had no nerve?

"Matron," said the woman in the spider-silk dress, "the reason we have called this meeting——"

"I know what it is you want," she spat. "What I don't know is how all of you can be so foolish."

"It is you who is foolish!" shouted Kleegor from his chair halfway down the middle of the table. The half-ore snorted as he spoke. "You are putting our businesses in danger and risking everything we have built. It is within your power to fix this situation, but you refuse."

"Yes, I do refuse," said the Matron.

"This situation, as you call it, has given us the opportunity to solidify our power in this kingdom for the foreseeable future. Yet you would rather suffer the indignation of being bound by King Korox's unjust laws, milking out what little you can until it becomes too difficult for you to continue."

She looked around. "What is it you plan to do when all of this is gone? What is it you will do when the Magistrates and the Claw have torn down the docks and made it impossible for any of us to do business?"

"That will never happen," said the spider woman.

"Yes, it will," replied the Matron. "And it will happen sooner than you think."

That is why we must stay the course. We must use the arrival of the Obsidian Ridge to our advantage. We can form an alliance with the king, put him in our pocket, make him a partner to our crimes."

She smiled. "Then for as long as he lives, we will have free reign of ErIkazar. We will control the laws and the tariffs and the distribution of wealth. We will have everything we have ever wanted."

The Matron leaned on the table, her voice growing serious. "We can give the king everything he wants, and he is willing to give that to us as well. But not if we turn his daughter over. Not if we do not ally with him and bring our mages

to his convocation. If we give up now, if we simply turn the princess over to this Xeries, then we have gained nothing."

The heavy steel doors complained as they opened.

The Matron was already in a foul mood, and this unexpected interruption was not helping.

Into the chamber came one of Jallal Tasca's guards, escorted by four of the Matron's own armed soldiers. The woman looked as if she'd just been dragged through a bonfire. Dozens of tiny burn marks covered her clothing, and ash and blood smeared her face.

She bowed as she entered, staying on the top step.

"Matron, please forgive the intrusion, but I have grave news."

"You may speak."

"It's the Claw, Matron. He's killed the Tascas and liberated Princess Mariko from the Cellar." „

The room exploded in hushed mutterings and angry accusations.

"You see!" shouted Kleegor. "You were playing with fire, and now we are all going to burn."

"Choose carefully your words here, Kleegor," warned the Matron.

The half-ore stood to address the room.

"We do not have the princess. The decision to turn her over is no longer in our hands." He turned to the Matron.

"You want to rule ErIkazar? You had

your chance to save the kingdom. You had the chance to make the choice. The king was powerless. But now you have wasted the opportunity trying to turn it into more than it was. The king will never turn over his daughter. He knows we have the power to help him stop Xeries, and he'll assume that we'll use it to help ourselves. We no longer have a choice."

"What do you propose we do?" asked the spider woman.

"There is only one clear path," said Kleegor. "We must kill the king and force the palace to turn over the princess."

"Idiot," the Matron fumed underneath her veil. "If and when we kill the king, it

will be when I tell you to kill the king. If this is done wrong, all of Erlkazar will be up in arms against us or worse, in ashes. The king will become a martyr, and we will continue to be hunted by Xeries's beasts. Our businesses have thrived for hundreds of years by being inconspicuous. If Erlkazar is destroyed, we have nothing."

"You should have thought of that before you started this game," said Kleegor.

The Matron lifted her hand and pointed at Kleegor. An army of guards rushed into the meeting room from the open steel doors. Four of them grabbed hold of the half-ore, while two others pressed sharpened steel against his back.

"Stop!" shouted Kleegor. "What are you

doing? You can't do this!"

The guards held firm, and no one in the room moved to help him.

"I warned you." The Matron stepped out from the table and made her way to the half-orc. "But you did not listen." She placed her hand on Kleegor's chest. "And now your poison words will be your undoing."

Her hand flared with power, and the half-ore doubled over in pain. His arms went weak, his face pale, and he vomited on the table, the contents of his stomach spilling over everyone within two chairs. No longer able to struggle against the guards, they held him up, keeping the half-ore from falling to the ground.

"What have you done to him?" asked the woman in the spider-silk dress, her words whispered and horrified.

"I have simply given him a taste of his own poison." Returning to the head of the table, she nodded to the guards.

They placed the sickened Kleegor back in his seat, testing his head in the puddle of vomit.

"The Claw will return the princess to her father," said the Matron, addressing the collected underworld bosses. "We must make sure the king doesn't do anything foolish. I will send him a message, reiterating our deal to help him combat Xeries. If he thinks there is a chance that he can keep his daughter, he will take it, and he will still

be in our debt."

"And what of the Claw?" shouted a man in garish robes at the far end.

"The Claw is a different story," she said, her veil fluttering with the force of her words. "He must die."

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King Korox stood in the middle of the great hall, piles of dead soldiers and beasts littering the floor.

"Do you see this?" He pointed to the blood and the ruined lives. "Are you looking?"

Whitman stood before him, his hands and legs in heavy shackles. Bruises and dried cuts covered his face. He didn't look at the king. He didn't look at the mess around him. He just stared at his

bare feet.

Korox grabbed him by the back of the neck and dragged him over to the corpse of a young solider.

"Do you see that?" He shoved Whitman to the ground, forcing his face over the dead solider. "He was still a boy, less than half your age."

Korox dragged Whitman, still on his knees, to look at a slain Watcher. "How about her? Was your treachery worth her life?"

Whitman said nothing.

"I'm going to ask you this once, and you're going to answer me, or so help me I will cut you down right here and hang your dead body from the front of the palace." The king placed his sword

under Whitman's neck. "What is it the Matron wants? What is all of this about?"

Whitman looked down at the king's sword, piercing the skin on his throat. He swallowed hard. "She wants you in her debt." He lowered his eyes. "She thought that if she took your daughter, that you would be willing to turn a blind eye to her Elixir business in exchange for Mariko's safe return."

"And the Obsidian Ridge?" prompted the king.

"She had nothing to do with that. When it arrived, she was as surprised as you. But she saw it as a further opportunity to draw you into her plans."

The king pulled his sword away from

Whitman's throat. "She offered to help with the convocation as a way to get influence in the court."

Whitman sat back on his heels, a completely beaten man. "And her chance to take from you a powerful weapon."

"The Claw," said the king.

Whitman nodded.

"Who is she?"

Whitman looked puzzled. "Who?"

"Yes," said the king, raising his blade again. "What is her name? Tell me her identity."

Whitman shook his head. "I do not know."

Korox dropped his knee down on the ex-scribe's chest, lowering his entire weight—full armor and all—onto the man. "I

will ask you this only one more time. What is her name?"

Whitman struggled to keep himself upright, his back straining under the extra weight, threatening to break. "I swear to-you. I do not know. She keeps her face covered, her identity a secret."

The king stood. "Take him back to the dungeon," he ordered a nearby Magistrate.

Whitman fell over sideways, a gushing sob ushering from his lips as he was dragged out of the room.

Korox watched the man he had once trusted with all of his words disappear from the great hall in shackles. His reign as king was in danger of being characterized simply by the string of

betrayals from his advisors and servants.
"Father!"

Korox turned away from Whitman to see his daughter standing at the door to the audience chamber. "Mariko?" He rushed to her side and wrapped her in an embrace. "I wasn't sure I was going to ever lay eyes upon you again."

She smiled at him. "There were some moments there where I thought the same thing." The princess traced the path of bodies across the floor with her eyes. "What happened here?"

"Erlkazar is in grave danger," he said. "We're at war."

"Quinn mentioned that."

Behind her, the Claw entered the great hall, his mask missing.

The king glanced to his assassin, then to his daughter. "Then I guess you've heard about Arch Magus Xeries and his demands."

The princess nodded. "Yes." She looked up at him with her chin pointed to the ground. If she had been wearing spectacles, she would have been staring over the tops of the rims.

The king had seen that look before. Her mother used to give it to him on a regular basis. "Mariko, you can't believe that I want to turn you over to that man. That has never been my intention."

"I'm sure you will do what is best for the kingdom," she replied, not changing the look.

"I'm glad someone thinks so." King

Korox Morkann took another look at his daughter. It seemed he hadn't seen her for ages. Indeed, whatever she had been through had made her look older, wiser—a lot like her mother in fact.

"Let me tell you what has happened while you were away." He touched Mariko's elbow and gently directed her down the hall. "Perhaps you will have a clearer view of what our best course of action may be."

She looked like her mother, had the same stern look as her mother, maybe she'd have sage advice, like her mother always had.

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Chapter Twenty-Seven

The sun rose on a new day in ErIkazar.

A westerly wind blew in from the water, lifting the morning fog and gently rustling the grass and leaves. At any other time, this would have been a beautiful spring day. Visitors from other lands would have seen children playing in the foothills, farmers coaxing their crops from the soil, and a community of people who worked and lived together in harmony.

But not today.

On this day, the sun's rays were somehow absorbed by the empty hopeless blackness that was the Obsidian Ridge. The children, those who hadn't been evacuated, were locked tightly inside their homes, cowering behind barred doors with their huddled

families. The roads were all but bare, occupied by only the bravest and the most foolhardy. And the wind had nothing to rustle.

The first rays of dawn had brought with them what seemed a plague. The crops, once sprouting with the hope of a fine harvest were turned gray and lifeless. Their budding blossoms had withered and died. The first signs of flowers and fruit had decayed on the vine, transforming into little more than dried out husks.

Xeries had done what he'd promised.

"This is an outage," fumed Lady Herrin, stomping right into the audience chamber. "You are our king, and it is your

obligation to protect us from this threat."

"I am aware of my duty, Lady Herrin."

Korox stood on the dais. His throne had been destroyed in the melee that took place only a day before. Blood stained the floor of the chamber, and scars from the battle marred the pillars.

The king looked up at the painting on the ceiling. It depicted a time in his nation's history, only a few short years ago, known as the Black Days of Eleint. What would these days be called, he wondered, if not black?

"The crops have withered," said the old merchant woman. "Our livelihoods are at stake. Our lives are in your hands, yet you stand there and do nothing."

"You have seen the power of Xeries.

Our army cannot best him, and we do not have the resources to beat him in a magical fight. We are looking into solutions."

"Give him what he wants," she said. "Turn over your daughter for the sake of the kingdom, and be done with it."

Korox paced across the dais. Inside he fumed, his frustration boiling over into a massive hatred of the woman before him. Right now, she was all that was wrong with the world. He wanted to smite her, cut her down for demanding such things from him.

"You know not what you ask of me," he said.

"I know very well," said the old merchant. "You can save the lives of

thousands by sacrificing only one. That is a good pay off. Even someone as poor with economics as you can understand those numbers."

The king reached for his sword, but his hand was stayed by that of Senator Divian.

She smiled at him, and gently directed him toward his private reading room. "That is quite enough Lady Herrin," she said to the merchant. "Your request has been heard, and the king will take it under advisement. You will be contacted if your advice is needed further."

"But what about—"

Divian cut her off. "Good day, Lady Herrin." The senator escorted the king out of the audience chamber.

The door shut behind them, and Divian raised her hand, illuminating the room with her magic. The king walked silently to a heavy chair and sat. He could feel the skin on his face drooping from lack of sleep. He could hear the arguments for each of the decisions ahead of him running over and over again inside his head.

He let out a sigh and placed his face in his hands. "Divian, what would you do?" The senator stood beside his chair and touched his arm. "I cannot tell you what I would do. I am not the king. Mariko is not my daughter."

The king nodded, rubbing his face.

The senator smiled. "What I can tell you is what I think you, the rightful King of

Erlkazar, should do."

"And what is that?"

"You are human, Korox. Your daughter is all you have left of your family. She is the end of your bloodline, and the heir to your kingdom. It is only natural for you to want to save her."...

"But what if there isn't any kingdom for her to inherit?"

"That's where it gets tougher. Ask yourself, if what you want is to tell Xeries he cannot have your daughter, then how will you protect her? What is your next course of action?"

"There is little else I can do. The army cannot fight him, and I fear the Matron's offer of help with the convocation cannot be trusted. It does not seem wise to risk

the fate of the kingdom on the promises of a woman who kidnapped my daughter and wants to use me as her pawn."

"That seems like a wise assessment," she agreed.

"If I send Mariko away, ask her to run for her life, I will be dooming the rest of the kingdom."

"It sounds as if you have already made up your mind."

He stood up and took Divian into his arms. "I'm afraid I have. I was just hoping for a miracle, I guess, before it came to this."

++++'?

"You can't be serious." Quinn couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"I have agonized over this decision,

Quinn. I have weighed every option. I have tried everything within my power. Where was unable to save Llorbauth, Mariko can." The king let out a resigned sigh. "I have no other choice."

Quinn felt his heart racing in his chest. "Are you going to tell her?"

"Soon. She will have until the morning to make her peace with it." Korox looked at his trusted bodyguard, sadness in his eyes. "As will you."

Quinn took a deep breath, trying to steady himself and get his head around what he had just heard. "If this is your decision, then I want to tell her, and I want to be the one to take her there."

The king straightened, looking at Quinn with all seriousness. "You do not have

to do this."

"I know."

"And you also know what that means?"

"I would rather be with her than make her go alone," Quinn said. "She should have someone, perhaps several someones, with her."

The king sat quietly for a moment, considering his assassin's request, a dour look on his face. "Very well," he said. "Make sure she understands that this was your request, not mine. I do not want her to leave this place thinking that her father was too much of a coward to deliver the news to her in person."

"Yes, my lord." Quinn bowed. "You have my word."

"She's going to be angry."

"I know."

"She's going to argue."

Quinn nodded. "It wouldn't be like her not to." "Good luck, son." "Thank you, my king."

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"So he sent you to do his dirty work, then?" Mariko waved her hand and the entire table of books blew over, slamming to the floor, some against the wall.

"No," replied Quinn. "I asked him if I could be the one to tell you."

"Still protecting him, huh? I guess I know where your loyalty lies."

"That's not fair, Mariko. It was very difficult for him to allow me this. He wanted to tell you himself, but I

convinced him to let me do it."

"Why?"

"Because I'm going with you. I'm not letting you leave here alone."

Quinn tried to take her hand, but she was too angry, and she pulled it away.

"You listened to him yourself," said Quinn. "There is little other choice."

"There's got to be another way."

"There is," said Quinn. "But it requires that many, many people die in our place."

Mariko stood at the window to her chamber, looking out onto the southern plain below Klarsamryn. "I know," she said after a long silence. "But I'm just not done here yet." She sobbed.

Quinn came up behind and put his arms

around her. This time she did not pull away.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Mariko please," pleaded the king. "Won't you even look at me?"

The princess sat atop her horse, her eyes averted. "I will do what you ask. I will uphold my duty to ErIkazar as the heir to the throne." She softly spurred her mount forward. "But that is all."

She rode away from the king and the palace, not looking back.

Quinn and a half dozen of the King's Magistrates followed her out of Klarsamryn. It was still dark, the sun not due up for some time.

The king stood at the end of the drawbridge.

"Good-bye Mariko," said Korox, waving weakly at her back. "Know that asking you to save this kingdom was the hardest decision of my life."

He watched as the escort reached the crest of the first hill. Just as they began to drop down the other side and out of sight, Mariko looked back at her father. And then she was gone.

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"You might wish you had said good-bye," said Quinn as they reached the bottom of the first hill.

"It will be over soon enough," said Mariko. "He can share in the pain."

"You know you don't mean that." Mariko sat silent in her saddle.

The riders moved on, veering off the

road toward the Obsidian Ridge, hanging over the rooftops of the homes and farms in the valley. Their path took them through a small copse of trees. It was very dark, and Mariko's eyes had a hard time adjusting.

Riding out from under the leaves, not far from their destination, a familiar figure stood in the middle of the clearing, wearing the uniform of a Watcher.

"It's about time you showed up," said Evelyne, a dagger in each hand.

Quinn kicked his horse and bolted out in front of the other riders. Turning his mount sideways, he pointed at the young man leading the Magistrates with the blades of his one remaining gauntlet.

"This is as far as you go," he said. "I'll

take it from here."

The other riders came to a stop. The ranking Magistrate looked to his comrades then gritted his teeth. "I can't let you do that. The princess must be delivered to the Obsidian Ridge."

"She'll make it to where she needs to go just fine. But you're not coming along."

The young man pulled his blade. "The safety of the entire kingdom is at stake."

Quinn responded by leaping down from his horse and pulling his enchanted long sword—single blade in his right hand, four blades on his left.

"I do not wish to hurt you. I am trying to save your life. But if you do not back down now, I will take you apart."

The young Magistrate held his ground,

clearly nervous and unsure what he should do.

"Put your sword away, son," said Mariko. "That's an order."

"But—"

"The king is not here, and I am still the heir to the throne. You are bound to follow my orders, are you not?"

He looked to the other Magistrates, but they just shrugged. Finally he nodded and slid his sword back into its sheath.

Quinn let out a sigh of relief. "You are to wait here, at the edge of this copse of trees." He pointed to the youngest of the Magistrates. "You there, hop down from your horse. We're going to need it."

The Magistrate did as he was told, and Evelyne took hold of the reins and

leaped into the saddle.

"I'll take good care of her, sweetheart, don't worry," she reassured him.

Quinn jumped back up on his horse as well. "When you see us enter the Obsidian Ridge, then you return to the palace. Go slowly and take your time. We want people to see you ride back without the princess. If you are asked, say that you were turned away, as a show of Xeries's good faith."

"And what should I say happened to my horse?" asked the now-on-foot Magistrate.

Quinn smirked. "Tell them it got spooked and threw you off." He spun his horse around and took the lead.

Mariko fell in behind him, and Evelyne

behind her.

"Judging from the way you sat in the saddle, you weren't much of a rider anyway," said Evelyne over her shoulder. "They'll believe you, no worries."

The three of them took off at a gallop, leaving the King's Magistrates behind.

When they were out of earshot, Mariko rode up alongside Quinn. "My father is going to be furious if he finds out we ditched his Magistrate escorts."

"This was your father's idea," said Quinn over the stomping of the horses' hooves. They had reached the base of the Obsidian Ridge and were slipping underneath it as he spoke.

"What?"

"He wanted you to find a way to take down the Obsidian Ridge from the inside. He thought maybe, just maybe, a single person could do what his entire army could not." "But why didn't he tell me?"

"Because I convinced him that three would be better than one." He slowed his horse, coming to a slow trot at the very center underneath the floating fortress. "And we both knew you would argue with that."

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Xeries stood up with excitement. "She's here," he said.

At his feet, he could see the image of three riders, two female, one male, as they approached the base of his citadel.

Adjusting his robes, Xeries stood as tall as he could, stretching his deformed back to walk almost as he had when he was a younger, fitter man.

"Come, my dear," he held his hand out to his wife and helped her from her throne.

"I have something to show you.

"Must I?" She shied away from his hand, fussing with the veil covering her face.

"Yes, yes, come," urged the arch magus.

Reluctantly, she gave him her hand and allowed herself to be pulled to her feet. Her body was frail, and she moved quite slowly. Xeries held her arm, supporting much of her weight as they made their way to a smaller chamber.

"It's just this way," he said, indicating the door ahead. "Not much farther."

"What is it you are taking me to?" she complained, leaning hard on her husband each time she shifted her weight. "You know I don't like surprises."

Xeries chuckled. "Yes, I know. But this one I think you'll enjoy."

Leaving behind the bigger room, Xeries and his wife entered a small round chamber. A stone slab table was the only adornment, situated off to one side. The walls, if you could call them that, were no more than a series of doors, one next to the other, covering the entire space. "Here we are."

"And where is here? Xeries, why have you dragged me into this tiny place? There is nothing here." "I brought you here to calm your fears." "My fears?"

"When we arrived here in ErIkazar, you asked me if I was here to replace you, cast you aside."

"And you are!" she said, raising her voice. The extra effort caused her to cough, and she cleared her throat as best as she could, trying to maintain her composure.

Xeries shook his head, stroking her frail arm. "I told you I am not going to cast you away. You are my fartrite. You always have been."

With a wave of his arm all the doors swung wide, revealing dozens of open coffins all standing upright. Inside each lay the body of a different woman—or what had been a woman, long ago. Now they were all dried up. Their skin clung

tight to their bones, brown, creased, and tormented. All had their arms crossed over their chests, and all were dressed in the finest of silks.

The coffins were stacked one on top of the other in rows, like dolls displayed on a shelf. On the top in the center there were two unoccupied coffins.

"You see," said Xeries, pointing to the preserved, utterly drained woman. "I'm not going to cast you away. I'm going to keep you forever—right there, on the very top, where I can see you the best."

His wife wobbled and fell to her knees, her legs giving out from under her. "Are they... are they dead?" she whispered, horrified.

"Not quite," said Xeries, still holding

her hand. "Though they no longer have enough life-force to keep me alive."

"Are they suffering?"

"I do not know," said Xeries. "They cannot speak, and I have not thought on the matter much."

She pulled her hand from his and buried her face in her palms, her veil smearing with tears. "Why did you show me this?"

"So you would understand," replied Xeries. "I am not getting rid of you. You'll always be here, immortal like me."

He bent down and draped his arm over her shoulder. "You know I love you. I have always liked you the best. That's why I saved you the best spot. Right on top. The queen of them all."

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The horses whinnied and skittered a bit, startled by the rumbling of the huge stone citadel hanging overhead. Part of the blackness separated from the rest, and it lowered, slowly descending to the ground like a drawbridge.

"Guess we came to the right spot," said Quinn, steeling himself. "You ready?" he asked Mariko, squeezing her hand.

She nodded. "Are you?"

Quinn smiled. "Let's hope so."

"What about me?" Evelyne shifted in her saddle. "Is no one worried about me?"

"After half a year in the Cellar," replied Quinn, "I suspect you're going to feel right at home in there."

"You may even see some of your old

friends," quipped Mariko.

The black bridge reached the ground with a resounding thud, sending up a plume of dirt. Inside, an orange light issued forth, illuminating the area, and from it came a horde of gibbering monsters. Their flesh shimmered in the light, like pieces of broken obsidian falling from the Ridge itself.

They marched down the bridge, in two rows, their claws grinding out a high-pitched scratch as they mashed against the stone below their feet. Reaching the ground, they spread out, surrounding the three riders.

Nearly as big as the horses themselves, the creatures took up very deliberate positions, as if each had been assigned a

spot—trained soldiers following routine orders. When all of the beasts were in their places, they began to march back up the bridge, Quinn, Mariko, and Evelyne between them.

The horses whinnied more, not at all comfortable with the strange, deformed beasts or their smell. The bridge, like everything else associated with this citadel, was made from chipped obsidian. The smooth, broken edge of the stone made it difficult for the horses to keep their balance, and the normally surefooted mounts were forced to move very slowly or slip and fall.

The black bridge vibrated under their feet. It seemed the whole citadel shook, ever so slightly, with tremendous power.

As they climbed, the shaking became a hum, filling the air in addition to moving the floor.

Reaching the top, Quinn peered up into the center of what looked to be a dormant volcano, chiseled and sculpted over hundreds of years. Carved-out alcoves covered the ceiling and the walls. Where one ended, the next began. It looked like a beehive—hundreds of empty spaces whose edges defined the parameters of the chamber.

Inside each of these alcoves was a statue, all of the same man, each with a different pose. There was no doubting whom the denizens of this place worshiped and followed. There were reminders wherever the eye traveled.

The orange light reflected from the crevices in the chiseled figures, casting Xeries's features in stark relief. The black of the stone mixed with the strange light gave him a very sinister countenance.

Closer to the ground, passages led off from the main chamber in multiple directions, and Xeries's mutated beasts littered the floor. They stared at the newcomers, patiently waiting.

"Guess this is the welcoming party," said Quinn. "Whoa," said Evelyne, finally reaching the top of the bridge behind Quinn and Matiko. "This should be fun."

When all three were inside, the black bridge rose, grinding and complaining as

it lifted from the ground, finally pounding into place as it closed.

"What now?" asked Evelyne.

"Step down from your mounts and remove your weapons," said Xeries's echoing, disembodied voice.

All of them climbed off their horses. Three of the black beasts approached and took the reins, leading the mounts away down a dark corridor. They whinnied and whined as they disappeared from view.

Then a second beast—its lithe, dangerous arms outstretched—approached each of the Etlkazarians.

Quinn unbuckled his sword belt, placed it in the creature's waiting palms, then unstrapped his gauntlet and gave it to his

host. Mariko and Evelyne handed over their swords and daggers.

The collected army of monstrosities backed away, separating into organized lines, forming a long walkway between them. Their feet made stomping sounds in unison as they moved.

Down the length of the cleared floor, Xeries appeared. He hobbled as he walked—not quite bent over, not quite uptight. His robes trailed behind, slithering across the polished stone, and he stopped several paces from the three friends.

He bowed his grotesque, disfigured head. "I am Xeries, master of this citadel and ruler of all you see."

He approached Mariko, craning his neck

to get a good look at her. "You are more beautiful than I could have possibly imagined."

He touched her arm, running his finger along her smooth skin and over her shoulder. The princess flinched away from his touch.

"Don't be frightened," said Xeries, his voice echoing itself. "I will not harm you." He ran his fingers through her dark brown hair.

Mariko shuddered under the touch of such a hideous creature. Glancing to Quinn, she nodded. "Here we go," Quinn whispered to Evelyne.

Mariko seized Xeries's wrist with both hands, dropping to one knee and pulling

him off balance. Taking in a huge gulp of air, she let out an earsplitting shout. The sound grew and grew, filling the chamber and rising quickly to the level of painful noise with the aid of her magic.

The room shook with the reverberating sound. The walls, already vibrating from the natural buzz of power, wobbled under this new force. Three huge cracks formed in the stone floor, radiating out from Mariko and her tremendous scream.

Beasts in front of her dropped to the ground, their hands over their ears. Their spiky claws shattering under the sonic assault. They rolled in agony against the terrible sound.

Xeries, catching the full power of the princess's spell right in the face, tipped himself out of her grasp and stumbled backward. He grabbed his head in his hands, shaking it as if trying to free something lodged inside. He tripped over his robes and fell to the ground, writhing right alongside his black beasts. Quinn and Evelyne dropped into defensive stances, ready to take on a flood of the citadel's defenders, but none of the beasts moved. Only those in pain showed any reaction. The rest simply stood still, their heads bowed, waiting as they had when their master arrived. They didn't look around. They didn't even sniff the air. It was as if they didn't notice the attack.

Quinn bolted to the creature holding his weapons. Balling his fist, he prepared for a fight. But the beast didn't seem to notice him, and it made no effort to keep him from his things.

Strapping his sword to his hip and his gauntlet to his hand, Quinn pushed the creature over sideways. It simply allowed itself to fall, lying on the ground, its eyes blinking, and its chest moving as it breathed.

Mariko's spell came to an end, and the chamber fell silent except for the persistent hum that rattled the floor.

"They're all stunned," said Quinn.
"Quick, up here."

He took two steps then leaped toward

the nearest alcove. Grabbing hold of Xeries's statue inside, he pulled himself up. Reaching back down, he offered his hand.

"Come quickly before they—"

The beasts started to move.

"Get-get them-them!" shouted Xeries. His words no longer echoed, but two distinct voices—one male one female—filled the room.

In an instant, a sea of blackened flesh swallowed Evelyne and Mariko.

Quinn pulled back. The beasts threw themselves at the alcove with absolutely no regard for their own safety. Three and four at a time leaped into the air, colliding with the carved statue of Xeries, bashing their own heads in and

falling back to the ground.

A few managed to get their limbs past the statue. But they were cut away by quick swipes of Quinn's four blades. The area was small, but it worked to his advantage as the creatures' numbers counted for nothing in such a confined space. Quinn slashed his gauntlet back and forth, back and forth, severing obsidian flesh from the stark white bone beneath.

Down on the chamber floor, Xeries regained his feet, and he pushed aside his beasts to get at Mariko and Evelyne. Taking their wrists in his hands, he turned around and matched off, dragging the two women behind him as if they were no more than rag dolls.

"Open!" shouted the arch magus. And the wall before him transformed into a shimmering portal.

Stepping through, he disappeared from sight, Mariko and Evelyne with him.

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Quietly, a shroud of magical darkness crept away from the closed bridge that had led into the Obsidian Ridge. It had evaded notice likely because the attentions of the creatures inside the citadel were focused on other guests. Blending into the black walls, Jallal Tasca stood at rapt attention as the beastly denizens of this place tore after the man he had come to kill.

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Chapter Twenty-Nine

How do you feel?" Senator Divian took the king's arm, touching him softly on the chest.

"How should I feel?" asked the king.

"I'm sure it was difficult. But you did the right thing."

The king nodded. The sun had still not come up, but the riders had returned from delivering Princess Mariko to the Obsidian Ridge. His daughter was once again out of his reach.

"The kingdom will be saved," said the senator. "You've done right by your subjects and countrymen."

"I did-the only thing I could allow myself to do." Korox took Divian's hand.

"You are a good king. You put the needs of your people ahead of your own. You

will be remembered for that."

"Will I?"

"Of course, you will. You sacrificed your daughter for the good of the kingdom. Your selfless act will go down in history." She ran her finger up his forearm. "You might even be remembered as Erhkazar's greatest king." The king squeezed her hand. "Or its worst."

The senator gave him a funny look. "Why would you say that?"

"Because I didn't turn my daughter over to Arch Magus Xeries," said the king. "I complied with his demands only as a means to fighting him."

"What?" The senator stepped back, dropping his hand. "What have you

done?"

"My daughter and Quinn are inside the Obsidian Ridge. If anyone can find a way to bring down that citadel, it's them."

"Are you mad?" shouted Divian. "You've risked the fate of the entire country."

"I have done what I thought best for Erlkazar and—" "For your own personal gain."

"I did not take this decision lightly," said Korox. "This isn't just about the safety and well-being of the people. It's also about us—all of us—being able to live the lives we choose, not pressed into service or lorded over by an arch mage in a floating citadel. Today it was my

daughter, but what happens tomorrow when Xeries comes back, demanding that we turn over all the daughters of ErIkazar? Where does it end, Divian? Where do we draw the line?"

"The citizens depend on you to make the choices that will keep them safe. They cannot rule themselves. They need a strong hand, someone who can tell them what they want and when they want it. They don't want freedom. They don't want choice. They want to be kept safe, and you've put your own needs ahead of theirs."

The king shook his head. "My responsibility as king is to weigh the options and make the hard choices. I made a choice to fight for our way of

life. It has its risks, but I would rather see our home destroyed than held hostage."

"Then you have doomed us all."

"Wait," said the king, remembering their earlier conversation. "You were the one who told me it was only natural to want to save my daughter's life."

"Yes. But I didn't tell you to launch an assault on the Obsidian Ridge."

"This plan will work, Divian. Quinn isn't just my bodyguard. He's the Claw!"

A stiff wind blew in from the open balcony. Then the

mage-lit stones all blinked out, dropping the king's chamber into total darkness.

Korox heard some rustling and running feet. The twanging sound of a repeating

crossbow echoed through his ears, and something large and soft collided with his chest. Tumbling backward, he hit his head on the stone floor, and a sky full of tiny white stars flashed in front of his eyes. Somebody was on top of him, and the inside of his skull throbbed, threatening to break out of his ears and through his forehead.

The doors slammed open, and Magistrates poured in to check the commotion. The mage-lit stones re-illuminated, and the king found a man in a large hat lying on his chest.

"Vasser? What are you doing?"

"I was saving you from assassination," replied Vasser, getting up off his king. Korox sat up to find Senator Divian

lying unconscious on the floor, a bloody gash across her forehead. Five smallish crossbow bolts pierced the inner door.

"Divian!" the king crawled over to the senator and put his hand on the side of her face. "Divian!"

She moaned. "What happened?"

"I'm opt sure. Did you see anything?"

Divian struggled up to a seated position and shook her head. "No. The lights went out, and that's it. I woke when you touched me."

Korox turned back to Vasser. "What did you see?"

"Nothing," said Vasser. "I heard a crossbow being cranked, and that's when I dived on you."

"And how about you?" he asked the

Magistrates searching the room and the balcony.

They shook their heads. "Nothing, my lord. No trace of the assassin."

Korox got to his feet and helped the senator up. "You should have a healer look at that," he said pointing to the gash in her head.

"I am a healer," replied Divian, giving him a weak smile.

"I'll be fine. You worry about the assassin. I'll worry about my head."

"You mean assassins," said the king. "It's just a guess, but based on the number of attempts on my life in the past few days, I'm still in the running for worst king of ErIkazar."

"Don't fret too much over it," said the

senator. "You're only the second king. It's not all that hard to be worst."

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Quinn pushed himself deeper into the alcove, kicking at the teaching beasts with the heels of his boots. They clawed at the statue of Xeries. They gnawed at the stone with teeth like boat's tusks. They whipped the wicked barbs of their tails into the space. But nothing they did could dislodge Quinn from his spot.

He used the statue as cover, defending the narrow openings on each side to keep himself from harm. But the black beasts outnumbered him thousands to one, and they never seemed to tire. If he was going to defeat Xeries, he was going to have to find a better way than

fighting his minions one at a time. Slashing down on the claw of a nearby beast, he severed it at the joint, sending the creature sliding down the wall to the floor below. Two just like it filled the empty space. They climbed over the fallen beast to get around the statue and inside the alcove. They wedged themselves, shoulder to shoulder, into the confined space, reaching and hissing. They shoved at each other, trying to get to their prey.

Quinn scrambled, kicking, punching, and slashing as fast as he could. His blades hit the sides of the alcove as often as they hit the creatures, but he continued to battle. He was not going to die here and leave Erlkazar to these foul creatures.

Clang, clang, slash.

With the flick of a wrist, his blades sank into a fleshy throat, coming out the other side. The creature's blood spilled in a great gush down the floor of the alcove and out into the chamber beneath. The beast twitched as its life drained away, its body slumping sideways, creating further cover for Quinn.

Xeries's beasts were hulking masses of unrelenting muscle, bone, and claw. The alcove had not been intended to hold them—cramped for one, impossibly small for two.

The second black beast lunged deeper in, its obsidian claws grinding at the stone. But the corpse of its recently slain ally blocked the way, and the angry

creature got stuck—unable to push in farther, unwilling to go back.

Quinn planted his foot on the head of the slain monster and kicked off, pushing himself up higher and deeper into the alcove. The creature growled and reached again. Its persistence allowed it to press in a few inches closer, and it was rewarded for such tenacity. The tips of its claws slid down the side of Quinn's leg, cutting into the leather of his boot. He winced and scrambled back, his head smacking against the stone behind him. The alcove was deep, but it did indeed end, and there was nowhere else to go.

The black beast continued to harass him, its long arm slapping to one side,

grasping desperately at anything it could reach. Quinn's arms weren't as long, and he had to pull himself up into a tight ball to stay out of the monster's range.

Unbuckling his scabbard from his belt, he flipped it over and let his long sword slide out.

"Swallow that," he said as the weapon came free. Then he jammed the blade in the beast's face.

With so little room, there was no place for it to dodge, and the tip of the sword plunged past the creature's huge fangs and into its open, salivating mouth. Putting his foot on the hilt, Quinn stomped it into the creature's brain.

The black beast convulsed once, choking on the sharpened steel. Thrashing

mightily, it died on the sword, its body jammed against the other dead creature. Together they blocked out the orange light from below. For now, their corpses clogged the opening, a temporary blockade against the hundreds of other beasts. Quinn could hear the rest of Xeries's monstrosities clamoring into the bottom of the alcove. It wouldn't be long before they simply managed to dig through the dead flesh and mount a new attack. Reaching behind him, Quinn pressed his hands against the wall that had smacked his head. It was smooth, just like all the other exposed obsidian, except in the center. The stone had a large crack, an opening of crumbled rock that lead all

the way down the wall toward the floor below.

"Mariko's shout," whispered Quinn. The spell the princess cast had damaged the stone in the lower chamber, but it must have reverberated up into this alcove as well. „„

"As you wish, Princess Mariko." His palm lit up, and he peered into the cracked obsidian.

The wall behind him wasn't very thick—just enough to close the alcove off from a much larger space behind. Rolling backward, Quinn braced his shoulders against the beasts he had just killed and slammed his boots against the broken stone.

The bodies slipped down with the blow,

threatening to dislodge and clear the passage. Quinn slid along with them, that much closer to the hungry monsters below. Bits of broken stone rained down as well, a large chunk tumbling against the wall and smacking Quinn in the face. He kicked and kicked again. More stone came away, a small hole opening in the wall. Obsidian shards fell on his head, and with one final kick, he broke the crack open wide.

His effort was successful, but the blow finally knocked the dead beasts free. Their bodies slid away, pulled out of the space by the killers who wanted in. More of the creatures climbed into the alcove, teaching for Quinn.

Their claws scraped at a frantic pace.

The waiting had whipped them into a rabid frenzy, and they came for him with a renewed desperation. Shoving and clawing at each other, each seemingly bent on being the first to devour the interloper, each one driven to finish what the others could not.

Upside down, his face covered in splinters of obsidian, Quinn rolled backward until his feet hit the back of Xeries's statue—the beasts grabbing at his heels. With all of his might, he leaped for the opening at the opposite end. His fingers just touched the edge of the torn, jagged stone, but it was enough. Scrambling up, he squeezed through the hole in the wall and tumbled down into the unknown—Xeries's angry minions

reaching through the gap, but too big to follow.

In the space behind, Quinn tolled down a short incline, tumbling nearly out of control. Flopping over onto his back, his feet hit the ground with a thud, and he came to a stop in the bottom of a wide, rough-hewn passage, not unlike the ones he'd traversed in the Cellar. He forced himself through the tiny hole so quickly that the broken obsidian gouged large cuts in both of his arms and down the side of his ribs.

Getting to his feet, he examined the passageway.

"Shortcut," he said quietly.

Wiping the blood from his exposed skin as best as he could, he turned and

headed deeper into the citadel.

"I A o

Chapter Thirty

Xeries materialized out of the obsidian wall, a woman in each hand.

"Who does your king think he's dealing with this voice echoing as he dragged Mariko and Evelyne across the floor. "I was perfectly clear about the consequences. Yet he disobeyed me.

"You got what you wanted," said Mariko, struggling against his grip. She was going to enjoy killing him.

Xeries stood as straight as he could, taking a deep breath. "Yes, I suppose I did." He released the two women, and put his hands to the side of his head, rubbing his temples. "Though I had not counted on you having such a piercing voice."

With a wave of his hand, a shower of black sparks appeared in midair. They drifted down onto the princess and Evelyne. "That'll keep you from shouting."

Mariko tried to dodge them, but there were too many, and they seemed to follow her wherever she moved. As soon as the first spark touched her skin, she could feel her throat constrict.

She opened her mouth, a scathing retort ready for the arch magus, but nothing came out. She tried again. Still nothing. Mariko tried to scream, rattling her vocal cords and raising her voice. She spat insults and tried to invoke her spells, but it was no use. She had been silenced.

Xeries pointed at Evelyne, looking at her as if he had just realized she was there. "I did not ask for you." He waved his hand. "Take her from here."

A dozen of the arch magus's servants descended on Evelyne, lifting her from her feet and carrying her away. She struggled, her mouth open and moving, likely trying to spit obscenities at her captors. But like Matiko, she too had been silenced, and she disappeared from the room without a sound.

"That's much better," said the arch magus. Ambling over to his throne, Xeries retrieved a large pouch with something heavy inside. "I hope that as we get better acquainted this sort of thing won't be necessary."

Returning to the princess, he reached inside the sack and pulled out a small, furry animal. It looked like a cross between a hedgehog and a feline—small, round, chubby, covered in fur, and curious. The little creature didn't move much, but it sniffed the air, pointing its beady little eyes first at Xeries then at Maliko.

"This is one of my own personal creations—the mimmio," said Xeries. "It'll allow you to converse with me until I remove your magical gag. You need do nothing more than hold it in your hands. The mimmio can hear your thoughts, and it will repeat them for me to hear." He stroked its fur with his deformed fingers. "Watch."

There was a short pause while the creature listened, then it opened its mouth and began to translate. The words it spoke were oddly deep for such a small creature, a contrast to Xeries high-pitched echoing.

"The mimmio will be your voice until I am suet you will behave yourself," said Xeries through the creature. He handed the rodent to Matiko. "You try."

The princess accepted it, cradling the squirming ball of fur in her open palms.

"I want to kill you," the mimmio said. Mafiko shrunk back, not prepared for the creature to be so blunt.

Xeries laughed, sounding like a young couple giggling together. "You must be

careful what you think. There is no filter. The creature will say whatever it reads from your mind."

"I hate you. What do you want from me?"

Xeries smiled, steepling his fingers under his chin. "I want you to be my bride."

"Your bride?" The mimmio repeated her thoughts as soon as she had them.

The arch magus nodded.

"Why me? You know nothing about me."

Mariko tried to calm her mind, control her thoughts, but it was difficult.

"Ah, but I do." Xeries poured himself a goblet full of wine. "I know that you are from a very good bloodline. I know that you were born in Eleint, what you now call Erkkazar, and that you are a

descendant of my first wife's charming sister."

"You want me because I'm a relative of your wife? That's sick."

"Not exactly." Xeries took a sip of his wine, rolling it back and forth in his mouth before swallowing, then he continued. "You see, I have lived for more than twenty of your lifetimes—"

"Twenty?" interrupted the princess through the mimmio. "Ate you some kind of immortal?"

Xeries nodded, seemingly unfazed by the abruptness of the unfiltered conversation. "In a sense, yes. My first wife and I created a spell—one that would prolong our lives and allow us to live together forever."

"Then why do you want me? Get bored with your wife?" Mariko smirked. There was a certain amount of freedom in not having to choose her words carefully—or indeed, be able to choose them at all. The topic did not please Xeries, and he scowled at the princess. "She died during the spell."

"Died?"

Xeries's scowl deepened. "Yes. And now I need to have a new bride every hundred years, or else I will lose the benefits of the spell."

"You killed her?"

Xeries grit his teeth. "My wife died during the spell," he repeated, "but I have found a way to get the immortality that we both so desired. In her memory, I

live on, the way she would have wanted. But the spell requires that I always have a bride. One from the same bloodline. That is all you need to know."

The doors to the small chamber leading off of Xeries throne room ground open, and a woman in long flowing robes, a veil over her face, came into the chamber. She hobbled toward them, clearly having a hard time moving.

"Is this her?" said a cracked and raspy voice.

"Yes, my dear," replied Xeries, putting down his goblet and going to the woman's side.

"Do you think she is as pretty as I was, all those years ago?"

Xeries looked at Matiko, then back to

the woman. "She is very pretty," he said. "But so were you."

The woman grabbed hold of the arch magus with both hands, holding herself up by clinging to his robes. "You have killed me, Xeries. I blame you."

Her grip went limp, and she slowly slipped to the floor. Xeries held her weight in his grotesque hands, gently lowering her to the ground. He carefully arranged her dress around her body and lifted her veil. The face beneath was nothing but wrinkled gray-brown flesh, clinging tightly to her narrow skull.

Xeries bent down and kissed her lips. "Rest well, my dear. I will put you in your place in short order."

"Is this what happens to your brides?"

asked Mariko. "You use them up?"

"It is a fair trade," replied Xeries, his echoed voice sounding somehow saddened. "I give them wealth and power, and they give me their life-force." "You take their souls."

The arch magus shook his head slowly, still fussing with the fringes of his wife's dress. "I don't like to look at it that way. I prefer to think they die for my love."

"That's sick."

"Love always is." Xeries returned the veil over his wife's face. "Always is."

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The long, dark hallway wound deep into the Obsidian Ridge. Along the floor, four sentries patrolled. Long, lithe, dangerous killing machines, like all of

Xeries's other creations, they were on a mission. In their heads, they could hear their orders repeated, then repeated again, Find-find the-the intruder-intruder.

From above, a figure watched their movements. It paced them, waiting for the right moment.

The sentries reached the end of a hallway. They sniffed the air. They pawed at the walls. They examined everything.

The figure dropped to the passage floor behind them, silent—a cat, smaller than its prey, yet no less dangerous.

The sentries turned to head back down the hallway just as the figure pounced. It had claws on one hand, just as they did.

Its body was covered in black, just as was theirs.

But the figure was not one of them.

It was smarter. It was faster. It was more ferocious. And it came for them now, tearing into their flesh like a ravenous dragon.

Xeries had bred his minions personally, experimenting with them for hundreds of years. He had tortured and mangled their bodies and souls until he had developed the perfect killing machine—strong, obedient, and afraid of nothing.

That is, afraid of nothing until now. The figure climbed back into the ceiling, the sentries dead on the floor.

++++ ?

Xeries raised his hands, and his wife's

body lifted from the floor. Gently, carefully, he levitated her onto the stone table, just below her final resting spot. She was not quite ready to pass from this world to the next. She would never fully die. Not at least until Xeries did, and if all went as he had planned, that would never happen.

Eventually, though, she would reach a state of limited consciousness, just like all the rest of his wives. For now though, she would hang on. They all had clung to that last ray of hope, that last bit of life. There was not enough of her life-force left for Xeries to claim. His immortality required more than she could give. But he remained bound to her, as his wife, until she gave up on her survival instinct,

until she no longer wished to live.

It was then that he could put her to rest in her place up high on The wall. When that happened, he could wed Princess Mariko and continue his immortal life. But until then, while his wife was between life and unlife, he would age, just like all the rest of humanity. He would bleed, just like the rest of humanity.

Xeries hated this time, this waiting while he was mortal again. He disliked the vulnerability.

A vision came to him as he finished lifting his wife from the floor. Connected to his creatures through telepathy, Xeries watched his sentries torn to shreds by the man who had accompanied the

princess into the citadel.

"This was not part of the arrangement." He glared at Mariko. "Who is this disease you have introduced to my home? Who is this man that stalks my halls?"

Mafiko sat on the floor, the mimmio cradled in her lap.

"He's just one of the king's soldiers." She smiled. "They're all just like him."

Xeries growled. "I told your king there would be consequences, yet he has defied me." Reaching into a pocket on his robes, he pulled out a small pile of dried, brittle bones. Dropping them on the floor, he spoke the words to a spell, one he had not used often, but he had committed it to memory all the same.

"What are you doing?" asked Mariko through her furry translator.

"I am delivering on my threat," said Xeries, his echoing voice giving away his glee. "I'm drying the land. Turning your home into a desert."

He smiled big, a mouth full of crooked teeth showing. "Let's see your father defy me now."

Xeries left the room, waving the doors closed behind him. He crossed to the dais and sat down in his throne. It felt empty here without a wife. It had been a long time since he had replaced one.

This last one had been very strong, had lasted a long time. He would remember her fondly. Lifting a goblet from the table, he brought the wine to his lips and

took a drink. Yes, he would remember her fondly.

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In another part of the Obsidian Ridge, Quinn looked down from the ceiling on a third patrol of sentries. They were traveling in groups of six now, but that didn't matter. They were all about to die. Gathering his feet under him, he readied himself to pounce—teach them what it meant to feel helpless and terrified in their own home. He wanted Xeries to know that he was coming for him, wanted the man who had taken his love and terrorized his home to suffer for what he had done.

Silently dropping to the ground, he went to work on the sentries. The first one

squealed in fright as Quinn's blades cut into it. The others had very little time to react.

When he had finished, he climbed back up into the cracked passage and moved on, leaving the remains on the floor as a warning to Xeries.

This was no longer about justice or even saving Erlkazar. It had become something more—this was revenge.

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Chapter Thirty-one

Kleegor handed another crate full of Elixir to Talish and walked down to the end of the dock.

"Good to see you back up and around," said Talish. Kleegor nodded.

"I take it you don't want to talk about it."

The half-orc grunted.

"Well, I told you not to throw it in her face. I told you I agreed with you, but you should've just—" Suddenly, the sky began to roil.

"Whoa, will you look at that." Talish pointed over Kleegor's shoulder.

The half-ore nearly dropped his crate of Elixir.

Huge gray clouds swept in from the east over Shalane Lake and the west over the Snowflake Mountains. The wind picked up, and the clouds coalesced over Llorbauth and the Obsidian Ridge. They swirled together, forming one massive, turning storm that blocked out the mid-morning sun.

The storm moved faster and faster, and

its center stretched but like a long finger—a funnel of twisting air reaching for the ground. Where it touched, high up on the wall of the valley, the ground simply dried up. The grass, flowers, and trees instantly turned brown, shriveled, and died.

Bolts of lightning shot from the clouds. Where they hit, the dirt turned to sand, the stone crumbled and cracked, the puddles and streams evaporated. A tremendous clap of thunder shook the dock under Kleegor's feet.

"What's happening?" Talish had his hands pressed against the side of his head, shaking it in amazement.

"I'll tell you what's going on," said a voice. "The king has betrayed us."

Kleegor looked down from the building storm into the face of the Matron.

"My lady," said the half-orc, falling to his knees and dropping his head to the splinter-torn wharf.

The Matron approached the half-ore and the dark-skinned man.

"On your feet, Kleegor. You do not need to bow to me."

He did as he was told, getting back to his feet.

The Matron put her finger under his chin, lifting his eyes to meet hers. "I have come here, Kleegor, to give you my apology."

"I do not understand."

"You were right." The matron waved her arm back at the slowly growing storm as

it continued to devour Llorbauth, turning the fertile land of the valley into little more than a desert. "We never should have trusted the king to do the right thing. His blind affection and shortsightedness may end up being our undoing. I should have listened to you, and now we have to make it tight."

The half-ore stood up straight. He puffed his chest out, feeling some of his previous courage returning.

"And how do we do that?"

"The king's betrayal has brought this destruction upon us. I had hoped to avoid it, but he leaves us little choice." She turned to look one more time at the valley being transformed into a barren wasteland. "King Korox must die. The

palace must fall. Prepare your assassins, Kleegor. We take Llorbauth by force."

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The walls hummed. The floor moved, and a low buzz filled the air, washing out the sounds of footsteps and doors opening.

Slipping out of the wall, Quinn perched himself behind a jagged chunk of obsidian. Settling in, he melted into the blackness, blending in and disappearing from view.

Below him, Xeries sat, drinking from a goblet. The deformed arch magus slumped in his throne—or at least the way his bulbous spine curved over on itself made him look as if he were slumping.

There was no sign of Mariko or Evelyne. But that didn't matter right now. Quinn would find them—all in good time.

For now, the only thing he wanted was a clear shot at the ruler of the Obsidian Ridge. «

Quietly, he lowered himself to the next perch, then the next. The buzzing coveted his tracks, and he reached the floor very quickly. Staying close to the wall, he circled. When he was fully behind the throne, he approached, slowly, carefully, until he was crouched right behind Xeries.

He paused to relish this moment, something Quinn had never done before. Up until now, killing in the name of

Erlkazar was something he had done out of loyalty and honor. It was his job, and one that he took no great pleasure in.

But he was going to enjoy this.

Lifting his left hand high in the air, he swung with all of his might.

He shouted—uncontrolled rage spilling out as he came down on Xeries's twisted body.

His blades slipped through the arch magus's hunched back, viciously slashing off a huge hunk of flesh. Blood and pus shot from the wound, and Quinn's gauntlet carried on, slamming into the throne. So fueled by anger and hate was this attack that his blades buried themselves in the thick obsidian and plowed right on through.

The throne shook like it had been hit by a sledgehammer.

Chips of stone rattled to the floor, mixed with bits of flesh and trails of blood.

Xeries screamed, his yowls of pain echoing again in the confined chamber.

The arch magus rolled forward and turned to face his attacker.

Quinn circled the throne, his long sword in his right hand. "I am here to collect on your sins, Xeries," he said, closing the distance.

Xeries's eyes were wide, and his breathing heavy, labored. He backed away, limping and crouched over. "Do not come any closer. I'm warning you." Despite the echo of his voice, he sounded panicked.

"Are you afraid, Xeries? Do I frighten you?" Quinn made a sudden jerking move forward, taunting his prey.

Xeries jolted back, startled.

"You are wise to be afraid." Pulling the blade of his sword closer to his chest, Quinn threw his body forward into a tumbling roll.

Xeries scrambled backward, trying to get out of the way.

Quinn unfurled in front of him, coming out of his roll with a leap, flying at the arch magus with his long sword cocked over his head. The blade came down, and Xeries ducked, but not before Quinn cleaved another huge chunk of the hump from his back.

The lord of the Obsidian Ridge let out a

second painful wail as another piece of his decrepit, deformed body fell to the floor.

The doors to throne room burst open, and a flood of Xeries's brutes charged in. They washed over the floor like a huge toxic wave, sloshing up and over the dais, covering the broken throne as if it were a rock caught in the surf.

Unable to take on so many in such a large space, Quinn was pushed back. Reaching the wall, he scaled the jagged stone in three huge bounds.

"I'll come for you again, Xeries." And with that, he slipped into his shortcut, disappearing from view.

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Arch Magus Xeries retreated into the

private chamber off of his throne room. His wife lay motionless on the slab. Princess Mariko stood beside the coffins, examining his previous wives. She turned around when he entered.

"Looks like you've had a run-in with Quinn," said the mimmio.

"Is that what you call that disease?" spat Xeries, his echoed voice dripping with venom.

He trailed blood and pus behind him as he limped. It ran down his back and off his legs, and he could feel the squish of each footstep as he went. Reaching a cabinet near the slab table, he retrieved an alabaster globe and quickly pulled the top off of it. "

Inside was a smooth opalescent salve,

which he scooped up in his fingers and smeared on his back—the remnants of his hump. The burning throb that had spread across his flesh was cooled, and he could feel the skin on his back tighten as it knitted back together.

His hunched-over frame would forever be scared from the wounds he had taken, but at least that madman had not managed to kill him.

Returning the globe to its place, Xeries snapped his fingers. "Come to me, my pets," he said.

A silvery portal opened in the wall, next to the coffins of his discarded wives, and through it stepped his most trusted minions. These were his assassins, the smartest, most deadly of all his

creations. Over the last hundred years, he had created only a half a dozen. One he had sent to its death as a message to King Korox. The other five now stood before him.

Smaller than his regular soldiers, they would be able to fit into the tight spaces this man was using to travel through the citadel.

"Find the man called Quinn. Kill him and return here with his remains."

Chapter Thirty-Two

He saw them coming.

These beasts were unlike the others he had fought. They were cunning. They had more patience, and they worked together, watching every direction as they moved through the cracks in the

walls of the Obsidian Ridge.

Quinn clung to the ceiling of a wide passage, completely hidden against the pitch black rock. Xeries's creatures worked their way past, scrutinizing everything, leaving no nook unsearched. They were hunters, killers sent out to find Quinn and destroy him.

At the end of the passage, all five of the creatures split up, each going their own direction. Quinn picked one and followed, silently stalking the beast from above. The creature's deep black skin made it hard to see in the obsidian corridors. Its soft, padded feet and smooth gait made it hard to hear against the constant humming noise of the citadel. But neither of these things

hindered Quinn in his pursuit.

Had Xeries's hunter not been an adversary, Quinn might have admired its stealth and dedication to its work. He might have tried to study its instincts and see if it had something to teach him about their shared craft of killing. But it was an adversary, and now it needed to die.

Drawing closer, he came down the wall, still concealed in the darkness, silent as a tomb strider. The beast did not see him. It did not hear him.

Lifting a shard of broken stone from the floor, Quinn slipped it underneath the creature's neck and jammed it through the bottom of its throat. The beast

scrambled sideways, pawing at its face. It tried to hiss at Quinn, but its mouth was pinned closed.

"Let me help you with that." With a slash, Quinn cut the creature's face from its head.

The beast shook, thrashing violently back and forth across the corridor, bashing its head against the walls. It could not see. It could not scream—just the way Quinn wanted.

"Time to go to work," he said, then he lit upon the creature with both hands.

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Xeries watched the chase through the eyes of his assassins. These minions were not dependent on him. They could search for the disease that ran through the

halls of his home without him controlling their every move. It was a luxury he thoroughly enjoyed. They would seek out this Quinn, and he would watch as they tore him to shreds.

The youngest and smartest of the group led them all as they descended into the bowels of the citadel. At a crossroads, they split up, each going their separate ways. There were many places to hide, and his assassins had to check them all.

The tubes and passages that ran through the walls were remnants from a day when the Obsidian Ridge had been an active volcano. Xeries had chosen this mountain as his home many hundreds of years ago, when he was still with his third wife.

They had been far from Faerûn then. So far east, many people would not have believed it was still on the same plane. A place where the earth raged day and night. Red-hot lava shot into the sky, rocking the ocean with earthquakes. The molten

rock landed in huge clumps, making jagged mounds as far as the eye could see. It was really quite beautiful, the reds, oranges, and yellows spat from the mouths of the angry volcanoes, juxtaposed on the deepest black of the mountains themselves.

His third wife had so admired this mountain that Xeries couldn't bear to leave without giving it to her as a gift. For three days and three nights he

labored to devise a spell that would tear the volcano from the ground. It had worked quite well, and his wife had been very impressed.

It took several months for the stone to cool sufficiently for them to be able to finally go inside. Seeing his minions scurry through the lava tubes deep in the bowels of the citadel reminded him of that time. He and his third wife would take strolls through the tubes often, reminiscing about the places they had traveled and the things they had seen.

When his third wife had become no longer of use to him, he stopped going down to the tubes. His fourth and fifth wives did not care for them, and so he all but forgot they were there. He

doubted any of his wives since then had ever even seen them.

A stabbing pain shot through the neck of one of his assassins, and his reminiscing came to an end. His minion was struggling, and for some reason it couldn't get its mouth open. There was something in the lava tube with it.

A second pain shot across his minion's face, and suddenly its sight went out.

The creature was still alive, that much Xeries knew. He could sense its pain, but he couldn't see anything through its eyes. The creature was confused. It thrashed around, trying to get its balance, not understanding why it couldn't see.

Through the assassin's ears, Xeries heard Quinn's voice.

"Time to go to work."

Another pain shot through the beast's body, and Xeries winced. Waving his hand, he severed the magical connection he had with the creature. It was dying, and he did not need to see the end.

His other minions circled back. Responding to his commands, they raced through the tubes toward the dying assassin. It did not take them long to arrive at the spot, but when they did, Quinn was already gone.

Left in his place were piles of tortured, mangled black flesh, cut from the bones of the assassin and laid out on the floor to spell the words, You're next.

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Quinn stalked his prey through a very

narrow corridor. They had to know he was following. They had abandoned their usual ritual of stopping to sniff the air and searching the cracks as they passed. No, they were headed somewhere—or rather, they were leading him someplace where they could fight at an advantage.

It did not bother Quinn that he was being led to an ambush. He was ready to finish this and get to the real business at hand. Let them come after him. Let them try to corner him. Let them throw a hundred of their best at him.

He would take them all.

Up ahead, pulses of bright orange light came into the passage. The closer they got to it, the more the walls hummed and

vibrated. He could feel the bones inside his skin rattle. Ever since arriving, Quinn had noticed the slight vibration in the floors and walls. Where he stood now, the shaking was not slight.

Whatever it was that moved this place, made it vibrate so, was waiting right up ahead.

The creatures stopped at the edge of the passage and looked back, as if they were waiting for Quinn to catch up, then they stepped through, toward the orange light, and disappeared from view.

Making his way cautiously to the end of the tube, Quinn peered out into the chamber beyond. It was a huge, open area, at least as large as Xeries's throne room. In the center,

three man-sized rubies hovered in midair. Jagged bolts of magical energy pulsed through them, bouncing back and forth between pedestals on the ground and what looked like a series of magical staves attached to the ceiling.

Each time a pulse of magic passed through a ruby, it sent out a glare of orange light that shone from the reflective, chipped surfaces all around the room. The gemstones moved quickly back and forth, seeming to hum a deep tune. All three had hit the same note, and it was this sound that was making the entire citadel vibrate.

On the floor at the base of one of the rubies, Quinn caught sight of the assassins he had been stalking. They had

stopped, all four of them, to look in his direction, once again as if they were waiting for him to follow.

Quinn obliged, slipping out of the tube and into the open chamber.

The room was quite warm, and he could feel the vibrations chatter through his ribcage and shake his chest. It was a strange sensation, the beats of his heart moving at odds with the vibrations of the gemstones.

Once he was out of the tube, Xeries's assassins continued on, passing around the floating rubies and steering clear of the magical bolts of energy emanating from them. At the other side of the room, the creatures began to climb the wall, slipping into another passage near the

ceiling.

Quinn followed, not sure where all of this was taking him. Scaling the wall with ease, he continued on, deep into another passage—this one headed straight up toward the top of the Obsidian Ridge.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Korox sat in the saddle of his night-black war steed in the easternmost courtyard, looking at the dead, wilted cherry blossoms. It was the beginning of spring, and the warmth had just returned to Llorbauth. The flowers and trees had just staffing to bloom—but they were never given a chance.

The shrubs, grass, and trees had all curled up and died. The water had dried

up. The dirt had turned to sand, and the sun beat down on the city as if it were a desert, desolate and wasted.

All of this had gone terribly, terribly wrong. The land as far as the eye could see was wilted and withered, and a new army of Xeries's beasts had mustered under the Obsidian Ridge. More poured out of the sides of the floating mountain every moment, and that could mean only one thing—Quinn and Mariko had failed, and Llorbauth was about to be attacked by the arch magus's forces.

Korox tried to tell himself that Xeries would have dried up the water, withered the crops, and taken his kingdom even if Mariko had been turned over without incident. But even if that were true, it

didn't make him feel any better.

"Can you ever really trust a man who makes his home inside a burnt-out volcano?" he said to Captain Kaden.

"No, my lord, you cannot," replied the head of the Magistrates.

The king had ordered all of his remaining troops to muster in front of Klarsamryn. If Xeries's beasts were going to attack, then by Helm, Llotbauth was going to defend itself. While the regular army, Watchers, and Magistrates were preparing for battle, Korox had decided to ride through the courtyard one last time. Captain Kaden had insisted on coming along, and the king had agreed, if only for the company.

King Korox stepped down from his

horse and crouched near the ground at the base of the queen's statue, touching the dried, brown grass. Brittle and stiff, it crumbled in his hand. He remembered taking walks here with his wife, when she was still alive. It had been the perfect place for a bit of privacy. The smell of the cherry blossoms made even the largest problems seem insignificant. All of that was gone now.

Erlkazar was less than two decades old. He'd been its king for less than a year, and already it was on the brink of destruction.

"My lord," said Captain Kaden, "we should return."

King Korox nodded. "I know, Kaden. I just wanted to see this place again. Over

the past year I have spent too much time inside my audience chamber and not enough out here." He looked up at the carving of his deceased wife. "I fear I have missed out on what may have been the last days of spring in ErIkazar."

With one final look he turned and led his steed back toward the front of Klarsamryn. His Magistrate escorts marched along side as they moved slowly from the courtyard, past the empty diplomatic buildings and into the field beyond. It too was brown and dry, like all the other places in the kingdom.

It was not far to the drawbridge, but from here, even the dead leaves on the trees obscured their view of the mustering troops. To the north, they

could see the huge squirming mass of Xeries's army gathered under the floating mountain.

The flow of beasts out of the citadel had stopped. Their shimmering blackness seemed a giant bottomless pit in the middle of the world. There was no end to what could be consumed by the collected evil under the Obsidian Ridge.

"They will be coming this way soon," said the king. "Our final test is upon us." "You will not be tested," said a deep voice.

The Magistrates accompanying the king pulled their swords.

"You will not be tested," repeated the voice, "because you have already

failed."

Suddenly the field outside the courtyard, still except for the occasional dead leaf falling to the ground, erupted in movement. The landscape transformed, turning from brown to black as more than a hundred assassins materialized around the king and his men. Humans stepped out of the dead hedges ahead. Ores dropped from the rooftops behind them. Half-elves appeared as if from thin air. They filled the field and the courtyard, more appearing with each blink of the eye.

Captain Kaden, King Korox, and their Magistrate escort found themselves trapped and surrounded. It seemed every hired killer in Erbkazar was here, all

wearing black robes and masks—the golden-haired symbol of the Church of Waukeen emblazoned on their chests.

"You have betrayed your kingdom, Korox," said a man who-had appeared from the dead brush. "You have traded in our lives for the life of your daughter.

We are here to take your throne and end your rule." The assassin pulled a pair of long, thin blades from the sheaths at his waist. "The Matron sends her regards."

The assassins attacked.

"Magistrates!" shouted Captain Kaden.

"Surround the king!"

A tight circle formed around King Korox as the men prepared to fight for their lives.

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Quinn came out of the narrow passage into a high-ceilinged room. His skin tingled in anticipation as he realized where he was. The creatures he followed had led him directly back into Xeries's throne room.

The black beasts were nowhere to be seen. The floor hummed from the magical contraption far below his feet, and the open room was completely empty—except for the arch magus himself.

Xeries stood in front of his throne, intently watching something on the floor, his hunched back and head covered by a heavy robe. Beside him, a half-drunk goblet of wine rested on a short table. If he heard Quinn come out of the tube, he

gave no indication.

Lifting himself onto his feet, Quinn stalked silently across the floor. As he drew closer, he could see a swirling image displayed at the foot of the throne. Some sort of scrying spell Xeries had likely cast. Whatever he was watching, it had his full attention.

Moving up onto the dais, Quinn moved into position to cut Xeries's throat. He lifted his left hand, and placed his blades just under the arch magus's throat. He was poised and ready to kill the man who had threatened his king, stolen his love, and neatly destroyed his home. This was why he had come to the Obsidian Ridge. His mission was nearly complete.

But something made him pause.

This all seemed too easy. Why had those beasts led him to the throne room? Why was Xeries unguarded? Something wasn't right.

Looking down at the image at Xeries's feet, Quinn could see two figures. One was clearly Xeries in his heavy robes. The other was less clear, so he moved his head slightly to get a better view.

A chill ran down his spine. The second figure was him.

Quinn and Xeries were looking down at an image of themselves. The arch magus had been watching him sneak up from behind. He knew that Quinn was there, yet he hadn't moved.

Grabbing Xeries by his robed shoulder,

Quinn spun him around and pulled back his hood—revealing Princess Mariko. A look of desperation filled her eyes, but she didn't speak.

Pulling the robe from her shoulders, Quinn could see that she was holding a strange furry creature in her bound hands. It wiggled its nose and sneezed. Then it looked up at him and said, "It's a trap."

The air seemed to waver and bend—like waves of heat coming off a hot stone road. The empty throne room filled with Xeries' minions, the invisible turned visible. Hundreds of them surrounded Quinn and Mariko. ""

They pounced on Quinn, knocking him to the ground before he could respond.

They tote from him his cape. They took from him his sword and his gauntlet, leaving him empty-handed on the floor, two of the black beasts on each of his limbs, holding him down.

And nearby, Xeries himself appeared. Seemingly very pleased with himself, he stepped up on the dais to look down at Quinn—helpless and unarmed.

"You were right. You did come back for me." He smiled. "I thank you for the warning."

Quinn struggled against his captors, but it was no use. He was held fast. "Don't mention it."

"You realize of course that I'm going to have to make you pay for all of this. All of Erbkazar is going to pay for the

damage and difficulty you've caused me."

"Whatever it is you want, you won't get it," Quinn said.

Xeries laughed, his echoed voice multiplying the terrible sound. "I already have almost everything I want." He ran his finger over Mariko's cheek.

The princess pulled back, and the mimmio conveyed her words. "Don't touch me, you filthy beast."

Xeries scowled. "I shall have you despite your defiance. And I shall destroy this little village you call home just for my pleasure."

He slipped his belt off of his waist and let the robe fall from his shoulders. His body was twisted and blackened, a

deformed monstrosity that made both Mariko and Quinn look away in disgust. "But there is something else." Waving his hands over his head, Xeries cast a spell. His bent, twisted body grew upright. His blemished, foul skin became smooth. His withered old hands and face became young again. His whole visage transformed.

A chill ran down Quinn's spine and his chest grew cold. Pinned to the floor, he looked up at an exact doppelganger of himself—complete with one bladed gauntlet.

"You wouldn't dare," spat Quinn.

Xeries smiled. "Oh no?" he said, his voice no longer echoing, but now sounding like Quinn. "I want to see the

look on your king's face when I tell him —with your face—that I have betrayed him. That I have turned over his daughter without a fight, and that despite her sacrifice, Erlkazarl's doomed."

Xeries, wearing the appearance of Quinn, turned and strode out of the throne room. "Move the citadel over the water until I return," he commanded his minions. "And hold those two in my private chamber. I will deal with them both personally when I have finished my business with their king."

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Assassins swirled around King Korox Morkann of Erlkazar and his men, coming in a dozen at a time. They carried all manner of weapons. There

seemed no continuity between them except that they wore the same robes and all worked at the same goal—to kill the king.

Already his circle of defenders had dwindled. Four men had died in the opening moments of the battle. Three more and the king's black mount had also been grievously wounded. They tried to hold their ground, but it was no use. There was no way out of this.

Their shouts were muffled by the dead brown foliage on the once-in-bloom trees. The sounds of their blades colliding with those of the assassins wandered off into the dry air, unheard by the waiting troops. Less than a mile from the mustering army, the king, the head of

his Magistrates, and their escort were all going to die.

They fought now only to prolong their lives for a few more precious moments. They stayed on their feet, defending themselves and their king for the pride of having been here at the end. If this was the way they were going to go when they were going to fight with every last breath left in them.

"Steady!" shouted the king to his defenders. "You are the bravest this land has to offer! Your courage will earn you a place in history!"

His words moved them. Though they were wounded and outnumbered, they fought with the strength of a hundred men. But even if they'd had that many, it

would still not have been enough.

A shower of purplish blue light came down on the assassins. It looked like thirty or more brightly colored spring birds diving into the fray, striking the black-robed men attacking the king. They hissed and popped as they impacted, burning holes in their targets and dropping a few to their knees.

A huge bolt of lightning shattered the dry afternoon air. It struck one of the assassins in the back then leaped toward another—and another and another. The electricity reached out like the fingers on a skeletal hand, touching at least half a dozen enemies and striking them senseless. When the spell ended, two of the assassins fell down dead. The others

staggered a bit, wisps of steam floating off their shoulders and arms.

The sound of galloping horses echoed out of the courtyard and into the field, followed by the appearance of fifty men, half in armor, half in robes. All wore the jade green and royal blue that could mean only one thing—Lord Purdun of Duhlnarim, the Baron of Ahlarkhem had arrived.

"Guardsmen," shouted Putdun, "save our king!"

Suddenly the odds had been evened.

The two men had saved each other countless times. Now Purdun had arrived with his elite guard and most of his court mages to protect his friend.

The wizards of Duhlnarim were not a

force to be taken lightly. Though there were few of them, they were mighty on the field of battle indeed. Their magic filled the air with crackling energy and dangerous pitfalls for the enemy.

"That way, men!" shouted King Korox.
"Meet them halfway!"

Korox forced his way past the Magistrates guarding him, stepping into the fray and leading a charge toward the newly arrived cavahy. His sword bit through cloth and magical wards. His fist came down like the gavel of justice, slamming aside the wicked and the unlawful. His actions spoke louder than his words, and the Crusader King found his place at the head of his troops once again.

Meanwhile, Lord Purdun and his elite guard closed from the other side, using the height of their mounts as an advantage. They charged the line of assassins, pinning them between the barding of their horses and the blades of the Magistrates.

The cavalry slammed into the attackers and bowled them over backward. Swords met swords. Hooves collided with chests. And bolts of magical energy sailed into the fray, knocking the minions of the underworld from their feet.

Blood spilled. Men died. Ridets fell from their mounts, and the battle raged on.

Then a foul wind blew up from the valley. It shook the dead grass, rattled

the brittle leaves, and brought with it the stench of rotting meat.

"The beasts have arrived!"

Xeries's horde of twisted monstrosities fell upon the fighting men and women of ErIkazar. They bit the heads from assassin and Magistrate alike. They tore into the flesh beneath plates of metal armor. They traded blows with the strong and the quick.

In the distance, the Obsidian Ridge began to move, slipping away from the valley and out over Shalane Lake. Its shadow lifted from Llorbauth, revealing the dead, cracked land it had left behind.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Evelyne sat on the floor, waiting.

Her cell was in the middle of a lava

tube. A magical barrier had been placed over the opening, and a pair of guards had been stationed in front. They had looked in on her every few moments. Why, she hadn't a clue. She was stuck inside a tiny little hole inside a much larger hole, inside a huge floating volcano.

"Where do they think I'm gonna go?" Her voice had returned to her once she was no longer inside Xeries's chamber.

But then the guards had just left. There was no ceremony, no sound or alarm, no indication of why. One moment they were there, and the next they were gone.

"Guess they got tired of waiting for me to do something." She tossed a chip of obsidian against the wall and watched it

shatter to the floor.

Picking up another piece of the stone, she hurled it at the same spot. When it hit, the whole wall started to shake. Chips of obsidian rained down from the ceiling, and the floor undulated from side to side.

"What the... ?"

Evelyne leaped to her feet and was neatly thrown back to the floor. "It's moving."

The entire citadel was shifting back and forth. This wasn't the same hum and vibration that seemed to permeate everything inside the volcano. That was still there, but now it felt like a ship on the high seas, rocking slightly but definitely moving somewhere.

More of the broken stone rained down on Evelyne. She covered her head with her hands and ducked into the corner, trying to protect herself from the falling ceiling and walls.

Larger and larger chunks fell into her cell, each shattering as it hit the ground. Tiny pieces bounced and ricocheted around the small, carved-out hole. Then just as suddenly as it started, the shaking and movement ceased.

Evelyne slid out of her corner, sent sprawling by the sudden stop. She put her arms out to catch herself but ended up face-down in a pile of tiny stone shards.

"Makes me miss the Cellar."

Getting up off the floor, she brushed the

obsidian chips from her clothes. Looking up at the ceiling, a smile spread across her face.

"Whoa," she said. "This should be fun."

Right above her head, the movement of the citadel had shaken loose an entire fault line. The result was a huge crack in the stone—big enough for a small person to squeeze through, into the lava tube beyond.

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Chaos ruled the fields outside Klarsamryn. Magistrates fought half-ores, half-elves, humans, and the black beasts. Enemies winked out of existence, the mages at the back of the line transporting them far away. Lord Purdun and his elite guard held the line of battle

with their mounts. King Korox and Captain Kaden fought side-by-side.

The rest of Xeries's army scampered up the low hill toward the open field, crushing the dead vegetation into a fine powder as they charged toward the palace. It looked like a wave of tar, flooding over itself as it crashed against the

dried, brown dirt of the shore. Surely this was a scene from the Nine Hells.

As the wave broke across the open ground, it spread out, washing around the cavalry, the assassins, and the Magistrates. The blackness, with its jutting fangs, sharp-edged limbs, and spiked tails slowly surrounded everything else. King Korox stood in the

middle of it all, a beacon of light against all that was dark.

Just as Xeries's army arrived, the voices of two thousand men filled the battlefield. They burst through the dense, dead foliage as they charged to the side of Korox Morkann.

The king's army had arrived to join the battle.

The fight to win independence from Tethyr had been a long, bloody affair. The wars that followed against the united might of the goblin tribes had been fiercer still. But this battle, now swirling through the fields and courtyards of Klarsamryn, was by far the most wicked contest ever waged in the history of this young country.

Three hostile armies clashed at once. The assassins sent by the Matron focused their rage toward King Korox and his subjects. The Magistrates and their allies fought on two fronts, against the forces of the underworld and the forces of the arch magus. And Xeries's beasts bore down on them all, killing anything they could claw or bite.

"Assassins of Waukeen!" shouted King Korox over the clattering din of battle. "You were sent here to dethrone me. To take control of Erbkazar, so that you could rule it as you saw fit. But you are fighting the wrong foe."

He flipped his sword around, and grabbing the hilt in both hands, pounded the tip into the oncoming mouth of an

obsidian attacker. The blade ripped though flesh, teeth, bone, and sinew, dropping the beast's innards on the ground to mix with the blood and mangled flesh already collected there.

"We may have our differences," continued the king, "but together we are part of this free nation. And as your king I

ask for your help on this battlefield." He lifted his enchanted, blood-coveted sword high in the air. "Together we can win this fight, for Erbkazar!"

"For Erbkazar!" came the cry from the Magistrates, elite guard, and regular army.

For a brief moment, the shout overtopped the ringing of metal and the

sickening sound of tearing flesh. Then silence descended over the fields beside Klarsamryn, as the king and his warriors held their attacks, waiting for the response.

King Korox stood his ground, his hand lifted high in the air. He could hear the sound of his heart pounding in his chest as the silence seemed to drag on and on. Then finally, "For Erhkazar!" shouted one man.

"For Erhkazar!" screamed two more.

"For Erhkazar!" came the cacophony.

And the battle resumed in full force, this time with a united front.

Men, half-ores, and half-elves who had come to the palace to wrest it from the hands of the king, were now fighting in

the name of their country. They worked the tools of their trade, employed their expertise as killers, in an effort to repulse these invaders. The men and women of the Magistrates—a group formed with the express purpose of defending Erilkazar from the forces of the underworld—fought by their side. These were desperate times, desperate people, now protecting a desperate land.

Leading them all, assassin, mage, and soldier alike, King Korox punched, kicked, slashed and fought. His crown had long ago fallen from his head. His armor had lost its shine. The edge of his blade had gone dull, slamming down onto the invaders who would dare take his home.

His breath was labored, his muscles sore, his burden heavy. But it seemed that the fight might be turning in their favor. The tide of black beasts was at a standstill. All they needed was one final push, just one thing to fall in their direction, to change the momentum and balance of this war. They could defeat these invaders, send them from this land and regain what rightfully belonged to them.

That's when the king spotted Quinn at the edge of the battlefield.

The king's assassin approached Xeries's army from the back of their line. He struck down the invaders with each step he took, moving with a purpose toward Korox. His long sword came down with

one hand, his bladed gauntlet with the other, and he cleared a path like a farmer harvesting a field of ripe wheat.

This is what they needed, thought the king. Quinn would turn the tides in their favor. Victory was at hand. All they needed was to reach out and grab it.

With a few more strides, the king's closest ally, his bodyguard and personal assassin reached his side. Korox reached out his hand and grabbed his friend by the shoulder.

"You have returned!"

"Yes, my lord," replied Quinn.

"Is it done?"

Quinn nodded. "Xeries has your daughter I turned her over as instructed." Korox pulled back, confused. "He has

Mariko? Then why are you here?"

"Xeries was just too powerful." Quinn shrugged. "I turned over your daughter and begged for my life."

Korox felt the world grow cold. "That monster has my daughter." His desire and fight drained from his body as if it were blood spilling from a massive wound. His knees went weak, and he dropped to the ground. "He has my daughter."

"Xeries was merciful and gave me back my life," continued Quinn. "He let me go in exchange for Princess Mariko. He said I was a good servant, and that her sacrifice would please him."

Korox looked up at Quinn. The bodyguard had a smile on his face, as if

he were enjoying the pain that the king now felt. "Mariko is gone."

Quinn nodded. "She is out of our reach. Xeries has won." Then he turned and headed away from the battlefield, bypassing the beasts and assassin, heading for the dead trees lining the easternmost buildings of the palace.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Quinn had never been much for waiting. He was more of a man of action. Sitting here trapped while Xeries was out there masquerading was maddeningly difficult. Every few moments he would get up and pace the floor. He would examine the cracks in the walls. He would scan the faces of the decrepit women—the past wives of Xeries.

Each of the women had been placed in a fabric-lined coffin. Those in turn had each been set inside small, carved-out recesses in the black stone wall. And each of those had been equipped with a heavy door, all of which were open at the moment, giving Quinn a spectacular view of something he wished he'd never seen.

Not one of them moved. Not an inch. They were like life-sized dolls, displaying their tortured existence for the amusement of any who happened to gaze upon them. Quinn wasn't able to look for more than a few moments. He shuddered every time he thought about Mariko being turned into one of those helpless, terrible creatures. It was too

much to bear.

Finishing his latest rounds through the small room, he sat back down beside Mariko.

"I have failed you," he said, not looking at her.

"You haven't failed," she said through the mimmio. "I'm not gone or dead yet."

He smiled. "You never did know when to give up, did you?"

Mariko shook her head. "Never will."

Quinn took her hand in his and sat beside her in silence. Since the Obsidian Ridge had arrived over Llorbauth, this was the most time they had spent together.

He turned, lifted his eyes to hers, and looked into them. "Well, if you're not ready to give up, then I have a question

for you."

Mariko smiled. "What's that?" asked the furry creature in her hands.

"Will you marry me?"

She cocked her head to one side, as if she were trying to figure out if he was joking or not. Then, apparently satisfied that he wasn't, she nodded.

"Yes, Quinn, I will marry you."

From high up on the wall, a noise caught their attention.

Quinn stood and stared up at the inhabitants of the room. A chill ran down his spine to think that one of them might be creaking around in her final resting spot, not quite dead, watching him propose marriage to the woman who was likely going to occupy the last

empty place on the wall.

The faces of all the decrepit old bodies stared down on him as he examined them. Then one of them moved.

Quinn felt the pit of his stomach drop out, and his skin went cold. The suffering that woman must have endured — and continued to endure. He looked away.

Mariko stood beside him, and she pointed at the space on the wall.

"It's the coffin. Something is moving the coffin."

Quinn pulled his eyes back up. She was right. It wasn't the wife moving, but the coffin that held her. It shifted side to side, very slowly at first, but then it grew more noticeable, until finally it

started to shake quite violently.

The coffin jerked forward, and the body of the woman inside flopped out, tumbling past the open door and falling head over heels onto the floor, three coffin heights below.

The body landed with a thud, and Quinn had to cover his face. The coffin came down right behind the woman, shattering as it impacted. Both Quinn and Mariko jumped back to avoid the flying debris.

"Do you know how long it took me to get that thing to break free?"

Above, where the coffin had been inside its recessed cove, there was now a large crack in the wall. Through it, Evelyne stuck her head into the room.

"I've been listening to you two lovers

make cooing sounds for far too long."

"Nice of you to let us know you were there," said Quinn, beginning to climb up past the other coffins to get to Evelyne.

"I guess this means you've found another shortcut."

"You bet," she replied. "Got free rein of the whole place."

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Jallal Tasca skulked out from an alcove, blending in with the black stone of the surrounding walls as he moved. He had followed Quinn and his two companions inside the floating black volcano when they had first arrived on horseback. None of them had seen him. None of the hideous beasts or even their master had noticed a fourth person enter the floating

fortress and hide amongst them.

He had been patient, he felt, stalking through the halls of the citadel, waiting for the right moment to strike. He had seen Quinn escape the throng of black beasts. He had followed through the corridors and passages as the king's assassin executed Xeries's pets.

He had been wrong about Quinn all this time. Watching him work as he did, there was no doubt in Jallal's mind that the man known for so long as only "the Claw" was capable of terrible, terrible things.

Jallal rather admired that quality. It was too bad Quinn had to die.

Crossing the throne room, Jallal pounced on the four beasts standing guard outside

Xeries's private chamber. His exotic blade bit through their flesh and bone with no more effort than a knife through water. It cleaved their obsidian claws from their limbs, took their heads from their shoulders, stole their souls with little more than a thought.

He stood in front of the private chamber, the corpses of the black beasts at his feet. He had tracked Quinn to this very room. Had seen Xeries disarm him and place him in custody behind that door. All he had to do now, to claim his prize, was to open it and walk through.

His skin tingled with anticipation. His mind raced with the tantalizing excitement that was to be his revenge. Gripping his blade tightly in one hand,

Jallal Tasca released the lever, and the heavy stone door swung wide.

Charging inside, he skidded to a stop in front of a smashed coffin.

His shout rattled the skin of the desiccated corpses, all but one neatly arranged in coffins on the wall.

The room was empty. Quinn was gone.

Grabbing the lip of the first coffin with his powerful hands, Jallal began climbing up the wall to the hole near the ceiling.

He would find Quinn, and when he did, he would make the man suffer. Oh yes. The Claw would beg him for death, and Jallal would oblige.

+++++

The Matron was appalled.

Arriving at Klarsamryn, she expected to find the king dead and her assassins in control. Instead, she found them fighting by his side. Did she have to do everything herself?

The beasts from the Obsidian Ridge had also picked this moment to attack the palace. But that was no concern of hers. There would be time enough to deal with them once she controlled the throne. She would negotiate with this Xeries fellow. Every man had his price, and she was certain they could come to some sort of an arrangement that would make everyone happy.

Right now, however, she was not even close to happy.

"The goddess Waukeen is not at all pleased!" she screamed, her voice piercing the air.

The battle raged in front of her. Her assassins engaged the black beasts, none paying attention to her orders or displeasure.

Pointing her finger at the closest of her minions, she cast a spell.

"Kill the king," she commanded.

The assassin turned away from the beast he was fighting and headed deeper into the fray to do her bidding.

"Kill the king," she commanded again and again, continuing to direct the energies of her prayer.

More and more of her men followed her command, until finally she had turned the

tide far enough in her favor that she no longer needed her magic to compel her assassins.

"Kill the king!" she shouted at the top of her lungs, her words bellowing over the field of battle.

The assassins responded to her orders, now aware of the Matron and her desires.

As they had once been swayed by the courageous words of their king, they were now swayed by the fear of retribution from their mistress.

"If he cannot be controlled, then he must be eliminated," said the Matron. "Korox, I will have your head on a stake before this day is out."

+

Chapter Thirty-Six

Quinn and Mariko climbed out of the chamber into a lava tube right behind the wall. Once they were all free, Evelyne started down the corridor.

"This is the way we came in," said Evelyne. "I figure it'll be the way out as well."

Mariko followed, but Quinn did not.

"You two go on," he said. "I must finish my mission."

"Your mission?" asked Evelyne. "We got your girl. What more do you want?"

"I told the king I'd take down the citadel, and I think I know how to do it."

"The huge rubies you told me about?" asked Mariko through the mimmio.

"That's right," replied Quinn. "I'm going

to destroy them and this place with it."

"We'll go with you," said Maliko.

Quinn took her by the arms and gave her a long, slow kiss. "Your father will need your help. Go to him. I'll be right behind you."

"But..."

Quinn cut her off with another long kiss.

"No time to argue. Your father is in danger, and he may think that I've betrayed him. Find him. Protect him. Then we can be together—when this is all over."

"Listen to your man, honey," said Evelyne. "We'll get to getting, and he'll do whatever it is that a man's got to do. Leave the romance part for later."

There was a screeching sound behind

them, coming from the chamber they had just left.

"Hurry now," said Quinn. "No sense in getting caught again."

Mariko nodded. Then, giving him one last kiss good-bye, she and Evelyne slipped down the hall.

Quinn watched them go, thinking that he had spent a lot of time lately doing exactly that. When she disappeared into the darkness, he turned and went the other way down the lava tube.

+++++

In the middle of the swirling melee, where men fought and died, where the future of a kingdom lay at stake, a friendship turned the tides.

"Get up, Korox."

The Warrior King, Korox Morkann of ErIkazar, sat on his knees-in the center of the battlefield. His sword lay on the ground before him. His face rested in his hands. He recognized the voice. Lord Purdun, the Baron of AhIarkhem, old friend and brother-in-law to the king, stood before him, defending Korox against the onslaught of fighters.

"I have nothing left," he said, shaking his head. "I have doomed my kingdom to save my daughter, and now I have lost everything."

"This is not the man I know." Another would-be assassin went sprawling to the ground, split across the belly by Lord Purdun's sword. "What would your father think if he saw you now? Where

would we be if he had given up when his wife, your mother, was killed?"

"He did not lose everything," said the king. "He had me, and his daughter—your wife."

"And you still have me, and your sister, and a kingdom that needs your leadership if it is going to survive."

Purdun spun to catch another assassin just under the chin, taking his jaw from his face with a single blow and sending the man reeling—no longer able to scream.

Korox took a deep breath and looked into the eyes of his old friend. "We fought hard to get here," he said, remembering the battles they had won when they both had called themselves

Crusaders.

"And we must fight hard to stay here," said the Baron of Ahlarkhem, pausing long enough to cleave the golden-haired symbol of Waukeen from the chest of an incoming assassin and add him to the pile of dead at his feet. "The tides have turned against us, and only you can turn them back."

Korox looked out at the battlefield. He did not know exactly how long he had been wallowing in self pity. However long it was, it had been too long, and things had changed.

Xeries's army had them surrounded. The assassins of Waukeen had turned back against him and his men, and most surprisingly—the Matron had arrived.

She spurred her forces onward, her veil flowing in the afternoon breeze, casting spells into the battle at her whim.

She had come here to see him removed from the throne. She had come to see him killed at the hands of her assassins.

Korox picked up his sword and hefted it toward Lord Purdun in a salute.

"You are right, my friend—my brother. I have a duty to uphold, and I owe you a debt of gratitude."

Purdun bowed his head. "I am your humble servant."

"Then you will fight by my side, one more time?"

The Baron of Ahlarkhem smiled. "One more time would be an honor. Let us hope it is not the last."

With that, the two men charged back into the fray, pushing their way past the Magistrates, Watchers, mages, and elite guards to cut into those who would threaten their home, their kingdom, and the nation they fought so hard to free from the rule of Tethyr.

+++++

The Matron had been successful in turning her assassins back to the task of killing King Korox, but it had been a poor tactical decision. Xeries's army of beasts did not take the time to distinguish between those fighting the king and those fighting with the king. The obsidian beasts mauled and ripped and macerated everything in their path.

The Matron's desire to take the throne

had trapped her minions between two foes, and now they paid the price. The assassins had been compelled to turn their attention away from the invaders to attack the king and his troops. For their efforts, they were simply chewed to pieces from behind. The beasts came at them with their mouths agape, killing a man in one bite, a half-ore in two.

Praying to the goddess Waukeen as fast as she could, the Matron tried to aid her followers. Where one took a wound, another was healed. Where one was outnumbered, he suddenly found himself with the strength of four men. But no matter how fast she countered the beasts of Xeries, she was still not fast enough. Realizing her error, the Matron called

her men back. "To me, my assassins!" she ordered. "We let the beasts fight the king and his troops, then we move in for the kill."

Casting one final spell, the Matron inscribed a magical circle on the ground—a protective ward that would make it more difficult for the black creatures to reach her and those near her.

"Give them a reason to eat the other soldiers first," she said, smiling at the cunning of her plan. "The path of least resistance leads directly to Korox and his men."

Her assassins fell back to her and the protective circle.

Some were cut down in the process, but it was no matter. The Matron only

needed enough to mop up whoever managed to survive the onslaught.

A few more than twenty of her minions made it back to her side. The black beasts lunged at them, their open mouths drooling in anticipation, but they were held back, blocked by the magic powers of the goddess Waukeen.

They jumped and clawed, growled and hissed at the invisible wall, but none of them managed to make it through. Though they were stupid creatures, they eventually tired of trying to get past the Matron's barrier. Then they turned their full attention toward the king and the rest of his men.

"This is it," said the Matron. "Our hour of victory is at hand." She straightened

her veil, eager to see King Korox Morkann fall and the throne of ErIkazar become-open for her to plunder.

+++++

On the edge of the battlefield, Quinn stopped to look for something. There was little left here, only dead grass and barren trees, the reminders of the king's disobedience.

The desolation made him smile.

Scanning farther along, past the edge of the square buildings and ruined shrubbery, he found what he wanted.

"That'll do nicely." He walked to the tall statue of a rather regal-looking woman holding a book, seemingly engrossed in its pages.

The plinth that she stood upon was

nearly the full height of a man—perfect for him to perch on and watch his black beasts punish the foolish king and his followers. Grabbing hold of the stone edge, he struggled to pull himself up.

With some effort, he managed to get to his feet to stand beside the woman and look out at the battle that raged in the courtyard. As soon as he did, the stone beneath him began to vibrate, almost like the soft undulations of the Obsidian

Ridge. The feeling was rather comforting, and it made the victory he was about to witness that much more pleasant.

A wind began to blow, ruffling the dry grass and the robes of the man on the plinth. Mores of white light and tiny

glowing orange orbs floated up from him, swirling around each other, once, twice, then shooting out in all different directions.

Quinn's body began to transform. Muscular arms, straight back, and smooth skin withered and bent, becoming a hunched, pock-marked monstrosity. Buboos and pus-filled lumps appeared. His armor and cape morphed into oddly cut wizard's robes.

The magical visage of Quinn fell away, leaving behind only a twisted and decrepit overlord.

When the transformation was complete, the wind died.

"That's very strange," said Xeries, his voice and appearance having returned to

their true forms. "I did not release that spell."

He looked up at the carved stone woman standing beside him. She seemed to be looking right back at him, her eyes fixed on a single spot.

A strange chill ran down his spine.

Shaking it off, he let out a timid snicker. "Don't be foolish Xeries," he said to himself. "It's only a statue."

Turning back to the battle at hand, he let out another laugh, this one louder. The arch magus sounded like wind chimes as he reveled in his soon-to-be victory.

+++++

The twin red wyverns on his chest had all but disappeared under a thick coat of blood and gore. King Korox stood

beside Lord Purdun. It seemed the two men were eternally fighting for the freedom of their kingdom. Perhaps that was their fare, to fight and die for what they believed in.

Pulling his blade from another downed opponent, the

Warrior King surveyed the battlefield. His men were pinned, and the Matron had found a way to turn the black beasts' attention away from her own assassins. The tide of this battle had shifted so many times that he was starting to lose count. He was tired, and so too were the men who fought at his behest.

That's when he spotted Quinn.

The man he had trusted with the life of his daughter had failed him, had

betrayed him. Now, it seemed, his one-time bodyguard was going to climb atop the memorial statue of the queen and mock Korox in his final moments.

Spheres of orange and white light shot up into the air over the statue. Korox rubbed his eyes, not sure if what he just saw had actually happened. He looked again. Quinn was hunched over, his body twisted and bent.

That wasn't Quinn at all. It was Xeries. Spinning around, Korox put his fingers to his lips and let out a short, shrill whistle. Then a second. The sound of a horse whinnying rose over the clashing melee, and the king's own black war steed, wounded as it was, appeared at the edge of the fighting. Its heavy hooves

stomped down a pair of black beasts as it galloped obediently toward its master. Grabbing the reins, Korox threw himself onto the saddle. The aches and pains, the weariness and fatigue all disappeared as his focus turned to just one thing.

"Heyaw!" he shouted, bounding away from the battle toward the statue of his lovely wife and the wretched beast who stood on it, befouling her glory.

Behind him the fate of Erlkazar was being determined. His men, his subjects—his friends—fought off the largest threat the kingdom had ever seen. But at that moment, none of that mattered, nothing else existed. Korox could see only ahead of him—could see only the man who had taken his daughter and

tormented his realm.

His sword held high in the air, he urged his loyal steed onward. He was no longer a king. He was no longer a man.

He was a devil with malice in his heart and pure hatred in his veins.

If this was to be the last thing he would do as the King of ErIkazar, then he would gladly trade in his life to do it.

Closing the distance in a matter of moments, Korox could see the look of recognition on Xeries's face. He smiled as he watched that look turn from understanding to terror. The twisted arch magus raised his arms to cast a spell.

A beam of orange energy shot from Xeries's hands, howling as it soared toward Korox. Then, just as suddenly as

it had been conjured, the beam dissipated, splashing harmlessly against the chest of the king's black steed.

"But-but that-that was-was the-the finger-finger of-of death—"

His echoed words were cut short as the Warrior King leaped from his saddle. Korox hurled himself forward, both hands on the hilt of his enchanted blade. Like a bird of prey he descended upon Xeries, screeching as he dropped from the heavens to take vengeance on the master of the Obsidian Ridge.

His feet hit first, knocking the arch magus to his back and crushing bones as the withered man absorbed the force of Korox's impact. Then the king's blade came down, slicing through flesh, pus,

and the withered black heart at the center of this ruined wizard.

Korox dropped to one knee, placing all of his weight down on top of the frail arch magus, holding Xeries to the stone plinth.

"But-but my-my spell-spell..." gurgled Xeries.

Korox's lip curled up as his hatred bubbled over like a pot left too long on a fire.

"I see you've met my wife," he said, shrugging his chin up at the statue. "She looks after me, even in death."

The Warrior King twisted his blade, and Xeries convulsed in pain, hissing through blackened teeth. Xeries tried to focus his eyes on the king through all of

his pain, but it was clear he was having a hard time. He reached up, opening his mouth to say something, perhaps cast a spell. But it was no use. His whole body trembling around Korox's blade, the tormentor of ErIkazar let out one final breath—a sound like wind chimes crashing to the ground—then he slumped back, dead at the feet of the king and queen.

+++++

Inside Xeries's private chamber, the dying gasps of nearly three dozen women echoed off the walls. Their faces bent upward in smiles of relief. Together, each of them released their hold on life, falling finally into a well-deserved rest. Had there been anyone in

the chamber to listen, they would have heard all of those final breaths used to utter the words, "Thank you."

At long last, the chamber was silent.

+++++

Chapter Thirty-seven

The black beasts stopped dead in their tracks—even those in the middle of chewing a soldier to pieces. They closed their fanged mouths. They retracted their scything claws. They stopped moving, and all of them, every single one, sat down on their haunches and hung their heads, right in the middle of the battlefield. They were like obedient dogs, all of which had seemingly been told to lie down.

Silence settled over the blood-strewn

grounds surrounding Klarsamryn. The ring of metal and cries of dying men slowly faded. It was calm in the heart of Llorbauth for a brief moment.

Then a shout went up across the line of soldiers. Hope had returned.

"Cut them down!" shouted King Korox from behind the battle. He hobbled back toward the fighting, returning from the edge of the courtyard and the now-lifeless body of Arch Magus Xeries.

Every soldier within earshot hacked down upon their stationary foes. Not a one of Xeries's beasts moved, not a muscle, as King Korox, Lord Purdun, Captain Kaden, and all their men fell upon the enemy.

The beasts that had terrorized ErIkazar

only moments before died by the dozens. They did not whimper. They did not cower. They simply waited their turn to be slaughtered.

Their blood ran in rivers across the parched earth.

The Matron could hardly believe her eyes. One moment the end was near for the ruler of ErIkazar. The next he had taken the field. His troops had not suffered as many casualties as she had predicted, and they now outnumbered her assassins more than twenty to one.

"Assassins of Waukeen!" shouted King Korox, as his men surrounded them. "Your treachery here today will not go unpunished. Throw down your weapons, and you will be tried justly. If you resist,

you will be killed."

The Matron's face burned with anger and frustration. "Do not listen to him! The throne is ours! Take the king! Take Llorbauth by force!"

+++++

Quinn stared up at the three huge floating gemstones. A line had been chiseled into the ground, connecting the base of each to the others. The space in between the rubies described a triangle, large enough to fit nearly fifty men, if they were standing shoulder to shoulder.

Coming a little closer, Quinn reached out to touch the nearest stone. A narrow thread of magical energy lifted away from the ruby and connected with his hand. When it touched him, he could feel

every hair on his body stand on end. It was like being too close to a bolt of lightning, yet at the same time, the power coursing through his body was somehow invigorating.

He placed his entire palm on the humming ruby. A hundred other strands of magic reached out to him, creating a thin barrier of energy between his skin and the surface of the stone. As he pulled his hand away, the narrow threads stretched and combined, reaching across the distance to keep contact with his skin. The farther away he got, the fewer, thicker strands connected him to the ruby, until finally he broke the connection and the energy receded back into the floating stone.

Stepping inside the inscribed triangle, he made a connection with the first ruby then reached out his other hand to the second of the three stones. Another stream of energy lifted off its surface and attached itself to his hand.

This time though, as soon as it touched him, his feet were lifted from the ground, and he began to float in the air. He wobbled a bit, his balance a little shaky, as he was sucked in deeper toward the center of the triangle. The third ruby reached out to him as well, lifting him higher into the air as it added its energy to that of the other two. More and more of the magical threads touched his skin, like hands holding him aloft.

It was an extraordinary experience—

hanging in midair, suspended between the humming rubies, weightless and free to move as he pleased. By lifting his hands over his head, he could rise toward the ceiling. By lowering them to his sides, he would drop back toward the floor. A shift to his right or left would move him around the triangle.

The closer he was to the center, the more control he had. At the edges, he would lose the connection to one of the rubies, and he'd drop a few feet. If he lost the connection to more than one, then he'd fall back to the floor altogether.

His feet touched the ground, and he stepped out of the triangle. Being inside was rather exhilarating, but it was also quite tiring. His heart was beating very

quickly, and he sat down, a rest to catch his breath.

"I think this belongs to you."

Quinn spun to see a man watching him from the other side of the triangle. His face was warped and cast in an orange glow from the humming rubies and their magic. In one hand he held Quinn's bladed gauntlet.

It took him a moment, but Quinn eventually recognized him. "Jallal."

"Put this on," Jallal demanded. "Perhaps it'll prolong your inevitable death. I'll enjoy it more that way."

He threw the weapon at Quinn, tossing it into the triangle.

Tiny threads of energy shot from the gemstones. The magical strands

wrapped themselves around the blades, slowing the gauntlet and lifting it high in the air. Reaching the ceiling, it came to a stop, suspended between the rubies at the highest point in the room.

Taking two large steps, Quinn leaped into the triangle, his arms held high over his head. He could feel the gemstones' magic take hold of him and shoot him into the sky. As he reached the ceiling and his weapon, he kicked his legs out and spun his body around in a somersault. Grabbing his gauntlet as he passed, he flipped over, landing feet first on the ceiling.

Standing upside down, he strapped the gauntlet to his wrist and motioned at Jallal. "I don't know how you got here,"

he said. "But if you want a fight, then I'm happy to oblige. Come and get me." "•

Jallal stated up through the orange light, a look of confusion on his face. Then his eyes narrowed, and he stepped across the inscribed line on the floor. The moment he made contact with two of the rubies, he was lifted into the air. He hovered not far off the ground, his arms and legs flailing while he got used to the weightlessness.

Quinn didn't wait for him to find his balance. Diving down on Jallal, he slashed the man across the back of his neck, tumbled over, touched the floor with his feet, then shot back up to the ceiling.

Drops of blood glistened bright red in

the strange light of the rubies. They fell from the fresh wounds but did not hit the floor. Instead, they remained floating in midair. Tiny threads of magic reached out to each one.

Jallal growled at the pain of four keen-edged blades ripping his flesh. "I suppose I owe you my thanks. If you hadn't killed me that night in the slaughterhouse, I never would have been given the gifts I have now." He straightened, admiring his powerful limbs. Then he turned his glowering gaze up at Quinn. "But you owe me for killing my brother. And I have come to collect on that debt."

Lifting his arms as he had seen Quinn do, Jallal rose through the air, aided by the

magic of the rubies. He brought his wicked-looking sword to beat, holding it out and turning himself into a human javelin as he flew toward the ceiling.

"You and your brother were plotting to kill the king," said Quinn. "You kidnapped the princess. Both of you deserved to die."

Quinn watched the man come, waiting for the right moment. When Jallal was almost upon him, he dodged hard to his left, losing his connection with one of the rubies and falling quickly to a spot just a few feet off the floor. Jallal's outstretched blade missed Quinn by several feet, clanging loudly as it bit into the black stone of the ceiling, sending chips of obsidian showering toward the

floor only to be caught up by the magic of the gemstones and suspended in midair.

Now it was Quinn's turn. Shifting deeper into the center of the triangle, he flew toward the ceiling and grabbed hold of Jallal's feet. Burying the blades of his gauntlet into the man's calf just above the hoof, Quinn yanked him sideways and then let go, tossing him out of the triangle.

One by one the threads of energy slipped away from Jallal, until he wasn't even connected to a single ruby. From high up in the air, he plummeted to the floor, no longer suspended by the humming, levitating magic of the floating gemstones. With a heavy thud, his body

slammed to the ground; his head landing last, making a sound like a ripe melon falling from a farmer's cart. His sword impacted tip first, burying itself in the stone floor beside him.

"Your brother is dead," said Quinn. "The princess is free, and the Elixir trade in Erbkazar is over." The magic coursing through his skin filled him with confidence and energy. "You shall never beat me. I've won." He did a back flip, thrilled by the heightened sense of victory and power he now felt.

Far below, Jallal stirred. He was slow to move, holding his head in his hands. After a short while, he sat up and glared at Quinn. Then he moved to his knees. The fall was not a short one. Most men

would have been killed by such an impact, their internal organs simply shattered from crashing into the ground. Jallal was not most men, but even his demon-enhanced body was severely damaged by such a drop.

His sword, still vibrating from the fall, served as a cane, and Jallal lifted himself up off the floor with its aid. He coughed, spitting something into his hand. Then he pulled on the hilt, groaning from the exertion.

The blade slipped free of the floor and lifted easily into the air. The strange sword seemed a natural extension of Jallal's hands, balanced just right, no strain or fumbling. It just simply moved where he wanted it when he wanted it.

Taking several steps back from the triangle, he held the blade waist high behind him, parallel to the floor as if it were his tail.

He hobbled as he walked, clearly staggered from the fall. Then he stopped, closed his eyes, and took a warrior's stance—poised to fly into battle.

"We shall see how confident you are when you no longer have your little toys," Jallal said.

Opening his eyes, he took a deep breath and charged across the room. He ran on the tips of his hooves, the wounds from his fall not slowing him. His horns cast a heavy shadow on his head, and his sword glistened orange and red as it cut through the charged air.

Then it impacted the first ruby, shattering it to dust with a single blow.

A huge bang echoed through the chamber and bolts of energy shot out in every direction. Light filled the room, revealing the cracks and crevices on every wall. The threads hissed and popped, reaching out to every imperfection in the obsidian and trying to grab hold.

On the floor, Jallal's charge carried on. Tiny threads of magic mauled his shoulders, arms, and legs. The energy releasing from the ruby exploded from the ruined gemstone, coveting his whole body in a dance of light. It stretched out behind him as he ran several more steps, long curving strands of magic trailing to

catch up.

His blade impacted the second ruby and bit deep, nearly cutting it in half. The top section of the gemstone teetered for a moment, then it toppled over, a million tiny cracks shooting out across its surface. By the time it hit the floor, the one single ruby had become countless smaller ones, and they rained down on the obsidian, bouncing and humming a melodic tune as they trickled to a rest.

Hovering near the top of the triangle, Quinn dropped from the air, his weight no longer suspended by the magic of the rubies. Threads of energy popped and squirmed all around him, touching his skin then dissipating into the air. He felt his stomach lurch as he plummeted, then

his feet hit the ground, and he jumped, trying to tumble away from the falling pile of shattered gemstones.

Quinn spun twice then landed hard on his side, sliding across the slick floor and coming to a stop when he collided with the wall of the chamber. His back and hands were cut to shreds on the sharp edges of the ruined ruby scattered all over the floor. And his ribs ached from the impact with the wall.

The first ruby, no longer attached to the other two, sputtered and shook. It wobbled in time with its low, vibrating hum. The tip and base moved in opposite directions, spinning in ever-widening circles.

Quinn rolled onto his back, dazed from

the fall. He opened his eyes to see Jallal looming over him.

"Never beat you, eh, bodyguard?" Jallal was breathing quite hard, but a smile crossed his parched lips. The gums in between his teeth were bright red from the blood he had coughed up.

He lifted his sword up over his head, in preparation of a killing blow. "Any last words?"

Quinn's eyes grew wide, then he pulled his arms over his face. "Behind you!"

The final ruby had turned itself completely sideways. The

oval-shaped gemstone swung quickly end to end, looking like a massive floating disk. Orange light flashed off the facets of the ruby, and it hurled itself

from its perch.

A heavy warbling sound filled the chamber, and Jallal spun around just as the gemstone hit him. The sharp, spinning man-sized ruby connected with his belly and carried on through. Jallal was cut into tiny little pieces as if he'd been hit repeatedly by a swinging guillotine. Chunks of flesh and tattered bits of bone were flung everywhere as the ruby impacted the wall, taking out a huge chunk of obsidian, and bounced back into the middle of the room.

Shards of stone and bits of ruined flesh covered Quinn, but that was the least of his worries. As soon as the last ruby landed on the ground, the entire Obsidian Ridge lurched downward.

Quinn was once again lifted into the air as the citadel fell out from under him.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Korox slapped aside an assassin with the flat of his blade and pressed in. He'd had enough killing for one day, and didn't want to strike down any more of his countrymen if it could be helped.

Breaking bones and bloodying noses, however, was still within bounds.

With the pommel of his sword, he struck a half-ore between the neck and the shoulder, dropping him to his knees. With the palm of his other hand he smashed a half-elf in the jaw. The bone made a satisfying crunch as the assassin stumbled back, his face in his hands.

From across the battlefield, Korox had

seen the Matron cast the magic circle that held out Xeries's beasts. He had watched the obsidian creatures turn away from her and come after his men, and he had wondered if her spell would keep him at bay as well. But whatever enchantment she had prayed for, it apparently didn't work against kings or the warriors of Erlkazar.

Seeing his target ahead, Korox grabbed another assassin by the back of his head and threw him aside like a child's toy. His men had surrounded and taken most of the other assassins as he stepped up beside the Matron and grabbed her by the throat.

"You are going to answer for this treachery," he said, holding her in his

powerful grip.

She took hold of his hand, but didn't struggle. Her touch felt somehow warm and familiar. She looked up at him, and he down on her, staring deep into her eyes. He recognized those eyes.

Pulling the veil from her face, he felt the sting of betrayal once more. "Divian."

"Yes, Korox." The senator scowled at him, her eyes narrowing.

"It was you." The king put the pieces together. He thought back on the mysterious attack only a few nights before. Vasser had saved his life from an unseen assailant. "You were the one who tried to kill me in my own chambers. I thought you had been

attacked, but it was you. You simply missed."

She gripped his hand in both of hers, but she did not try to pry herself free. It would have been a useless attempt even if she had. His long fingers wrapped almost completely around her neck.

Korox shook his head, confused. "Why? Why you, Divian? Why would you do this?"

"Because you are unpredictable and cowardly, Korox. You had to stick your nose into our business. You had to form the Magistrates and start an Elixir war." Her eyes burned into him. "Did you think I just wanted to be near you? That I enjoyed your company?" She shook her head. "No, Korox. You had to be

controlled and contained. And you played along so well. Pity it didn't last." Korox did not loosen his grip. "What sort of magic spells give you access to my trust? What did you do to me?"

"No magic," said Divian. "Just a well-placed disease and a favor from a friend. A man grieving over the loss of his wife can be very easy to manipulate."

Korox was struck numb, his hands trembling from the realization. "You sent the queen into that tomb to die. You... you knew. You had this planned."

"You should not have meddled, Korox. If you had just had the good sense to mind your own business—"

A huge explosion interrupted the Matron.

It knocked the king off balance, making him stutter-step to stay on his feet. His hand slipped, but he grabbed the front of Divian's robe to make sure she stayed put.

The blast pushed back the other soldiers, some falling over, others covering their heads. The dead leaves and grass rattled as if caught in a heavy wind.

"We've won!" shouted a soldier, pointing at the docks.

Over Shalane Lake, the Obsidian Ridge had blown its top. A plume of smoke rose from a newly formed crater. Massive blocks of black stone rained down on the docks and the crystal blue water. Orange light spilled from inside, clearly marking the cracks and holes in

the outer surface.

The entire thing lurched sideways, drawing gasps from assassins and soldiers alike. Then it dropped from the sky, crashing into the lake. The resulting splash sent a ring-shaped wave out in every direction. Air rushed from all the openings in the citadel, hissing and spitting out detritus, as the orange light was extinguished.

"Mariko!" The king watched the Obsidian Ridge as it sank beneath the roiling surface of the water.

When he turned back, Divian had disappeared, leaving only her robe in his hand.

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It had taken them some time, but Mariko

and Evelyne had found their way to an open archway at the edge of the Obsidian Ridge. They looked down at the clear blue waters of Shalane Lake.

"That's a long way down," said Evelyne.

"You know how to swim?"

Mariko nodded. "Yes." It was the first thing she'd been able to say without the aid of the mimmio.

Evelyne smiled. "Well then, what are we waiting for?"

Let's get wet." Grabbing hold of her nose, she leaped from the black stone ledge.

Evelyne grew very small as she plummeted to the water. Then she disappeared in a tiny little splash, far, far below.

Mariko waited until she saw Evelyne pop to the surface. Petting the mimmio on the head, she put it down and watched it scamper away down the passage. When it disappeared from sight, she stepped to the edge.

The next thing she knew, she was falling—not toward the water, but through the hallway inside the Obsidian Ridge. A huge, rumbling explosion rocked the citadel, and the ground dropped away. Mariko tumbled backward. Above her she could see the sunlight coming through the opening where she had been standing. She could see the clouds and the bright blue sky. —

Then the citadel spun sideways, and she collided with the wall of the corridor,

then the ceiling, then the second wall. The view through the open portal changed from open sky to cleat blue water, and then the Obsidian Ridge clashed into Shalane Lake.

Mariko was hurled back down the corridor toward the opening. She hit the oncoming gush of lake water rushing in from the opposite direction. One moment she was flying through the air, the next she was submerged, being dragged deeper into the Obsidian Ridge by a wild current.

Slamming through corridors, Mariko nearly lost consciousness. With no air and no way to see, she was along for the tide, helplessly at the mercy of the rushing wave of water quickly filling the

citadel. In those last moments, as she felt the need for air press against her chest and the panic of being carried off to die somewhere in the depths of this strange, awful place, her mind raced, looping over and over again on the same thought —

I must save Quinn.

Mariko closed her eyes, trying to calm herself and accept that she was not in control. She envisioned herself standing in the courtyard outside the palace, holding Quinn by the hand. She could see the cherry blossoms and the sun shining above her and—

Mariko landed hard on her back, shot from the passageway into a much larger chamber, one that had yet to fill

completely with water but was quickly flooding. Scrambling to her knees she took in great gulps of air, gasping for her life. Looking up, she realized where she was. The current had carried her back to the very center of the citadel—to Xeries's throne room.

As she caught her breath, the water rose over her elbows. Getting to her feet, she slogged toward the dais, but the room lurched again. The entire chamber tipped sideways. Mariko slipped off her feet and was thrown forward.

Reaching out as she fell, the princess grabbed the back of the throne. Rushing water ran over her, dumping in from the passage that was now above her. It pounded her head, hands, and shoulders.

She tried to duck behind the dais and the throne, using them to shield her from the rush, but the citadel was shaking violently.

Struggling to keep her head above water, she shouted out the words to a spell as quickly as she could. Her fingers were growing weak, and she was losing her grip on the throne. Below her, the room was nearly full of water. It wouldn't be long before she was submerged once more.

She felt her fingers slip, and she fell back, her feet, legs, and waist dropping below the surface. Throwing her arms out to her side, she slapped at the water, kicking and pressing just long enough to get out the final syllable of her

incantation.

Then the roiling current sucked her below the surface.

Tumbling, Mariko let herself be carried away. She tucked her body into a ball, covering her head with her arms as she drifted to the bottom of the filling chamber. The current shoved her down and down, until she was once again slammed up against the obsidian walls.

The water at the bottom, though still moving, was much calmer, and Mariko allowed herself to unfurl. Everything around her was thick and wavy, blurred by gallons and gallons of water. She could see the surface, shiny and silver, high above, and she could see the movement of the water as it poured in

from the passage beyond. She took a breath.

It was an odd feeling, not at all natural, and she had to force herself. The cold liquid poured into her lungs. The first one made her cough and gag. Her throat scratched, and her chest felt heavy.

Though her magic had given her the ability to breathe the water, it required a lot more effort than air—a lot more effort than she remembered. It took some getting used to, but she didn't have the time to let herself adjust. Quinn was likely drowning at this very moment, and she had to get to him. "

Pushing off from the wall, Mariko swam toward the corner of the chamber and the passage Quinn had described to her. She

could only hope he would still be there, still be alive when she arrived.

Finding the crack in the floor exactly where it was supposed to be, she plunged in head first, descending through the dark stone into the unknown. It was a long way down, longer she imagined now that the passage was flooded with water.

The darkness went on and on, until finally it was broken by a weak, orange light. Pulling herself out of the crack into a much larger room, Mariko crawled through the water. She dived toward the light, and the oblong-shaped object it emanated from. Squinting, she tried to see through some of the blur.

Everything in the room was piled into

the corner, where the floor met the wall. Coming to rest on top of what now looked to be a giant ruby, Mariko started to dig through the rubble. This was where Quinn said he would be, so this was where she was going to search.

She hadn't gotten more than two stones removed when a heavy thump and crack shot through the room. Mariko could feel the shockwave shake her body as the citadel tipped over again. The pile of broken stones shifted, and Mariko was forced to dodge between the pieces of obsidian and the huge ruby now falling toward her through the water.

They came slowly at first, but as the Obsidian Ridge shifted farther, they all came free, sliding down in a hail right

for Mariko. She dodged as fast as she could, but the water made her movements sluggish, and she couldn't get out of the way. The stones swept her up in their massive wave, carrying her along until they settled on the other side of the chamber.

Debris covered Mariko entirely. The pile had simply turned over on itself as the empty volcano had settled to the bottom of Shalane Lake. Fortunately, the larger, heavier pieces of obsidian had simply slid along the wall. The smaller pieces that had washed over her had been cushioned by the water. The princess had been covered but not crushed by the slide.

Pushing her way out of the stones, her

hand brushed against something soft. It was odd, out of place, and clearly not the jagged edge of another obsidian chip. Grabbing hold of it, she pulled it out of the pile.

A bright, white light hit her in the face, and her heart raced. What she'd touched was a hand—one with her personal rune inscribed in light right on its palm.

She'd found him.

His eyes were closed, and his mouth was open, but he didn't move. Digging as fast as she could, she uncovered Quinn's limp frame. As he came free, he flopped over into her arms.

Grabbing the back of his head, she pressed her lips to his, willing the magic of her spell into his body. Her kiss

lasted a long time, and she held him tight to her chest, all the while hoping beyond hope that she had reached him in time, afraid that if she opened her eyes or let him go the magic would fail, and he would be lost forever.

But Quinn did not move. He did not spring to life and wrap her in a tight embrace. He lay still, limp and cold in her arms.

Finally, Mariko let him go, setting his head back on the ruined stone. She touched his cheek. They'd only spent a few stolen moments together, but he had gone to the edge of the world to save her. If she could, she would do the very same thing for him now.

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Rising from the water, Princess Mariko pulled Quinn's lifeless body up onto the rocky shore and slumped down beside him. Laying back, she looked up at the blue sky, now devoid of the ominous black shadow from the Obsidian Ridge.

"I wish you could see it," she said, taking hold of his hand. "I don't think we ever saw the daylight together."

Mariko felt a heaviness settle over her. Tears formed in the corners of her eyes as she looked at his slumped, silent body. Despite her best efforts, he was gone. They never had a chance.

Suddenly, Quinn sat straight up, spitting out water and gasping for air.

"Quinn!" Mariko's heart nearly leaped out of her chest.

He rolled over onto his side, emptying his lungs and stomach of liquid. "Yes, I heard you," he said between gagging fits. "It's quite lovely. The sky."

"You're alive!" shouted the princess.

After his heaving stopped, Quinn nodded. "Yes." Struggling to get to his feet, he grabbed Mariko by the shoulder for balance. "Let's go make sure everyone else is too."

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Epilogue

Spring returned to ErIkazar.

Xeries's death had brought with it the end of his spell. The dried grasses and dead flowers awakened from their slumber. Within days of the Obsidian Ridge crashing from the sky, the

Llorbauth valley was back in full bloom. Quinn and Mariko stood in the middle of the easternmost courtyard, hand in hand, under a cherry blossom tree, finally able to give each other the public kiss they had been longing for. Captain Kaden and Evelyne looked on, and King Korox stood beside them, smiling. It had been the first time he had been happy in a long, long time.

More than five hundred people attended the wedding, and they applauded now, whistling and cheering for the newest couple of Erlkazar.

A group of bards played enchanted music as the king, his daughter, and his new son walked down from the altar to a long table set up with food and drink at

the other end of the courtyard.

"Korox! Korox! I must have a word with you."

The king's moment of happiness was quickly ended by Lady Herrin and her bodyguards.

Sidling up, a plate of food in her hand, she jawed at the king between bites.

"Who is going to pay for all of this destruction?" she said, her words made less comprehensible by the piles of chewed meat in her mouth. "The marketplace was completely ruined by showers of obsidian. Who is going to pay for all of my ruined goods?"

"Lady Herrin," said King Korox, "so good of you to come to the wedding." He shook her greasy hand. "I think you know

my new son, Quinn."

Heating his name, Quinn turned away from his new wife, to see the king giving him a rather forced smile.

"Yes, of course I know your bodyguard," said Lady Herrin. "Why you would let such a man marry your daughter—"

The king's smile turned genuine as he interrupted her. "Oh, Quinn is no longer my bodyguard. He's now my minister of trade. You will be dealing with him directly if you have any concerns you wish to bring to the court." He pointed to the plate of food Lady Herrin had gripped in her hands. "Please enjoy yourself. If you will excuse me, I have a small matter that I must attend to."

Stepping away from the annoying old

merchant, the king slipped out of the courtyard and away from the mingling crowd. In a quiet, concealed corner, behind a large hedge and away from prying eyes, he rendezvoused with the man who would take Quinn's place as his personal assassin.

"Have you found her?" he asked.

The man stepped out of the shadows, tugging on the tips of his moustache, his wide-brimmed hat at his side.

"Not yet, my lord," replied Vasser. "But I will."

The king nodded. "Good. Find her and kill her. Those are my orders."

Vasser bowed with a practiced flair. "As you wish, my lord."