

THE GOBLIN CORPS

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THE FEW.
THE PROUD.
THE OBSCENE



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*For George, Gary, Jason the Larger, and Naomi:
the original Demon Squad.*

*And with special thanks to Richard,
without whom Morthûl would not have been
the Charnel King that we all know, and . . . Well, know.*

PROLOGUE



he flickering torches, sickly embers staggering atop loose bundles of rotting wood, no longer even pretended to hold the darkness at bay. Their illumination succeeded only in convincing the mind that countless unseen horrors lurked within the underground, artificial night.

Not that this was much of an illusion; countless unseen horrors *were* lurking in the dark. But here, deep in the rock beneath the Iron Keep, horrors were nothing new.

The flagstones gleamed dully beneath the glowing brands thanks to a perennial coating of luminescent slime, a revolting substance that even the greatest magics of the keep's master had failed to exterminate. The slow, steady slap of approaching footsteps was heralded by the nauseating sounds of that slime squelching beneath heavy boots.

He was known to the men and monsters under his command only as Falchion. Ice-blue and empty eyes peered through the narrow slits in a bucket-helm shaped of dingy steel. It tilted to one side, that helm—a gesture of revulsion, perhaps?—at the sight of an enormous brown rat, dripping with slime and less-pleasant substances, that clung to the bricks beside him. A glove of mail lashed out, and the low reverberation of iron on stone echoed throughout the chamber, almost masking the

truncated squeal. The tiny corpse dropped to the floor, already forgotten, as its executioner continued calmly into the adjoining chamber.

“Careless, Falchion. Clumsy and careless.” Nasal and whining, it was a voice capable of conveying little more than arrogance and scorn. “Are you really so dense that you still haven’t learned how fragile this sort of incantation can be? The death of that rat might well have disrupted the entire—”

“Shove it, Havarren.” Falchion assumed an easy stance in the far corner, crossing his arms with a faint grating sound. Those cold blue orbs flickered downward, glancing briefly at the rust-red mail that covered him from shoulders to hips. A single eyebrow rose marginally, as though he’d only now discovered that he wore the hauberk at all.

“Shove it’? Really? How . . . common.” The second speaker leaned forward, finally exposing his own face to the faint torchlight.

Falchion snarled behind his faceplate—a reflex that had become ingrained, triggered by nothing more than the man’s proximity. Where Falchion was thick, corded, and well muscled, the other fellow was lanky to the point of emaciation. Thick blond hair cascaded to a near-perfect point just below jutting shoulder blades. His attire was vain, even fop-pish: bright ruffles and knee-high cavalier boots—tanned from the hide of something with more intelligence and fewer legs than anything so mundane as a cow—were complemented by an immaculately pressed violet coat and pants that were, to Falchion’s perpetual dismay, worn tightly enough to accentuate, rather than conceal, what lay beneath them. And unlike the general himself, who wore at his side the heavy blade from which he’d taken his name, the other was armed only with a flimsy dagger, poor protection from anything more menacing than an agitated rabbit.

But then, Vigo Havarren possessed methods of protecting himself that had little to do with sharpened steel.

A caustic retort clung to the tip of Falchion’s tongue, begging for release. Yet he clamped his mouth firmly shut as the chamber’s final occupant approached the center of the room. He watched both men through pinpricks of unholy yellow radiance that sat where most human beings kept their eyes.

“General Falchion. Lord Havarren.” The voice revealed just the faintest trace of an accent; whether this was natural or simply the result of a decayed vocal apparatus, Falchion never knew. “Gentlemen, the death of a rat is hardly going to interfere with one of *my* incantations. The death of two *sentient* entities, however, might well serve to *strengthen* the spell. Shall I find out? Or can I count on your silence?”

Havarren blanched. “Silence can be arranged.”

Falchion just nodded.

“Good.” The master of the Iron Keep stepped—*glided*, it seemed—to the large stone platform along the chamber’s northernmost wall. The fur-lined hem of a cloak that had been a beautiful midnight blue when it was new—about four centuries past, give or take a decade—whispered across the flagstones. Somehow, it remained unmarred by the grasping slime.

A huge iron cauldron sat beneath a granite altar, a noxious blend of fluids bubbling within, heated without the aid of any visible flame. Virgin’s blood, dragon’s tears, spider’s breath, essence of ghost, the heart of a newborn, and other reagents so rare that centuries of searching had been required for their acquisition—all splashed and burbled and flowed through the cauldron, agitated and stirred by the agonized thrashing of the live animals occasionally tossed into the pot by the lanky sorcerer.

“Havarren?” the master of the keep glanced up from the table, where he had been carefully arranging an additional assortment of rare and eldritch objects, enchanted tools, ancient amulets. “Time?”

The gaunt wizard briefly furrowed his brow in concentration. “Almost, my lord. You may begin . . . now.”

The first of the priceless arcane objects was hurled into the cauldron. Instantly the vile substance began to glow, filling the underground chamber with the light of the noonday sun. Falchion flinched slightly—not at the sudden influx of illumination, but at the close-up view of his own dark master: Morthûl, the Charnel King of Kirol Syrreth.

Garments once of royal quality, now worn and tattered beyond hope of repair, shrouded a body unimaginable by any rational mind. Mummified flesh creaked like hardened leather with every move the Dark Lord made. The left side of his face was covered in that not-skin, frozen in a

perpetual rictus; the right was nothing more than naked bone. That hideous, sickly yellow glow was most conspicuous in the eyes—but it leaked as well from the nasal cavity and between King Morthûl's teeth. Worms and maggots, beetles and roaches and less savory creatures all crawled about and among the Charnel King's clothes and patches of long-dead flesh, wandering between exposed bone and protruding ribs, every so often dropping from the empty sockets in a twisted parody of tears. A full head of raven tresses completed the horrific image, trailing from beneath a tarnished silver crown.

Falchion, general of the Charnel King's armies, shuddered again, a rare moment of self-reflection stealing over him in this most pivotal moment of a plan that had taken the Dark Lord centuries to implement. This, this was the man—the *thing*—to which he had sworn his loyalty and his life. It was enough to turn even the strongest stomach, to send even the most corrupt soul scampering into the corner to wail in terrified self-pity.

But Falchion was, above all else, a practical man. And if one man, however revolting, however many centuries dead, was about to conquer the known world—well, Falchion wanted to be on his good side, no matter what it took.

Morthûl's rotted form abruptly stiffened, as though rigor mortis had finally caught up with him. Then, with an explosion of voice somewhere between a sonorous chant and a low-pitched howl, the Dark Lord raised his arms, both fists—one skeletal, one wrapped in brittle skin—clenched tight. Unspeakable energies crackled around him, and a blinding wave of bile-green luminescence flowed from the cauldron into the Charnel King himself and thence upward, where it vanished through the room's cold ceiling. From there it would erupt to the surface and flow in writhing tendrils across the continent, seeking its targets.

Falchion saw Havarren bow his head and knew he was sending a mental signal of his own, an aspect of the ritual Morthûl was too busy to perform. Immediately, agents of Kirol Syrreth, lying in wait throughout the Allied Kingdoms to the east and south, moved out into the streets to do violence. Humans and goblins waylaid all who walked the roads so late, in a dozen cities across the land. In mere minutes a

thousand lives, young and old, rich and poor, good and evil, were cut abruptly short. And for every life snuffed out in these darkest of hours, the Charnel King's spell was strengthened, his power grew.

It had taken Morthûl over two hundred years of laborious research, of perusing tomes so old they predated even his own birth, to master the magics he now manipulated. Three hundred more were spent in methodical search for the necessary components. Agents of the Dark Lord had combed the world from pole to pole, questing for items so rare that even the greatest wizards of the day scoffed at the notion of their very existence. And finally, tonight, it all came together in a few short moments of the most fearsome sorceries the world had seen in generations.

Across the continent, kings and queens and princes, emperors and dukes and popes—all who ruled, or might one day rule—collapsed in agony so exquisite that the gods themselves must have writhed in sympathy. The Charnel King's spell swept them up in its wake and slowly, utilizing their own bodies as a gateway, traced its way through the flow of time itself, performing subtle alterations not upon the current royals, but on their ancestors.

Still chanting, his fingers flitting as though mending a rent in an expensive fabric, Morthûl began rewriting the events of lives long passed. Slowly, over the span of generations, he instilled in each successive ruler a growing loyalty, an intense fealty to the lord of Kirol Syrreth. It took time: Seemingly endless minutes were required for the manipulation of each separate generation. But when the ritual finally reached its conclusion, just before the dawn, he would have conquered the world entire, without a single voice raised in protest, a single sword in rebellion. Once he had worked his way forward through the ages to those rulers living today, their fealty, their loyalty, their *worship* would be absolute, instilled by tradition that stretched back a thousand years.

The last of the dispatched souls dissolved into the power emanating from the iron cauldron; the last of the ancient relics sank in its depths, melting into the obscene mixture that threatened now to boil over the sides and onto the floor. The critical juncture was upon them. Moments more, and the damage would be too extensive to ever be undone, the point of no return forever passed.

Falchion, Havarren, and yes, even the Charnel King jumped at the thunderous crash of a steel door slamming into a rock wall—a sound swiftly overwhelmed by the clatter of feet dashing through the corridor. The half of Morthûl’s visage that was capable of expression twisted.

Fear. For the first time, Falchion saw fear on the Dark Lord’s face.

“Stop them!” Even that single hissed command was a strain on his body and mind, both of which channeled more sheer magic in that instant than any wizard in history.

A metallic rasp pierced the room, and Falchion stepped toward the corridor, blade in hand. He nodded briefly as Havarren appeared beside him, animosity temporarily forgotten.

But the determination Falchion saw etched across the wizard’s features fell away as the first of the approaching figures strode determinedly into view.

“You! You’re dead!” The arrogance in Havarren’s tone was gone, drowned by an amazed and growing terror. “How . . . ?”

The regal figure actually smiled at Havarren’s bewilderment. “My dear Vigo, surely you didn’t expect *me* to be inconvenienced by *one* little dragon, did you?”

His name was Ananias duMark: one of the greatest sorcerers of this generation, beloved hero of the Allied Kingdoms, and perpetual thorn in Morthûl’s side. He was also, Havarren knew, a half-breed, though little in his build or features, his rugged chin or earthy-brown hair, hinted at his elven heritage. He wore a simple robe of mahogany hue and carried a staff of that selfsame wood, intricately carved with a thousand runes.

A curse on his lips, the gaunt servant of the Dark Lord began a convoluted dance with his fingers, weaving the magics that would finally obliterate this cretin from the face of reality itself.

He never finished. A piercing shriek, deafening in the echoing chamber, sounded from the hall, and the first of the half-elf’s allies leapt bodily *over* the new arrival and slammed into Havarren’s chest, taking them both to the slimy floor.

A lock of fire-red hair fell across Havarren’s face, and the musk of animals flooded his nostrils. This, then, would be Lidia Lirimas, scout

and beast-tamer. Even as he tossed her from him with a surprising burst of strength, he couldn't help but scoff at his half-elven foe. Would the pattern never change? Each time it was the same damn thing: Every few years, duMark would wander the lands, assembling a brand-new band of "heroes" from the most worthy of that generation. It was such a cliché that Havarren felt the urge to laugh aloud.

Until, that is, his attempt to rise from the clinging slime was cut unexpectedly short. Lirimás, a second cry escaping her throat, spun on the ball of her left foot and brought her right heel across his face. Bone snapped with a brutal sound, and the mage once more collapsed.

A gleam of triumph in her bright blue eyes, the young warrior raised her slim-bladed sword high, determined to see Havarren's head cleaved from his body.

It would have gone better for her had she not been quite so focused. . . .

Even as he parried blow after blow from another of duMark's companions—a heavily built, dark-skinned man with a scraggly goatee and a head as bald as an egg—Falchion interposed himself between the woman and Havarren's crumpled form. He'd been overwhelmingly tempted to stand back, to focus on his own opponent and let the chips—and swords—fall where they may. But he knew that the Dark Lord valued Havarren's council, that he would be *perturbed* if the arrogant bastard were allowed to die.

So, since his blade was occupied at the moment, Falchion hauled off and slammed his mailed fist into the young ranger's face. Blood spurted between his knuckles, and Lidia's nose disappeared amid a spreading mass of pulped cartilage and bruised flesh. Not dead, perhaps, but quite firmly out of the fight, she collapsed backward in a heap.

The mage hauled himself to his feet, tossing a grudging nod of thanks Falchion's way. That simple gesture sent new spears of torment shooting through his fractured jaw. A growl deep in his throat, Havarren raised the back of his hand and wiped a smear of blood from the corner of his misshapen mouth—and if any in the room noticed that the blood was

some odd shade other than red, or that it congealed too thickly to be normal blood, they assuredly dismissed it as a trick of the dancing, insufficient light.

It would almost, he thought bitterly, have been better to die than to owe his life to that—that imbecile! This was *not* something he could afford to have hanging over him. He needed to repay the debt, and fast!

Hmm. The bald man, dressed in leather leggings and precious little else, was giving the good general no small amount of trouble. His obscenely large axe hadn't yet penetrated Falchion's defenses, but a number of thin lines scored the general's hauberk, and the dark-skinned intruder showed no sign of tiring. With a nonchalant gesture, Havarren sent a stream of iridescent orbs hurtling from his fingertips, balefire summoned from the bowels of hell itself. A brief sizzling sound accompanied the stench of burning flesh, and the dark-skinned man collapsed with a scream, his back charred black by the sorcerous assault.

Falchion couldn't be bothered even to return in kind Havarren's own nod of thanks. With barely a sideways glance to acknowledge the aid he'd just received, he stepped toward the hallway, blade raised to meet the next invader.

Arrogant bastard. Should've let him die.

The gaunt mage tensed. Another offensive spell danced on the tip of his tongue; his hands glowed with the vile radiance of demon-spawned magics. Desperately he twisted about, seeking the face of the man who had started it all.

Too late. The half-elven interloper had reached the northern wall, his meandering steps having somehow carried him between the various combatants. He stood at arm's length from the incandescent form of the Dark Lord himself.

The Charnel King of Kirol Syrreth, though absorbed in his own magics, remained well aware of the world around him. His head slowly swiveled to stare directly at Ananias duMark. Within the greater aura of the ancient spell, his unholy glow left a luminescent streak as he moved, not unlike the slithering of an eel beneath the surface of a stagnant pond.

"I grow bored, Ananias." Morthûl's voice, distorted by the eldritch

whirlwind surrounding him, seemed to come from the deepest corners of the room—as though the walking corpse had been but the mouth-piece of something greater, something darker, that no longer need confine itself to his form. “This spell you see taking shape before you is ancient, far older than you or even I could ever dream. Even at your best, you could never hope to disrupt it. And though you may have fooled the others, I know well that you’re hardly at your best. Havarren’s dragon did you more harm than you let on, did it not? Flee, Ananias duMark. Flee now, and you may yet escape my reach before the night is through.”

It was a pure, unadulterated bluff. Truth be told, Morthûl hadn’t the barest idea what duMark, or any other sorcerer, might or might not be able to do to the ongoing incantation. That worried him—but not so much so as the fact that every iota of his power was tied up in maintaining these most ancient of magics. If that damn half-breed *did* interfere, there wasn’t a bloody thing Morthûl could do to stop him.

But even as the interloper lifted his hands, the Charnel King saw Havarren rising, bolts of cobalt-blue lightning arcing between his fingers, preparing to strike duMark down. The Dark Lord’s rictus grin widened, and he felt the eldritch forces around him surge and dance, as though they, too, celebrated what was to come.

Morthûl’s triumph, his euphoria, were short-lived indeed. At the sight of the half-elf’s sudden smile, he felt his own expression falter.

Ananias duMark released his spell. No great, earthshaking magic was this, no enigmatic ritual from days of yore. Thin streams of pure arcane force, crossbow bolts shaped of light and willpower, sprang from his palm. It was among the simplest of spells, a beginner’s trick, easily mastered by the lowliest apprentice, anger given form. So simple, so weak, it was absolutely useless against the various sorceries and enchantments that protected the Charnel King’s undead form.

But then, it wasn’t *aimed* at the Charnel King. The bolts flew true: straight into the air above the combatants. The Dark Lord’s scream of impotent fury was lost amid the deafening cacophony of the crumbling ceiling.

Slabs of stone toppled to the floor, pulping anything that dared get in their way. Clouds of dust billowed upward from the shattered cobbles.

stones, a raging storm somehow smuggled into the underground chamber. Thunder rocked the Iron Keep's foundations, echoes blending into echoes until they filled the empty spaces entirely, a physical presence as real as the ponderous rock. The marble altar disintegrated into a fine powder, the magics imbued within it lost as though they had never been. The cauldron, jagged stones already bobbing within its putrid contents, disappeared beneath an enormous chunk of ceiling. The tiny portion of the iron vessel not crushed beyond all recognition was bent so hideously that it would never again hold liquid. The nauseating glow that had permeated the room since the incantation began now faded away, the final moments of a strange and alien sunset.

It seemed as though the torrent of rock might never end. Surely there could be no more stone above their heads! Surely they must have reached the surface by now, and beyond, and still it came. But slowly, ever so gradually, end it did. The stone fell in smaller pieces, in shorter bursts. The impenetrable dust began to disperse, though sight remained a hopeless prospect, as the room's only torches were long extinguished.

And then the last, straggling portions of the ceiling had fallen, the last of the grit settled. Silence reigned, but for the occasional drip of unseen water.

Until, finally, something stirred.

Like a dog shaking off a light summer shower, Ananias duMark rose to his feet, small chunks of rubble cascading off him—or rather, off of the faintly glowing aura that surrounded him and had prevented him from becoming a permanent resident. Casually brushing the dust from his sleeves, he examined the substantial mountain of debris. Even a creature as overwhelmingly powerful as Morthûl couldn't conceivably have survived that collapse—not without the same sort of protective spells that had saved duMark himself. And the half-elven mage was quite certain that the king's godlike powers had been fully invested in the ancient spell. No, odds were good that the terror of a hundred generations was smeared across a hundred square feet of cobblestone.

Then again, this was the Charnel King of Kirol Syrreth and master of the Iron Keep, and “odds” meant precious little. DuMark halted him-

self halfway through a simple light spell, allowing the inky dark to wash over him. Only then did he once more scour the heaps of stone, searching for the faintest trace of that telltale yellow glow.

“Ananias . . . Help . . .”

The half-elf cursed under his breath. He’d completely forgotten . . .

With a strength born of desperation and fueled by arcane arts, duMark tossed stone after stone across the room, digging toward the source of that plaintive cry. He’d never have gotten so far—never have survived his many clashes with King Morthûl—without his companions, but they could be so bloody *inconvenient* at times.

There! More stone, its jagged edges stained with blood. The sorcerer quickly cleared enough space to see the dark skin beneath the rubble.

“Kuren?” he whispered, scraping away more of the detritus. “Kuren, are you all right?”

“He can’t hear you.” That same whispered voice, and now duMark could just make out a second form lying beneath the insensate warrior.

“Lidia?”

“Yes.” The voice, and the breath behind it, were weak, injured, but alive, thank the Gods! “He—he dragged himself over me as the ceiling began to come down. I—I think he’s alive. That is, I can feel his heart-beat. But he’s bleeding badly, Ananias. His mouth is full of blood, and . . .”

But the half-elf was only half listening. His hands now glowing with all the magics he had remaining, he ripped the last layers of stone from atop his companions. For just an instant, something snagged his attention, and his head jerked to the side.

But it was only a hand, protruding from between two gargantuan slabs of rock. A hand possessed of long, slender fingers.

The sorcerer, despite his friends’ condition, couldn’t help but grin. Whether or not Morthûl himself was dead, there was at least *one* foe who wouldn’t be causing duMark any more trouble. Momentarily satisfied with that, he turned back to his companions. “There’s a great deal of damage, Lidia. Shattered bones, internal bleeding. Even this far from the epicenter, it’s a miracle he survived this long. Any other human would be dead.”

Any other, but not Kuren Bekay. Even as a child, he had proven exceptionally strong for his size—a natural attribute duMark’s own spells, some years gone by, had magnified tenfold. The man could rip trees up by the roots, and it would take more than a stone hailstorm to put him down.

Probably.

“Let’s get him out of here,” duMark ordered, hefting the bulky soldier as though he were an armful of dirty laundry. A quick glance at Lidia, only now dragging herself to her feet, suggested far more eloquently than words could have done that Kuren was not the only one in need of aid.

DuMark met the woman’s eyes with his own, refusing to look at the ruined mass that was the rest of her face. “Can you walk?”

“I can bloody well walk away from *here*,” she told him, a horribly liquid tone to her voice.

“Good.” The sorcerer glided across the broken, uneven footing. “Erris and Father Thomas are still upstairs, holding off the guards. We’ll see if Thomas can provide a tincture for you, do something about the pain until he has the time to patch the two of you up properly.”

DuMark threw a single, lingering glance behind him. Nothing but tons of stone. Nothing stirred in the rubble. It was finally over.

“And then . . . we can go home.”

The door slammed shut behind them with a startling sense of finality, rather like the final page of a long and wearying book. And once again, the room was still.

The air shimmered as if observed through a sheen of rippling water. The very fabric of the room *parted*, and slowly, an inch at a time, Vigo Havarren returned to the chamber. At his sudden appearance, a faint illumination spread through the room, as though invisible torches shed their flickering light upon the walls.

The gaunt wizard was coated in dust and grime. Blood, or something that was *almost* blood, seeped from a dozen small wounds, and his jaw still hung crooked on his face. For a brief instant, Havarren simply stood, motionless, lost in concentration. A grating screech, a sudden

crack, and his jaw popped roughly back into place. A single grunt was his only concession to the sharp pain that followed.

Gingerly prodding at his chin with the fingertips of his left hand, he knelt beside the right—which he'd deliberately left in the debris—and wished wistfully that it would prove as easy to fix as his jaw. Already, fleshy tendrils had sprouted from the stump where that hand once rested, but it would be weeks before the writhing mass again formed into anything resembling an actual limb.

Standing once more, Havarren scanned the room. A faint gleam of metal shone from the gaps in a small hill of stone, but he ignored it completely. The wizard neither knew, nor cared, if Falchion had survived. No, his concern was for—

The center of the chamber erupted, showering the already-devastated room with a flurry of jagged rock. A volcanic wave of balefire coursed from the floor, the sorcerous flame melting the rubble into so much slag. Havarren only barely levitated himself above the hell-spawned flood before the all-consuming tide could eat his legs out from under him.

A roar emerged from beneath the carpet of liquefying rock, the mingling wails of a thousand damned souls. Bursts of smoke broke through the eldritch flood, filling the room with the choking stench of sulfur. The walls began to glow with unnatural heat, and the gaunt wizard found himself wondering if even the Iron Keep could survive what was happening to its foundations. Tendrils of balefire climbed those walls, slowly metamorphosing into the questing tentacles of *something*: something unknown, unseen in all the worst nightmares of mankind. Almost tenderly they brushed the sides of the chamber, the touch of a lover—or perhaps the first inquisitive prods of a prisoner seeking escape.

Arms spread, riding atop the final, cresting wave, he rose. He set his foot down atop the ruined floor, and the balefire parted beneath his tread. Eyes blazing to outshine the arcane flame below, the Charnel King of Kirol Syrreth ascended once more from the clutches of damnation.

But duMark's assault had left its mark. The withered flesh that covered the left side of his body and face was cracked and torn away, leaving gaping windows to bone and muscle beneath. His finery was no longer threadbare, no longer worn: It was nothing but a thin cobweb of dan-

gling threads. Roaches, maggots, and things unidentifiable swarmed across his body, writhing in panic, seeking shelter from the chaos around them. Many fell from him in a great deluge to sink and die in the hell-fire below, but an infinite number appeared to take their place.

Quaking under a surge of unaccustomed fear, Havarren could do nothing but watch as Morthûl walked, unhindered, through the wrath of hell, stopping only when the pair of them stood face-to-face.

Slowly, as though it required no small amount of effort, the Charnel King spoke.

“I,” he told his servant, his voice nearly too low to hear at all, “am *very* disappointed.”

Vigo Havarren didn’t believe in many gods, and he tended to despise those that he did believe in. But now, for the first time in his extremely long life, he felt an uncontrollable urge to pray.

Ananias duMark, greatest sorcerer of the Allied Kingdoms, emitted a sigh of sheer bliss as he slowly sank into the down-stuffed mattress. His robe hung on a peg across the small bedchamber; his staff leaned precariously against the wall beside it.

For the past month, ever since his final encounter with his ancient foe, duMark had daily driven himself near the point of collapse. Only within this last week had his arcane abilities returned to what he considered acceptable levels. Only now, finally, could he rest. Exhausted beyond human understanding, the wizard was asleep before his gently pointed ears hit the pillow.

King Dororam, his snow-white beard matted by the pillow upon which it pressed, bolted upright in bed, his heart pounding. Convinced, at first, that he had escaped a truly horrific dream, he had just begun to lie back once more when the hideous, earsplitting scream—identical, his sleep-numbed brain finally realized, to the one that had awakened him—echoed through the halls of Castle Belatine. And it was only then, as he came fully awake, that Dororam realized his wife, the elegant Queen Lameya, no longer lay beside him. That it was her despairing wail that came to him through the dark. A chill of fear waltzed with improper cheer down his spine, and the aging monarch leapt bodily from his bed, his hand already reaching for the latch set in the thick mahogany door. . . .

Echoing the king of whom he dreamt, duMark jerked upright, face coated in sweat, throat aching from his lingering scream. Before the echoes of that shout had dwindled, the mage was striding across the room, hands reaching of their volition for robe and staff. Rarely, even in his hundreds of years of life, had duMark experienced a dream of such intensity, and even the most wet-behind-the-ears apprentice wizard would have recognized it for the dreadful premonition that it was. Even before the hem of the robe had fully settled around his feet, duMark was mouthing the incantation that would teleport him instantly to Castle Bellatine. But his thoughts were elsewhere, miles away from the spell that he knew by heart.

Gods help me. I should have made sure. . . .

He arrived in the midst of unadulterated chaos. Every servant and resident of the castle dashed hither and yon, spurred on by the call of some urgent duty, none knowing what he or she should actually *do*. One harried steward, though startled by the sudden appearance of the half-elf in the hallway, recognized the wizard by sight. Without a word of explanation, he quickly led duMark upstairs.

Over a dozen guards milled about on the landing beside the royal chambers, but they all stepped aside quickly as duMark strode past.

Queen Lameya, tears streaking her cheeks, rocked bodily back and forth in a chair in the center of the room, a low wail of anguish sporadically punctuating her sobs. DuMark had always thought of her as an attractive woman, despite her age. Now, however, grief's ungentle fingers had sculpted her face into a grimace of pain and twisted her hair from a distinguished gray to brittle white.

"My daughter, duMark!" King Dororam, who had stood behind his wife, hands upon her shoulders, stormed across the room, his gaze boring into the mage's own. Although a decade older than his wife, Dororam had grown up a warrior and had allowed neither body nor mind to deteriorate. But tonight, his hair was tangled with sleep, his well-trimmed beard matted exactly as duMark had dreamed. And the aura of fury radiating from him was enough to make even the sorcerer retreat a step—almost enough to hide the sorrow behind it. "My own daughter!"

DuMark quickly regained his composure. “Your Majesty,” he intoned, bowing slightly. “Something has happened? I thought I sensed—”

“Happened? *Happened?! Oh, gods!*” And then he, too, allowed the tears to come, though the rage never once left his eyes.

Reluctantly, the captain of the guard—an older man, one who had served King Dororam for decades—stepped forward, his armor clanking and tabard swaying with each step. “My Lord duMark, Princess Amalia . . .” The old soldier swallowed once, audibly, and then rigidly suppressed his own grief, his own horror. “Princess Amalia has been murdered.”

DuMark felt his knees go weak beneath him. Had the wall not been near enough to support his slumping form, he would surely have collapsed to the floor. *Why didn't I make sure . . . ?*

“What . . . ?” His voice was little more than a whisper, barely even a breath. “What happened?”

“We’re not certain, my lord. One of the serving maids thought she heard a scuffle, and when she went to investigate—”

“They butchered her, Ananias,” Dororam intoned, his hands seizing the front of the mage’s robe. “Butchered my child like an animal! They didn’t—they didn’t even leave us a whole body to bury. . . .”

Slowly, gently, duMark removed the king’s fists from his robe. “Your Majesty—I am so sorry. If there were anything I could do . . .”

Dororam’s head shot up, that haunted look once more replaced by that burning rage. “It was Morthûl, wasn’t it?”

DuMark nodded slowly. “I think it must have been.”

The king’s mouth twitched, his teeth clenched. “You told me he was dead, duMark.”

“I truly believed he was, Your Majesty. But there’s no other answer. Had he died, Falchion or someone else might have taken over, but they’d be far too busy consolidating power to worry about retribution. No, my king. Only the Dark Lord himself could have done this. I’m sorry.”

Dororam stared for the space of several heartbeats. And then, without warning, he was striding across the room, his right hand clenched tightly about the hilt of the sword he had yanked from the captain’s scabbard.

“Assemble the soldiers,” he shouted to the guards around. “Assemble them all, and dispatch messengers to the dukes. We ride on Kirol Syrreth at dawn!”

DuMark, following on the king’s heels, shook his head in protest. “Your Majesty—”

“*What?!*” Dororam spun, blade held at the half-elf’s throat. “You are partially to blame for this, duMark! Would you withhold justice from me as well?”

It took no small amount of effort for the sorcerer to keep his annoyance from showing on his face. *Why are they all such fools?*

Carefully modulating his voice, duMark said, “Your Majesty, I share your grief. Were it within my power, I would hand you the Iron Keep this very morn.” Carefully, he pushed aside the blade with the head of his staff. “But winter comes in a few weeks. In the peaks of the Brimstone Mountains, the snows are already falling. By the time they reached the borders of Kirol Syrreth, whatever remnants of your army had managed to avoid starving or freezing would find themselves stalled at the Serpent’s Pass, unable to cross the Brimstone Mountains and easy targets for the Charnel King’s troglodytes. What justice would *that* bring you, Your Majesty?”

It appeared, at first, as though Dororam were deaf to duMark’s entreaty. But slowly, so slowly, the king’s wrath dimmed just a little, and the arm that held the sword began to relax.

“What,” he asked, his voice tight, “do you suggest?”

Internally, duMark sighed in relief. The others might have reacted poorly if he’d been forced to enchant the man. “Only that you wait. Delay your vengeance, my king. Shauntille is far from the only nation with reason to hate Morthûl. Use the opportunity that winter brings to send messengers to the others. Assemble the armies of *all* the Allied Kingdoms. With such a force at your side, even the gathered hordes of Kirol Syrreth cannot stand against you. And I personally shall ride by your side, to ensure that this time, the foul abomination stays dead!”

Thoughtfully, Dororam nodded. “It shall be as you suggest, Ananias. We will wait, and we shall assemble every fighting man this land has to offer. This spring will be the last thaw the Dark Lord ever sees.

Before I am through, not only the Iron Keep, but all of Kirol Syrreth will be thrown down!” The sword clattered noisily to the floor, dropped by nerveless fingers. With his rage diverted, the king of Shauntille found himself defenseless against an overwhelming tide of sorrow.

“And now, Ananias, if you’ll excuse us . . . We have a daughter to mourn.”

The half-elf bowed once and departed. As he marched through the carpeted passages of the Castle Bellatine, his mind worked at a feverish pace. King Dororam and his armies might be inconvenienced by a little snow, true enough, but duMark was the greatest sorcerer of the Allied Kingdoms, and it would take far more than a change of season to hinder *him*. He had sworn that this time Morthûl would truly fall—and that was one vow he was bound and determined to keep.

Like a fading mirage, the mage vanished from the walls of the great castle. There were preparations to make, and even a man so potent and resourceful had precious little time in which to make them.