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T.H. Lain

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Why in all the planes would this thing come to kill him? He'd made it a point, as his father always advised, to steer clear of wizards, gnomes, and other dangerous types.

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... though he wasn't the only one.

By T.H. Lain

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The DEATH RAY

T.H. Lain



DEATH RAY

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For Gary Gygax & Dave Arneson, with thanks for all this.

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Prologue ... He closed his eyes just before his chin hit the cold marble floor, smashing his teeth together and cracking at least one tooth. His hands, numb at the ends of shaking, flailing arms followed soon after, though he'd meant for them to hit the floor first and save the teeth. Thick, hot, coppery blood covered his tongue. When he opened his mouth to draw a deep breath into protesting lungs, he coughed, sending a spray of blood and chips of teeth fanning across the floor in front of him.

"Get up," he grunted to himself, trying to ignore the terrified quaver in his voice. "For Fharlanghn's sake, get up and run!"

He got to his feet, stumbled once, then ran. His knees shook so badly he could make barely half the speed he knew he was capable of, and the rhythmic shudder of the floor didn't help. His racing, terrified mind went back and forth between the urge to run faster and the need to sacrifice some speed in order not to fall again.

The floor shuddered again, and a dull boom rippled through the high-ceilinged hall. The memory of a brief glimpse of the behemoth chasing him was all he needed to make his legs finally move faster. The air tossed his long, clean hair behind him as he ran, moving alternately through shadow, candlelight, shadow, and candlelight as he passed the gilded sconces set along the walls.

He coughed again. Blood dribbled from his chin and onto his expensive, silk tunic. The rapier tapping against his left leg as he ran was more a piece of jewelry than a weapon, and he had no illusions about either its strength or his own swordsmanship. The thing chasing him would surely snap the fine blade like a dried twig.

He passed the huge, double doors that closed off his parents' private suite and kept running. He knew no one would be there. The house was empty, save for a skeleton staff of servants and maybe half a dozen guards who he was sure were already dead. The family was gone to the country for the warm summer months, when the smells of the Trade Quarter grew strong enough to fight the prevailing winds and descend upon the collection of fine manor homes on the Duke's Island.

Though he remembered insisting that he stay behind, as he ran through the grave-quiet corridors, the heavy air disturbed only by those thunderous footsteps, he couldn't recall why. There was a girl or two in the winding alleys of the Merchant's Quarter, to be sure but he couldn't have been willing to sacrifice himself for any of them.

Of course, he'd had no idea an enormous, heavy-footed monster would come to kill him. "It can't be me," he whispered, streaks of blood punctuating each word, splashing back up into his face to trickle through his neatly trimmed goatee.

Why in all the planes would this thing come to kill him? He'd made it a point, as his father always advised, to steer clear of wizards, gnomes, and other dangerous types. He kept his dalliances discreet and was careful to avoid women with jealous husbands or protective brothers. As he ran through the tall-ceilinged maze of his family's city house, he couldn't think of anything he'd ever seen like the horror that was chasing him, and there was no reason for it, though ...

... though he wasn't the only one.

"Gods," he breathed as the thought came to him.

There was a door hanging ajar and he slid to a stop in front of it—overshot it actually but he stumbled back to slip into the chamber beyond. It was his father's library.

As he crossed the wide room at a run, he recalled the news of the past few weeks. Your

men, men he'd known his whole life, from important families, had been found dead. There were as many "official" causes of death as there were rumors. His family had left before the first of them was killed. They didn't know—none of them knew—that there would be any danger. Could the other young men have been chased down and murdered by this thing? To what purpose?

He came to the foot of a wrought iron staircase and tripped again as he stumbled up the first few steps. Catching himself, he ignored the bruising shock to his forearms and scurried up the stairs, cringing at every step as his boots clanged on the delicate latticework.

His father's library was four stories tall, a huge gallery easily seventy feet in height. The stained glass ceiling looked dull under the midnight sky but in the daylight it was the envy of the finest families in New Koratia. Imposing bookcases lined all four walls with galleries circling each level. There was only one way into the room—the way he'd come—and only one way up. The wrought iron staircases matched the railings that circled the galleries. He used the railings to pull himself along, grasping for an opportunity to put distance between himself and those horrid, stomping footsteps.

He would be trapping himself in the upper reaches of the gallery, he knew, but it was the only place he could think of to hide. The thing chasing him would be too heavy to climb the stairs and too big to fit between the tight rows of heavy bookcases made even heavier by the thousands of books jammed onto them. If he could get high enough up and deep enough into the library, he could hide long enough to think of something—perhaps long enough for help to arrive or for the thing to tire and go away.

The booming sounds came more quickly, almost on top of one another, and increasing in loud. It was moving faster and getting closer.

More from panic than from any sort of plan, he made for the fourth, uppermost gallery. There, the room widened again, and the bookcases were arranged in rows barely two feet wide. The bookcases themselves were solidly made of the sturdiest hardwood. Packed as they were with books, scrolls, and manuscripts of every description and in myriad languages, they were as heavy as brick walls.

He reached the second set of stairs and was certain that the booming footsteps had come around the corner of the corridor outside. At that rate his pursuer would be at the door before he stepped onto the third flight of steps.

"Get there!" he urged himself, more loudly than he'd intended.

The tingling in his mouth had become a throbbing ache, broken only by razor stabs of pain as his heavy breathing pulled cool air over broken teeth. He tried not to imagine how much worse the pain would be when the thing finally had him, when the injuries were worse than a blow to the jaw. The thing was big enough to crush him and likely strong enough to tear his limb from limb.

That thought was, thankfully, interrupted by the realization that the footsteps had passed the door.

He didn't stop, barely even slowed, even as that potentially life-saving fact dawned on him. He reached the third flight of stairs with a smile, laughed halfway up, but then his blood ran cold. The footsteps behind had stopped. The tower was quiet—easily quiet enough to hear someone running up a flight of wrought iron stairs, laughing.

There was a boom, then another—louder, closer—and it was at the door.

He made it to the uppermost gallery and dodged behind a huge bookcase that soared eight feet over his head. From below came the sound of the library door being ripped from its hinges, then the first booming footstep echoed in the confines of the library itself.

He turned a corner, already lost in the maze of bookcases. The floor beneath his feet trembled through a rapid series of footsteps. His shoulder clipped the edge of a wood-bound manuscript that protruded from a low shelf, and he grunted as he spun to a flailing, bruising stop on the hard floor.

He managed not to hit his head but he thought he had when his teeth and eyes and tongue vibrated in his skull. It wasn't the fall that made the deafening, skull-shaking sound. Something huge, something as heavy as a caravan cart, had hit the floor.

The sound came again, then again, then again, and as he stood, hoping to run deeper into the maze of shelves, the bookcase to his left was peeled off the floor and thrown into the air.

He screamed but the sound was swallowed up by the crash of the bookcase shattering on the floor atop four others. Looking up into the eyes of the behemoth, he had just enough time to whisper a prayer before he died.



Regdar felt like a new man. Out of his heavy armor for what seemed like the first time in years, he even felt lighter. He'd been to a barber in the morning so his hair was neat and trimmed, his face cleanly shaven, and he'd had a bath. Pressed for time, he'd stopped short of a leeching. He had something to pick up at the shop of a master bowyer.

Naull had picked out the gray tunic of light wool that he wore and the matching breeches. Though far from fancy, the outfit was new, clean, and quickly tailored to fit his bulging physique. The shoes bothered him, though. They were also chosen by the pretty young mage who had become his constant companion in the weeks since they returned to the city from the frontier keep. The shoes were too low and too soft. They were city shoes, more appropriate for polished marble floors than his old boots. In that respect they were probably a good choice but they still made Regdar nervous.

He walked briskly, and alone, down the entrance hall of the duke's palace. Regdar felt like he was walking down the middle of a deep canyon. The walls soared so high over his head that he was only dimly aware of being inside at all. The intricately decorated flying buttresses seemed altogether too tall to have been made by humans, though indeed they were. The light seemed to radiate from the air itself—not too bright, not too dim. Even Regdar recognized that particular touch as decidedly magical.

At the end of the hall he came to a set of double doors that surely could have accommodated the shoulder width and headroom of a storm giant. In front of the door were two guards dressed in ceremonial armor, their azure tabards embroidered with gold thread and the house arms of the Duke of Koratia. The spindly dragon design was as familiar to Regdar as his own face. The same device was painted on his shield, though his dragon was red against gold—the field colors of the Comitatus. Each of the guards held a wickedly-bladed halberd. The polearms and their armor all but vibrated with magic. Regdar let slip an impressed smile. Those guards were hardly to be trifled with, however frilly their dress.

The big fighter was also aware of several other sets of eyes on him, though he couldn't be certain of their exact hiding places. To be sure, more than two men guarded the door to the duke's palace, and Regdar suspected it would require ten times that many simply to pull open the mighty doors.

When he approached within half a dozen steps of the guards, one of them said, "State your name and your business before the Duke of Koratia."

The man's deep voice didn't echo in the huge hall. It seemed to drift over Regdar with an air of perfect, calm authority.

"I am Regdar," he answered, "late of the Third New Koratia Comitatus, Red Dragon Regiment, here at the request of His Highness the Duke."

By the look on the guard's face it was obvious to Regdar that the man knew exactly who Regdar was and why he was there. Without answering, the guard stepped to the side, as did

his companion. The doors swung slowly inward. Neither of the guards had touched them, and the great golden hinges made no sound. When they'd opened more than enough to allow Regdar to pass, the guards bowed slightly and Regdar stepped through.

The entrance hall had been impressive but the chamber within was awe-inspiring. The ceiling soared to an impossible height, and everywhere were frescoes and gilding and bas-relief. Regdar thought it would take months, perhaps years, for him to study every work of art for more than a few seconds. The floor was the same polished marble as the columns and buttresses, and ceiling. The masonry was so fine that if Regdar hadn't believed it impossible, he might have thought the entire room was cut from a single slab of stone covering an acre of land.

Regdar saw the duke, surrounded as usual by a small crowd of palace advisors and bodyguards. The duke noticed Regdar, too, but continued speaking with his retainers, not watching as Regdar closed the imposing distance between them. The big fighter stopped a few yards short of the assembly and stood, strictly out of habit, at attention.

The duke finally turned his piercing green eyes on Regdar and smiled.

"You may stand at ease, footman," the duke joked.

Regdar felt his face flush and he took some uncomfortable effort in trying to be casual. Noting his discomfort, the duke stepped up to Regdar and clapped a hand on his shoulder.

"Regdar," he said, "old friend. Have you been enjoying the city?"

"Yes, Your Highness," Regdar replied.

"And still I can't bother you with staying at the palace?"

"No," Regdar said, too quickly. He winced, cleared his throat, and added, "Respectfully, Your Highness, no, thank you, but the inn you recommended is already more than I require. I have simple needs."

The duke gave Regdar a devilish, teasing wink and clapped his shoulder again.

"A thousand pardons, Your Highness," a lithe elf said, stepping out of the crowd of faceless advisors. He held a slate and a delicate stylus. Glowing runes on the slate gave the elf's face a pale blue cast. "The appropriations, Your Highness?"

"Will have to wait, Minister Nyslorvijiik," the duke replied, not bothering to look at the elf. Instead, he pressed gently but firmly against Regdar's shoulder, leading him away from the ministers.

"But—" the elf started.

The duke stopped, turned to the elf, and leveled a cool, silent gaze at him. Minister Nyslorvijiik went a bit pale—more embarrassed than afraid—and he sketched a quick bow.

"As you wish, My Duke," he said, taking two steps backward.

Duke Christo Ramas was as tall as Regdar, and though a good thirty years the fighter's senior, he was still a strong, solidly built man. A full head of wavy, white hair and an equally colorless beard framed his time- and stress-worn face. His hands, rough and scarred, were a warrior's hands. The ring finger of his left hand was missing. Regdar had heard more different stories of how the duke sustained that injury than even the most talented bard would have been able to recall. His dress was as simple as Regdar's, though azure where the fighter's was gray.

The duke led Regdar a few steps farther into the room, and the fighter could hear the others backing away as well, giving them more room.

"I am glad to see you, my young friend," the duke said. His voice was quite conversational, but still commanding.

"You flatter me, Your Highness," Regdar replied.

The duke chuckled and said, "I will admit to anyone who will listen that I was more alive and more a leader, against the janni than I've ever felt here. It is an honor to lead this duchy, to be certain, but the true honor lies in the command of men such as yourself."

"I am a soldier," Regdar said. "I serve."

"Yes," the duke said, his voice and manner growing even lighter, perhaps wistful. "You serve. You serve indeed, and are a soldier forged of the finest steel, my friend, but you could be more."

"More, Highness?"

The duke stepped closer—uncomfortably close—and held Regdar's eyes with his own.

"A man," the duke said, "the right man, could rise as high as ..."

With a sigh the duke looked away, then down at the floor, as embarrassed as the interrupting minister had been. Regdar felt his face flush again and he, too, looked away.

"I get ahead of myself," the duke said, "again."

A series of staccato clicks sounded on the marble floor and Regdar's eyes were drawn to their source. The duke also looked up to see a beautiful, young woman approaching with long tendrils of silk wafting behind her in a delicate wake. She was wrapped in silk that clung to her slim curves in an almost uncomfortably alluring way. Walking straight and tall, she slipped across the floor in elaborately braided sandals that, from the sound they made, were surely fitted with taps. Her hair was the color of hay and even the gruff fighter knew its gentle curls had been painstakingly arranged to fall just so over one delicately arching eyebrow. Certainly still in her teens, the girl's face betrayed a singular self-confidence beyond her years. Her crystal green eyes were of a set with the duke's. In a way Regdar felt as if he was looking at a smaller, younger, softer version of Christo Ramas.

"Ah," the duke said, breaking the silence, "Maelani."

The girl smiled and fluttered to a stop before the two men.

"Father," she said, dipping into a shallow curtsy.

"Regdar," the duke said, touching the fighter on the arm, "late of the Third New Korat Comitatus, and a good friend."

The girl smiled, showing straight teeth of almost blinding white, and said, "Regdar...."

"My daughter," the duke continued, "the Lady Maelani."

Regdar bowed, feeling a bit on display under the girl's embarrassingly precise gaze.

"My lady," he said.

"My father has told me a great deal about you, Regdar," Maelani said. "Your efforts in the defense of the duchy are ..."

She seemed to be searching for a word, and the duke said, "Most appreciated."

Maelani's cheeks flushed red and she looked away.

The duke laughed and said, "My daughter studies well and often, and will soon enough comport herself like the duchess she's destined to be."

Maelani either couldn't or didn't bother disguising the irritation in her face.

"She's lovely," Regdar broke in. His face flushed red with embarrassment, and sweat trickled down his chest.

The comment that Regdar so regretted made the duke laugh and Maelani blush again. She smiled at the fighter, who looked away.

“I’m sorry, Your Highness ... L-lady ...” Regdar stammered.

“Surely you’ve heard that my daughter’s hand is the most sought-after prize in the duchy, not the world,” the duke said, and again Maelani showed her irritation. “She is reaching the age where a marriage is possible, and I am reaching an age where her marriage is necessary. She is my only child, Regdar, and I love her deeply. She is also my only heir, and I love Koratia at least as much ... though in a different way,” he added hastily.

Regdar nodded, still too embarrassed to follow what the duke was trying to say.

“Maelani,” the duke said, “I would suspect that we’ll be seeing more of Regdar in the coming weeks. I hope that prospect pleases you.”

Maelani, whose future husband would eventually become the Duke of Koratia, smiled and nodded. Regdar began slowly to understand. He felt the color drain from his face, and his forehead went damp and cold. His mouth was dry. He tried to clear his throat but instead made an unbecoming, weak, squeaking noise.

Surely, he thought, the duke remembers Naull and everything I went through to get him back.

“It does please me,” the beautiful young woman replied with undisguised pleasure. “I would like to hear of your worldly experiences ...”

Regdar’s jaw went slack and he had to blink sweat out of his eyes.

“With the Comitatus, of course,” Maelani added.

Regdar sagged with relief.

Though he wasn't the tallest of men, Vargussel's spiky hair brushed the rafters of the dark passageway. It was the easiest of prayers to Vecna that caused the tip of his staff to glow like a torch. Without it, he would have stumbled around in whatever inconsequential twilight seeped through the crumbling roof of the abandoned slaughterhouse. As it was, it was difficult enough to avoid the many deep puddles of fetid, vile water. Vargussel's long, green robe was already spattered with muck that obscured the wine-red trim around the hem.

The place was cool but humid, and sweat beaded on his forehead as he picked his way deeper into the dilapidated building. The corridors were designed for cattle, not men. When the place was abandoned decades ago, no one bothered to clean it. The smell was a constant reminder of how low Vargussel had been forced to sink at times in order to inevitably rise so much higher.

Vargussel breathed through his mouth, quickening his step so that he would reach his hiding place deep in the old slaughterhouse before he was overcome by the stench. Sweat collected on his chest and back, under the heavy, quilted tabard in a wine-red diamond pattern mimicking the heraldry of his family. It was an old pattern for an old family—a family that would die with Vargussel if he failed in the coming days, but he would not fail. For his family, all gone but him; for his liege, still waiting and watching from afar, he would —

Vargussel stopped. His foot splashed in a puddle of syrupy muck that slid over the top of his fine leather boot. Something was wrong. Something was different. Vargussel had come to the old slaughterhouse often enough, for long enough, that he could feel the change in the air.

He wasn't alone.

In front of him was an intersection, one he'd crossed a hundred times. He was a few long strides from the intersecting passage, so he couldn't see around the corners. The ceiling was a bit higher there, the walls close enough on either side that Vargussel could have reached out and touched both walls at the same time. There was no change in the heavy stench of decay. He heard no sound but the odd drip of water and the creak of an old gate hanging from an rusted hinge. The intersections had once been gated so the butchers could hear their charges in one direction or another. The other three gates were missing, long gone.

With his glowing staff still held in his right hand, Vargussel slipped two fingers of his left into a pocket of his robe. There he found a small bead of blue glass, a spell focus he carried along with many others, everywhere he went. He didn't pull the bead from his pocket but just held it and whispered the brief incantation while closing his eyes in the precise way the spell demanded.

Without opening his eyes again, he could see. The lighting was different, more diffuse. His perspective was changed slightly, as if he'd suddenly become a few inches shorter. Concentrating on steady, even breaths, Vargussel altered his perspective by sheer force of

will. Without actually moving a step—he stood stock still, his eyes still closed—he moved his sight forward, up, and around the corner to the right.

The spell showed him the dark expanse of the narrow side passage. Scanning it briefly, lingering on the ceiling, he saw nothing. The shadows were deep, however, and Vargussel wasn't entirely convinced that the passage was clear. Before risking the time to move his sight deeper into the right-hand passage, Vargussel willed his perspective to turn, then slid back to the intersection. He caught a brief glimpse of himself with the magical light on the end of his staff illuminating the crumbling brick, rotting wood, and stagnant mud around him.

He moved his sight into the left-hand passage. When he tilted it up to scan the ceiling, he saw something move.

It was a twitch, really, a shadow expanding itself in an unnatural way. He moved in a bit closer and could see the outline of something clinging to the dark corner where the sagging ceiling met the cracked wall. The thing was vaguely humanoid but skinny. Its elongated arms were more like tentacles and at the end of them dangled grotesque, five-fingered hands that were seen only in shadow, looked more like squids than hands. The thing shifted its head around and twitched its shoulders. It was becoming restless, probably wondering why Vargussel had stopped.

Vargussel let the spell effect fade to darkness. When he opened his eyes, he saw through them normally once again. He touched the medallion hanging from a heavy chain around his neck. It was small enough to fit in the palm of his hand. The medallion was shaped vaguely like the head of a dog, with a long snout simply rendered and two large rubies where its oblong eyes would be. Letting out a small, silent breath, Vargussel willed the guardian to come.

Still standing in the same place, Vargussel took his hand away and whispered a quick spell that would protect him—at least a little—in the meantime. It was a minor casting, but wasting it and the clairvoyance was testing his patience. The fact that the Vecna-given light on the end of his staff would burn out half an hour after he cast it gave him a sense of irritated urgency. Still, Vargussel wasn't the type to let an opportunity pass.

"Come out," he said, his voice echoing in the tight space.

Somewhere, a flock of pigeons, startled by the sudden sound of a human voice in the dunder silence, took wing. The thing in the darkness around the corner stirred as well but didn't reveal itself.

"I saw you there, my friend," Vargussel said. "A clever hiding place indeed, but you've been found out. Come down and speak with me, and perhaps we can avoid all this nastiness. I'm sure you had planned for me—and that I've been planning for you as well."

There was a long silence during which Vargussel considered how to kill the thing if it didn't come down. As if sensing his line of thought, the thing in the corner came out.

It unfolded itself slowly, almost gracefully, like a worm coming out of an apple. It clung to the upper corner of the passage, holding onto a rafter beam with its left hand. Its webbed feet splayed out on the wall and seemed to hold it there like suction cups.

"That's it," Vargussel said, keeping his voice light, unthreatening. "Come down, and introduce yourself like a gentleman."

The thing slid off the wall, making a horrid, wet, sucking sound when its feet came loose. It splashed into a puddle of reeking muck without flinching from either the cold or the smell.

Vargussel moved his staff in front of him a few inches and the light fell over the creature.

Its eyes closed against the light and its skin wrinkled around its small, deep-set black oracles, but it didn't back away. It might have stood only four feet tall, if it stood erect, but it didn't. The slight creature crouched, not cowering, in front of Vargussel. Naked, its skin looked like burnished steel gone splotchy with rust. The flesh of its long legs and arms was smooth but elsewhere it was wrinkled and sagging, even where it hung from deeply-cut ribs. Its head was narrow, with a high forehead and pronounced jaws. As it stared at Vargussel, its lipless mouth slid open to reveal two rows of vicious, yellow fangs, each as long as one of Vargussel's fingers.

"Well, then," Vargussel said, "there you are."

"No fear me, human?" the creature said, its voice high but still menacing.

Vargussel smiled politely and said, "I do not fear a lone choker, but thank you for asking."

The choker, as Vargussel had identified it, was a wretched vermin that would lie in wait for unsuspecting passersby, then squeeze the life out of them. It opened its eyes a bit wider and tipped its head.

"Yes," Vargussel said, "I know what you are."

"How know?" the choker asked. "Why here?"

"I know a great many things," Vargussel replied. "As to why I'm here, that is none of your concern. Suffice it to say that I have laid claim to this dismal ruin for reasons of my own. It is you who is the trespasser."

"No understand," the choker hissed. "Who you?"

Vargussel was about to answer when the floor quivered under his feet. The choker twitched, startled, looking around, and Vargussel knew the creature had felt it too.

"Pay that no mind," Vargussel said. "A storm is coming ... thunder and all that."

The choker tipped its head again and nodded.

"Who you?" it asked again.

"I am Vargussel, but you can call me Your Highness."

"Highness?"

"I intend to be duke," Vargussel replied. "By marriage, mind you, but duke just the same. Do you know what that is ... a duke?"

The little humanoid shook its head, and its long, tentacle-like arms twitched.

"Well," Vargussel explained, "it is a title that identifies a man of great importance—a man it might do you well to serve."

"Serve you?" the choker surmised, its eyes narrowing again.

"Serve me," Vargussel said.

The choker's right arm shot out toward Vargussel's face like the snatching tongue of a tree frog. Grotesque, wormlike fingers splayed open, reaching for Vargussel's throat to grasp it. A palm lined with jagged spikes. It meant to strangle him, not serve him.

Vargussel didn't flinch, didn't move, and the hand stopped short, no more than an inch from his neck. The man lifted an eyebrow and looked into the darkness behind the choker where something enormous loomed.

"Wrong answer," Vargussel said, and the choker was snatched backward.

The creature whimpered, then coughed out a sound that might have been a bark. Vargussel stepped forward and held his staff out and up. Light poured over a massive form of steel and

wood and glinted off eyes of thumb-sized rubies. It revealed on the thing's chest a duplicate of Vargussel's amulet, and likewise illuminated the shocked, terrified face of the little choker.

The shield guardian—Vargussel's shield guardian—had a hold on the choker. The steel fingers of its left hand wrapped around the creature's slim torso. The choker's arms whipped back in a feeble attempt to ensnare the guardian, but the huge construct, sitting on its knees in the confines of the passage, paid it no mind.

Vargussel shrugged and stepped past, moving around the two creatures as best he could. He came close enough that the choker saw him. Its tentacle arms snapped back into place, then made to reach out again. The shield guardian drove the choker into the wall hard enough to dislodge a ceiling beam.

Vargussel stepped away from the falling dust and blood. The choker squealed, and the shield guardian drew back its right arm, pausing to let Vargussel pass. When its master was out of the way, it curled its metal fingers into a fist the size of a man's head and smashed into the choker's skull. The creature's neck snapped and one of its black eyes careened into the air only to splash into a puddle of decades-old cow dung.

“So that was the whole reason you were summoned to the palace?” Naull asked over the shiny silver teacup.

Regdar sighed, shrugged, and didn’t bother to answer. Naull shook her head, then sipped her tea, and Regdar looked away.

Absently, Regdar’s hands fiddled with the collapsing bow he’d purchased early that morning. It was expensive, but when he saw it he knew he needed to have it. How much easier would it be to carry a bow that folded into a slim leather satchel than the long composite bow that had gotten in his way so many times while slung over his shoulder and dragging on the ground?

They sat at a small table on the huge, high terrace of the Thrush and the Jay—the inn that the duke himself had recommended to them—sipping tea from wildly expensive silver cups and taking in the cool, sunset air. Regdar had never stayed in a place so opulent before. Almost everything about the inn made him feel silly, like a fish out of water.

Naull, who grew up in a lonely wizard’s tower on the eastern frontier, was oddly at ease. The beauty and elegance of the inn seemed to transform her, bringing out a grace that Regdar had always sensed in her but hadn’t often been able to see. She was a gifted spellcaster with a quick mind and an easy wit. Surrounded by silver, silk, and servants, she became a lady.

Naull set down her teacup and met Regdar’s eyes. He smiled when he realized he’d been caught staring at her when he’d meant to look away.

“She must be very beautiful,” Naull said, a smile curling her lips.

Regdar shrugged and this time did look away, out to the east where the pale orange glow of the sunset held the city in its gentle embrace. From where they sat, high atop the columned inn, the Duke’s Quarter stretched out beneath them with the eastern portion of the Merchant’s Quarter behind it and the bustling Trade Quarter beyond.

“More beautiful than a poor country wizard, anyway,” Naull mused.

Regdar ignored the comment and lifted his teacup to his lips. His huge hand engulfed the delicate, silver vessel in a most uncouth fashion, but the fighter didn’t care. He let his eyes wander the city, which was a great oval surrounded by mighty walls. Those walls were well maintained, even washed regularly on the duke’s orders so that their polished, gray-white stone glowed in the warm light. The River Delnir cut through the heart of the city, flowing from the north on its way to the endless expanse of the Southern Sea some dozen miles away.

The Thrush and the Jay occupied a large and expensive tract of real estate right on the western strand and the terrace overlooked the fast-flowing river. Orange light glittered on the water where the inn’s shadow didn’t fall. Directly across was the Duke’s Quarter, an island in the middle of the river. The duke’s palace towered over them, stretching over the entire northern half of the island. Surrounded by brilliant white walls of its own, capped with a cluster of soaring towers, the palace was easily half a mile on a side.

A coach that appeared to be cut from solid gold, pulled by a team of white horses and flanked by a dozen of the duke's elite guard, rumbled over the bridge that linked the island with the Merchant Quarter. The coach and its outriders disappeared from sight below the rim of the terrace to pass along the south wall of the inn.

"She's smart, too, I suppose," Naull sighed.

Regdar, engrossed with the view of New Koratia, barely heard her. A flash of light caught his eye and he squinted at the Floating Crystal. The renowned college of wizards was an enormous, floating tower of glass. Though it was almost a mile away, it still appeared huge, hovering over the wizard's reserve on the eastern side of the river. Behind it, the labyrinthine streets of the Trade Quarter formed a backdrop of chaotic shapes. Beyond that he could see the twin towers of the east gate.

"She's had tutors," Naull continued, "to teach her everything, perhaps even to school her in the most exotic and secret lore of love and pleasure."

Regdar's attention returned to her abruptly, and her eyes flared.

"That caught your attention?" she asked, arching an eyebrow at him.

He took a hasty sip of tea and flinched in surprise when he found his cup empty. He set the cup down on the lace tablecloth and shifted in his too-small, wrought iron chair.

"So you were introduced," Naull said. "Then what?"

"That was all," Regdar replied, studying his silver teacup.

"More tea?" Naull asked, reaching for the pot.

Regdar grabbed it before she could, though, and drew it toward him.

"I've got it," he said.

"Yes," she said, her voice dripping with sarcasm, "I'm sure you do."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Regdar found himself asking, against his better judgment.

"Oh, you know what I mean," she replied, looking away and sighing.

"No," Regdar said, "I don't. You're angry with me because I accepted an invitation from the Duke of Koratia himself?"

She turned on him and Regdar almost flinched at the fire in her eyes. He had no doubt about Naull, but had to force himself to understand that she could be angry, even with him, and it was a sign of nothing but her humanity. Considering her recent past, all they'd both been through, Regdar doubted she'd be offended if he occasionally watched her just a little too closely.

Naull folded her arms across her chest and started tapping her foot.

"What have I done?" Regdar asked.

The fighter was suddenly aware of other eyes on him and he looked up. The waiter, a lanky weasel of a man wearing a floor-length tunic in the ubiquitous blue-gray of the Thrush and the Jay, was standing next to their table.

"My apologies for interrupting," the waiter said in an accent Regdar couldn't place. "Is the tea to your liking?"

Regdar looked down at the empty tea cup, realized he was still holding the pot in his hand, and said, "Fine, yes."

"My lady?" the waiter asked, bowing in Naull's direction.

"Lovely," the young woman said, plastering a smile on her face for the waiter's benefit.

The waiter bowed lower and turned on his heel, the clean white towel draped over his left

forearm flapping lightly in his own breeze.

Before he could take a step away from them, Naull said, "No, wait."

Like a soldier snapping to attention before a general, the weasely man turned back to Naull and bowed again.

"Lady?" he asked.

"I have a question," Naull said, sitting up straight in her chair. The fine silk of her dress and the finer wool of the sweater that she wore over her shoulders against the cool evening air whispered on the wrought iron. "If someone were to introduce you to a young lady, and—oh, I'm sorry, are you married?"

The waiter went pale, swallowed once, and said, "Yes, my lady."

"Naull ..." Regdar cautioned, setting the teapot down without pouring himself another cup.

The young mage paid him no mind, focussing instead on the waiter.

"If someone were to introduce you to a young lady," she continued, "having made some effort to exclude your wife from the meeting, then was careful to inform you that the young lady was in need of a husband and that you would be someone she'd be seeing more of ... what would you think?"

The waiter swallowed again and looked around, as if expecting a hoard of demons to appear from the thin air and rip him to pieces.

You should be so lucky, Regdar thought. Both of us should be.

The waiter cleared his throat and said, "A scone, perhaps?"

"No," Naull said, "thank you. What would you think?"

"I'm sure I have no idea what—" the waiter began.

"Of course you do," Naull interrupted. "You would think that, regardless of your wife dutifully waiting at home for you, washing your blue-gray tunics, feeding your children, serving you in bed like a—"

"Naull!" Regdar blurted.

"Ma'am!" the waiter squealed at the same time.

Naull ignored them both and continued, "You'd think he was trying to arrange a marriage, wouldn't you? Do you love your wife?"

The waiter took a step backward as if slapped by the questions. Regdar sucked in a breath, looked around, and saw a good dozen sets of eyes directed at their table, at the little parlor drama Naull insisted on playing out. The other diners were the finest people of New Koratia, and Regdar doubted they'd ever seen anything like the shameful display.

"Do you?" Naull pressed.

"Naull," Regdar stage-whispered, "for Pelor's sake."

She held up a hand to silence him and lifted an eyebrow at the waiter.

"I ... I do," the poor man said, swallowing again.

"And you would tell this match-maker, however well meaning," Naull went on, "that you love your wife, you honor your vows, and have no interest in marrying this home-wrecking little trollop of his."

The waiter blushed and said, "Yes?"

And that was when Regdar said exactly the wrong thing: "But, we're not married."

“Get those clothes off,” Maelani ordered as she slipped off her own delicate shoes.

“Mistress!” her young maid hissed, her cheeks turning red, her hand coming to her chest to cover her heart.

Maelani ignored her. She pulled back the curtains enough to stick her face out of the open window of her coach.

“Driver,” the duke’s daughter said, “we’ll wait here for Theria. I will be napping and will expect not to be disturbed.”

“As you wish, My Lady,” the driver answered.

Maelani closed first the glass window, then the curtains, so that the interior of the coach was plunged into a perfumed grayness. Her maid hadn’t started taking off her clothes.

“I said strip, damn you,” Maelani whispered.

Theria began opening the catches on her humble servants’ gown, worry turning quickly to panic on her chubby, round face.

“Oh, Mistress,” the young girl murmured, “oh, dear. Don’t make me do this.”

“For Cuthbert’s sake, Theria,” Maelani replied as she quickly unlaced her own corset, “stop whining and do as I say.”

A tear slipped down the maid’s pudgy cheek, but she continued disrobing. Maelani did the same and handed her own garment of fine silk and wool to her maid, then collected Theria’s less expensive—and less obvious—clothes on the seat next to her.

Soon, the two young women were wearing each others’ clothes and though Theria had stopped crying, she was no less beside herself.

“Mistress,” she squeaked, “please let me go in your stead. Please don’t go out there ... oh, Pelor ... oh, Pelor protect us all if something were to happen to y—”

The maid squealed when her mistress’s warm, soft hand clamped over her mouth like a vise.

The duke’s daughter leaned in close and whispered, “Shut your thrice-bedamned mouth, will you? I told the driver I would be taking a nap. You’re me, so for all the gods’ sakes, will you please take a nap?”

Maelani took her hand away from the frightened maid’s mouth and pulled on her simple homespun cloak.

“Oh, Mistress ...” the maid started again.

“Nap,” Maelani hissed. “Will you take a nap?”

“But Mistress,” the maid persisted.

Maelani pulled the cowl over her head, shielding her face from view, and said, “Will you please just take a nap. Will you? Please, just take a nap.”

“But Mis—”

“Take a nap!”

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