



An
**EVERQUEST
NEXT**
Short Story

No POETRY in DEATH

Robert Lassen

No Poetry in Death

An



Short

Robert Lassen

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NIGHTMARES



The boy awoke.

As always, the nightmare faded the moment his eyes opened, though sensations lingered. Something was coming, something with murderous intent. His mind reached for it, trying to close upon it, but the memory slipped away like smoke through his fingers, leaving just the oily taint of its horror on his skin.

He sat up in bed and realized there were tears on his cheeks. He dabbed at them with the sleeve of his nightshirt. Though the fire still burned in the grate, he shivered. He tried to puzzle out the meaning behind the tears. He never cried anymore, even when his sister left him so frustrated that he wanted to. After all, he was no longer a child, not really, even if he was not yet grown.

He wondered if he should tell Mother. She would make things better. He pulled the sheets back and swung his legs out, then paused. The night was still young, not even midnight, but his mother had retired well before sunset. She'd been ill of late, and tired easily. He squeezed his fist in anger. No, he chastised himself, he would not disturb her rest over some foolish terror in the night! He brushed the tears away, knuckles drained white with his resolve.

He should tell Jorus. The old mage understood the power of dreams and omens, and would gladly give him counsel. He nearly rose to walk to his mentor's chamber when he remembered Jorus was out of the city, handling some business for Mother back at the old Myris'Hul estate. There would be no comfort from his teacher tonight.

He dismissed the thought of his father instantly. His father

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hadn't listened to anything he'd said in so long, and would merely laugh at his son's timidity. The thought alone made the boy squirm with embarrassment, which brought more anger.

A final tear welled from the corner of his eye, cold against his flushed cheeks.

The boy rose and walked across the room to the closed window. A thin layer of frost clung to the glass, but not enough to obscure the view of the slumbering city, perfect in its silence. He loved this view, even more during the winter. The ice and the occasional faint dusting of snow made it seem more pristine. His father was fond of standing by his side at the window and making grand proclamations about how all this would one day belong to him. He sighed, his fingers toying with the ruby signet ring given him by his father as a symbol of that destiny. Father did not understand. There was much more to life than having control of a city, or even a kingdom. But then, when had his father truly understood anything?

He shivered again, feeling the shadows in the room suddenly deepen. Some fleeting memory of the nightmare flared in the depths of his mind, evaporating in an instant, but not before the boy realized why his tears fell.

This thing he had dreamed of, whatever it might be, was not coming for him. It was coming for his father.

And it was coming tonight.



GHOSTS



Silence hangs over Takish'Hiz like a shroud.

An apt simile, Rollo Leafsinger decided as he slipped silently along the alley, keeping close to the rough stone wall. By day every conversation was laced with unspoken dread, but at least the Low Quarter still bustled with business. There was winter sunshine to drive the darkness away, and the azure voids of the sky to help the citizens dream that freedom still existed, somewhere.

At night, though, the city rotted in the tomb of its own walls.

It hadn't always been so, the halfling thought, straining his ears for any sound. A mere dozen seasons ago it wouldn't have been just the dal districts that dared to smile and dance and revel. The broad, tree-lined avenues that were the city's arteries had teemed with the ebb and flow of crowds, their numbers bolstered by almost every race on Norrath, many with faces turned up in wonder at the splendor of the capital. Every street corner had played host to a troubadour or three, or a hawker plying gaudy, overpriced trinkets. The air had been alive with the smells of cooking, and one could find treats and flavors from across the kingdoms, all available beneath the watchful presence of the Grand Tower of the Imperial Palace.

The tower had survived the slow death of the city, but it seemed to Rollo that its radiance now existed only to mock. It almost floated above Takish'Hiz, rising magnificent and daunting from the heart of the inner city where only elves walked. Once a symbol of unity, it now served to point the dal to the heavens while casting its shadow over everyone else.

The city made a remarkably preserved corpse, Rollo admitted as he darted on soundless feet across the open, cobbled

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expanse of Harken Lane. There was none of the garbage and filth that despoiled the streets of other large cities. The City Watch ensured that the sort of waifs, urchins, and living detritus normally found clustered in the dark alleys of lesser cities never remained in Takish'Hiz long enough to upset its noble folk. The walls of the city stood whitewashed and blemish-free, even in the Low Quarter, yet Rollo saw only the bleached bones of what had once been the greatest city on Norrath.

The elves called this a golden age, and gloried in their freedoms and riches even as they denied them to those they looked down upon. Rollo wanted to laugh in their faces. If only they could see the city as he saw it, as it truly was. Takish'Hiz was long dead, mummified and mute, her broad avenues and narrow, twisting back streets equally silent, except for the occasional patrol of the City Watch. It was they who kept the inhabitants of the city silently slumbering in their austere sarcophagus by ensuring that none but elves breached curfew. Everyone had heard rumors of what the Watch did to any non-dal they found on the streets after the appointed hour, even if most were exaggerated. Almost everyone seemed to know someone who had run afoul of them.

Rollo had known many, some among his closest friends. It was why he took no chances now, keeping to the deepest of shadows and only emerging when absolutely necessary to scamper across dimly lit open spaces.

The narrow street flowed into the wider expanse of Raven's Square. Rollo skirted around the edges, staying well back beneath the shadow of the ancient wooden houses that, despite their cleanliness, seemed like they might tumble into the square at any moment. A distant shout and the brief flicker of a lantern gave away the presence of the Watch, but the patrol was two or three streets away from the square. Rollo knew that even keen elven eyes were unlikely to see him in his black, hooded cloak from such a distance. Even still he paused, dropping into a crouch and letting his fingers slip beneath the cape to caress the reassuring weight of the short truncheon tucked into his waistcoat.

He filled his lungs and kept still, careful not to release his breath lest the patrol see it rising on the frozen air. It was the fourth patrol he'd spotted so far this evening. The Low Quarter had been on edge since the week before when the Watch rounded up a dozen gnomes after a protest sparked by complaints over stale bread. Erring on the side of caution seemed the prudent course.

Waiting patiently until the last of the glow had faded into distant Bank Street, Rollo rose, took a few more steps, and knocked gently on the faded dark blue door of the fourth house on the left.

From inside came the muffled sound of shuffling feet, then the soft hiss of a well-oiled bolt being drawn back. The door opened.

Noting with satisfaction that no errant light escaped onto the cobbles to expose him, Rollo looked up at a thin, aging human. He stepped across the threshold and started to remove his cloak, then on a whim changed his mind and kept it draped around his shoulders. He pulled the hood back just enough to reveal his face. "Am I the first, Dorovan?"

The old man nodded, his jaw set. The muscles of his cheeks twitched slightly beneath the parchment-thin skin of his face. His eyes, unblinking, gazed down without any sign of emotion. Turning in silence, he led the way through the darkened house to a thick interior door. It opened into a small but neat kitchen, lit by the sputtering flame of a single candle in the center of a battered wooden table.

The old man gestured for him to sit and edged wordlessly out of the kitchen, closing the door behind him.

Rollo clambered up onto one of the simple, clumsily-built seats. More than likely, Dorovan had made them himself. The kitchen was in better repair than Rollo had expected of a house so deep in the unloved and murder-haunted Low Quarter, but its state spoke more of his host's pride than any suggestion of relative wealth. Lighting his pipe, Rollo shifted his chair slightly to ensure that his back faced the crude stone hearth and the small fire crackling beneath it. He had chosen the

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position deliberately, and not just for the rejuvenating warmth of the flames. It gave him the best view of the room without leaving his back exposed. Both were important considerations tonight. He pulled his hood up higher and waited.

A muffled rap sounded through the kitchen walls, followed by the thud of heavy footsteps in the hallway. The old man shuffled back into the room, trailed by a corpulent dwarf. The few patches of the dwarf's cheeks not covered by his thick, matted beard shone a florid red that matched his hair. The dwarf paused as his eyes fell on Rollo, and he grumbled something incoherent and slumped back onto a chair opposite the halfling. They did not speak.

Dorovan placed a battered iron kettle above the fire before returning twice more to the front door. The old man's first trip yielded a tall, middle-aged human with an empty sleeve hanging where his left arm used to be. Rollo withdrew his tabac pouch from beneath his cloak and, taking care not to dislodge his hood, pushed it across the table to the newcomer. The man took it with a friendly nod, and finished filling his own pipe as Dorovan returned with the last of their gathering.

"It's cold as a tomb out there, but I see you've all made yourselves comfortable," Castigan sneered, running one hand through her thick black curls. Shorter than the other humans, she wore clothes that far outmatched theirs for price and quality of material. Her gold earrings alone would have fetched a month's wages for one engaged in honest work.

"You're late," the dwarf grumbled.

"Some of us have more important jobs than others, Bek," Castigan said, removing her garish jacket. "And customers to satisfy."

The one-armed human blew out a thin column of smoke that hung in the air above the center of the table. "And how is the slave trade, Castigan?"

"Busy. I sold three ogres today, for a good price." She glanced over at Bek with a half-smile. "And a dwarf who stole some of his master's silver. Not much money in dwarves these days."

Spitting a curse, the dwarf started to clamber from his seat, but Rollo raised his hand. "Sit down, Bek," he said, noting how the dwarf's cheeks burned with fury now. Perhaps it had been a mistake to recruit someone so hotheaded, but the dwarf ran the finest non-dal apothecary in the city. "As for you, Castigan," Rollo added, pointing a slim finger, "we're all friends here. You will be civil."

Castigan slid into the last chair, her eyes lingering on the expensive ring on Rollo's hand. "As you say, *Professor*." There was no disguising the contempt laced into the last word, nor the distrust that came with using the only name Rollo had given them. Still, they all understood the need for secrecy. And, Rollo thought with a smile that remained hidden beneath his hood, they all knew who paid the bills.

He turned to the one-armed man. "Let's get started. Mergher, what do you have to report?"

"Little." Mergher rubbed his chin with his one hand. "The butcher's trade is joyless these days. Since the Emperor's trademaster starting fixing prices for the dal, I'm all but giving my stock away to any elf who asks for it. Means I have to up the prices for everyone else, so I hear grumbling on all sides. Things stay like this much longer, I might end up closing the shop. Can't even afford an apprentice, let alone—"

"Fascinating," Rollo interrupted. "I meant about gaining access to the palace."

"Oh...right," Mergher mumbled. "The kitchen doubled its order of meat this month. Tedescho's and the Lumis Brothers are bidding on the contract as well, so there's no guarantee I'll be the one they choose."

Rollo tapped his pipe on the table and sighed. "Perhaps some sort of scandal might have to beset the other traders," he mused. "You *must* be the chosen supplier for the princess' birthday banquet. Otherwise this whole plan falls apart."

"I know," Mergher said. "Can you incite such a scandal?"

"I can," Rollo answered simply. He had already devised and dismissed a dozen ways to make it happen before settling on the thirteenth. He turned to the dwarf. "What about the herbs?"

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Bek almost dropped his own pipe when he realized he was being addressed. "Um, it will still be another month before the drumwort arrives," he said.

Rollo cursed beneath his breath. "More delays?"

"It... it was a bad harvest this year," the dwarf stammered, "and demand in the north is unusually high. At least the slithroot is in my storeroom now. It will all be ready in time."

Castigansnorted. "Drumwort. Slithroot. They're medicines for children. I know for a fact Bek keeps stronger stuff in that grubby little shop of his. They'd never taste varum powder. Fifty silver worth and Valinor and his whole wretched brood would be dead as Quin'Sari."

"No!" Rollo slammed his small fist onto the table, making Bek jump. Idiots! How many times had he explained the plan to them? As angry with himself for losing his temper as he was at Castigan, he took three quick breaths. He let his thoughts drift to the Commonlands, and the way the last light of evening played across the lilies that laced the old mill pond on the Freeport road. He could still smell the scent of the flowers, and...

Enough, he thought.

He began refilling his pipe. "I have been through this before," he told them, "but I see some of you still have trouble grasping it." He noted with some satisfaction the embarrassed frown that wiped the habitual smugness from Castigan's face. "If we murder the Emperor and his court," Rollo continued, "every dal in Norrath will thirst for revenge. Every elf garrison will turn its blades upon our peoples. You know what their High Magic did to Toskirakk, what their assassins did to—"

He cut short the sentence. He had almost said too much. He doubted any of them had ever heard of Stillwater, or what Valinor's soldiers had done there. But they might ask questions of others, and that might lead them to wonder why it meant so much to the "Professor." He saw Bek flash him a curious look, though the dwarf nervously cast his eyes down when Rollo returned the gaze.

"No," Rollo said softly. "We stick with the plan. Bek's herbs

will put the Tah'Re to sleep. With them as our hostages, we can prevent a backlash. There are elements in the nobility—the Thex family, for one—who don't approve of Valinor's subjugation of the races. They will negotiate with us, if we approach them the right way. This doesn't have to end in violence. There has been too much bloodshed already."

"I admire your dream, Professor," Castigan said. "I do wonder, though," she added with a dangerous gleam in her eye, "what gives you such an insight into the practices of dal nobility?"

Rollo blew out a long stream of smoke. Through it, he saw that Bek had leaned forward at the slaver's question, the dwarf's eyes burning with curiosity. "I have my sources," Rollo said, keeping his voice bland even as he felt his heart began to hammer in his chest. "What of your part, Castigan? Are all your pieces deployed?"

"My slaves are in place within the palace," Castigan said, hiding a yawn behind a tattooed hand. "Ever since they crushed Toskirakk, the high-born elves seem to relish buying ogres to serve in their grounds. They work them hard, too. Few would claim I treat my stock kindly, but compared to what their elven masters do to them, life in my slave pens is a summer festival."

"Just look at what they did to Dorovan," Mergher said. He pointed his one hand at the old man, who showed no flicker of interest at being singled out. "One word out of place to some elf lordling, and..." He mumbled to a halt, a sickened look spreading across his face.

"At least they gave him this house to keep him quiet," Castigan said. "Keep him quiet," she repeated, chuckling at her own jest.

Rollo frowned. The slaver was a disgusting creature, and it galled him to have to deal with such an awful being. But there was no denying that Castigan could put the right people in the right place for when the time came.

"That was what," Castigan continued, "three years past? Not so long ago, most dal regarded that sort of thing as going too far. These days, I doubt you'd find one elf in five who'd pay it any mind."

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Dorovan stared at the wall. He said nothing, just as he'd said nothing for three years.

"You've done well," Rollo told Castigan, swallowing his disgust for the woman. "Keep placing suitable slaves within the imperial household. See if you can't get a few halflings in there, too. The dal don't fear their halflings, which means they can get closer."

"Nobody fears halflings," Castigan laughed. "If only the bloody dal knew one of them was behind all of this. Is that what you do, Professor? Are you nursemaid to some noble's whelp? Or maybe the noble keeps you for himself? I've heard some rich dal like to—"

Bek's pipe clattered from his mouth to the table, his cheeks drained of color. He stood and almost toppled over before Dorovan reached out with wrinkled hands to steady him.

Castigan gave him a contemptuous look. "Commonlands tabac too strong for you, dwarf?"

Bek licked his lips. His beard glistened with sweat. "I just need a little air."

Rollo nodded, suddenly glad for the interruption. He didn't like Castigan's questions. The slave trader was loathsome and arrogant, but she was no fool. "Perhaps we could all do with a break. Five minutes." He turned to Bek, who was already stumbling toward the door. "And be careful. The Watch is particularly active tonight."

Bek didn't pause to respond. The door slammed behind him.

Castigan shook her head. "That one's weak," she announced to no one in particular. "I've never seen anyone with so much fear in his belly."

Rollo yawned. His bed called to him, and he didn't fancy one bit the thought of the long sneak back across the city to his own, far more pleasant home. Bek did seem particularly agitated tonight, even for the generally timid apothecary.

"Can you blame him?" Mergher shivered. "Do you know what the dal would do if they caught us? Or if they found out that I lost my arm at Shining Ridge and not in a farming accident?"

Castigan shrugged. "It's folly to trust anyone who's that scared."

Something clicked in Rollo's mind, but it took him a moment more to realize what it was. How could he have been so foolish?

Pulling his cloak tighter about him, he slid from the chair to his feet.

"Don't tell me the halfling needs air too," Castigan sneered.

"The privy," Rollo lied, turning to Dorovan. Without even a glance at the seated humans, he followed the mute old man back into the hallway and, at Dorovan's gesture, made his way up the narrow, uneven staircase toward the back of the small house. The sagging floorboards creaked ominously beneath his feet. Ignoring the chamber pot under the small window, he instead carefully pried open the window itself and peered out through a half-inch crack.

He saw nothing but the low rooftops of neighboring hovels and the shadows of the narrow alley that bisected the cluster of buildings. The thought flickered across his mind that he was imagining the threat, that this was just nerves and pressure taking their toll. He dismissed the notion. He hadn't survived these last five years by giving in to paranoia. His wits had kept him alive, and if they had temporarily failed him tonight, at least there was still a chance he might make it out.

The unusually high Watch activity. Bek's nervousness. The endless delays in getting sufficient drumwort, even though every apothecary in the city seemed to have it in stock. The dwarf's interest when Castigan started probing into Rollo's identity. Any one of these was suspicious. Together, they were damning.

There! A faint whinny and a snort of breath rising from beyond the next row of houses. Slaves didn't ride horses, and elven nobles didn't come into the Low Quarter after curfew. The Watch walked, they didn't ride.

Horses meant the Unbroken Chain. And that meant they were betrayed.



LONELY



The boy put the slim volume back on the shelf. It was useless. Poetry normally soothed him, but not tonight. The nightmare had faded to nothing, but still sleep would not return.

He ran his hand along the spines of the long line of books, leaving a fine trace of dust on his fingertips. Father had never approved of the collection, and would have been even less happy had he known the contents of some of his recent acquisitions. It was bad enough that his son read poetry, let alone the rest. When the boy had been younger, Father had tolerated the reading with a forced smile of forbearance, but as the years passed, the smile abated. Now, everything was about swords.

The boy tried to feign interest in martial tactics and swordplay, but they were crude instruments that bored him. It wasn't that he lacked skill. He had inherited his father's speed, if not his strength. He made up for his lack of brawn with agility, though, and cunning. Whether he won or lost a challenge mattered little to him. After all, who cared about a practice bout?

It would be different, he thought with a smile, if the contest were based on magic. Very different.

Sighing, the boy turned away from the bookshelf and sat back on his bed, pulling a woolen blanket close about his shoulders. He sometimes wished the talents that came more naturally to him could impress his father, just once. It seemed so little remained to bond them, other than their blood. He supposed they did still love each other, but if so it was a watery shade of the love he felt for his mother. To lie in bed beside her, enveloped in her arms, made his skin feel

like it had been kissed by the warmth of the sun, even in the dead of winter. But the persistent weakness that gripped her of late, despite protests that she was getting better, meant her affections had become rarer and more precious. His brat of a sister seemed to garner the greatest share of what hugs there were, and Father was often desirous of her attentions, too.

If Jorus were here, he'd understand. Of all those closest to the boy, Jorus was the only one who appreciated his true potential. In many ways—the ways that mattered—Jorus was dearer to his heart than Father. But even the wise old mage bristled at the boy's longing to master every form of magic, the dark as well as the light.

He lay back on the soft pillow, lacing his fingers in his hair. Some nights the loneliness became so crushing, so utterly soul-numbing, it made him want to lash out at the entire world. But not tonight.

Something was coming, bringing with it a desire for blood, and though the boy still felt a slight tremble of fear at the thought, it no longer paralyzed him. He would wait for it, and greet it with a smile.

At least once it emerged, he would no longer be alone.



THWARTED



Rollo pushed open the window. A crash echoed through the house, followed by the sound of dozens of feet stomping in the hallway. A shout rang out, then the clash of steel and a sudden piercing scream.

Forcing his head and arm through the small gap, Rollo scrambled for purchase on the windowsill. Panic flooded his veins as he found himself trapped, too large to get through the window despite his small stature. He drove both feet down onto the wooden windowsill and heard tearing as his waistcoat caught on the frame. Momentum almost sent him tumbling headfirst from the roof, but he managed to roll to his feet and crouch beneath the sill. He reached up and fumbled for the scrap of cloth that still clung to the window frame as footsteps resounded on the stairs. His fingers found it just as the privy door burst open.

“Check the window.” Rollo heard the growling voice, inches above his head. If they looked out and down...

“Don’t bother. It’s too small,” another voice snapped. “Search the bedroom. Quickly!”

With the elegant hiss of an elven blade being drawn, the footsteps moved away. Rollo slipped the cloth remnant into his pocket, then edged silently down the roof tiles and dropped into the alley below. Oddly, he felt no fear, just a half-remembered thrill and a deep embarrassment that he had let himself grow so soft about the middle. It was not, after all, his first brush with death, nor even his first rooftop—he would never have become half so famous if it had. It was his stories of derring-do and narrow escapes that everybody liked best. Well, almost everybody. Of late, most dal only wanted to read of Valinor’s exploits, not tales about a mere halfling.

Casting an eye up the alley, he headed away from the sound of the horses, stopping every three or four careful paces to listen. In his younger days he could move even more silently than a Teir'Dal, but where age had diminished his skill, cleverness and guile had been raised to the fore.

This part of town was a teeming warren of narrow alleys. Though he didn't know the area well, he could be sure the Unbroken Chain didn't either. For all their zeal, even the Emperor's secret police rarely ventured into the Low Quarter when they could be rooting out sedition in more salubrious places.

The thought of being caught by an arrow filled Rollo with dread, but capture would likely be rather worse. The Emperor had a tendency to go to extremes when he was disappointed. And, Rollo thought with a wince, Valinor would be *very* disappointed if the Unbroken Chain brought this particular halfling as their prisoner.

The sounds of struggle had faded even before he dropped from the rooftop. Silence reigned over the Quarter as he left the house behind and plunged deeper into the maze of cramped avenues, navigating more by instinct than from any clear plan. Sooner or later he'd hit Camphor Street, and he knew a dozen discreet routes from there back to his home on Sentinel Hill. In theory, he could walk openly there despite the curfew—after all, none but rich elves and very trusted associates lived on the Hill, and the Watch wouldn't dare to stop and question the likes of them—but Rollo wasn't about to take any chances. By his reckoning, he'd be at Camphor Street within a few more turns of this steadily broadening alley.

Two shadows detached themselves from the walls, their drawn blades more chilling than any ice.

"Halt," a deep voice said. The figure, clad in an indigo cloak with a chain of thick silver links glinting around his neck, raised a sword to point unerringly at Rollo's throat. "Pull back your hood and be recognized."

Rollo considered turning to run, but knew he would be dead within two paces. He'd spent too much time with officers

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of the Unbroken Chain to think otherwise. With trembling hands, he pulled back the hood, his mind desperately searching for a lie.

“Rollo?” The second dal stepped forward, her teeth flashing white in a puzzled smile. “Is that you?”

“Lieutenant Shir,” Rollo said, relief flooding through him. “What a pleasure to see you, madam.”

“Indeed,” Shir said, laughing. “I meant to write to tell you how much I enjoyed your latest play, but now I can do it in person! Honestly, during the final scene, when the ogres refuse to surrender and Valinor laments that he must destroy Toskirakk to save the lives of his own soldiers...why, I almost wept! Truly, Rollo, you are a genius.”

“You are too kind, madam,” Rollo murmured, his eyes on the blade hovering inches from his skin.

The first dal grunted. “What are you doing out here, halfling?”

“Manners, Ordell,” Shir snapped. “And put that sword away. This is Rollo Leafsinger.” She paused, staring in apparent disbelief at her subordinate. “Have you never heard of Rollo Leafsinger?”

“Can’t say I have, ma’am,” Ordell said, sheathing his blade, “but there is the matter of the curfew.”

“Hmm,” Shir said. “I’m afraid he does have a point, Rollo. By law, you’re not allowed out at this time of night. And why in the names of the Eight are you in the Low Quarter?”

“Stomach troubles,” Rollo lied, wincing as he rubbed his belly. “I needed something from my apothecary, and he lives just off Bank Street. I think I’m lost.”

“By a long way,” Shir said, frowning. “Look, Rollo, you’ve chosen a poor night to be wandering around here. I’m happy to walk you back to Camphor Street and have you escorted home, but your medicine will have to wait.”

“I understand,” Rollo said, with a sigh that was only half-forced. If he had to get stopped by the Unbroken Chain, at least it had been by a friendly face. Some sleep now would be welcome, and then in the morning he could plot his next

move. None of the conspirators, not Dorovan and certainly not Bek, knew for sure who he was. To them, he was a rich halfling—just another fat merchant who knew which imperial bureaucrats to bribe for a favorable trading permit. There was nothing to link him with the events at Raven’s Square. Certainly not to Stillwater.

“Of course, I’m going to have to mention this in my report,” Shir added, the words ringing like a death knell.

Rollo swallowed down the vomit that rose in his throat. “Must you? This is all frightfully embarrassing.”

“Rules must be followed,” Shir said, turning away. “But there’s nothing to fear. You’re a friend of the Emperor. What is anyone going to say?”

The speed with which Rollo made his decision took even him by surprise.

His hand slipped inside his waistcoat at the same instant he drove the heel of his foot into Ordell’s leg. The elf cried out as his knee buckled and snapped. Shir turned, eyes widening in surprise. Rollo brought up his truncheon in one fluid arc, stretching to his full height to smash her across the jaw. The officer was already unconscious as she fell, but the sickening crack of her head against the stone would have completed the job if needed. Spinning, Rollo brought the baton down on the back of the sprawling Ordell’s head, and he too fell silent.

Rollo bent over them, breathing heavily and surprised to find he was smiling. The die was cast, for better or worse. No more sneaking and plotting. It was time for action, just like the old times.

His smile faded as quickly as it had come. He was deluding himself, just as he had been when he pretended his kidnapping plan could ever succeed without bloodshed. The old times were gone forever. He was committed to a path that could only end two ways, one of which was his death.

He knelt down and placed his fingertips on Shir’s throat, then repeated the gesture with Ordell. Both were still alive, though they would awaken to wretched headaches.

Rollo’s eyes fell on the ornate silver-hilted dagger at each

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dal's waist. Two quick thrusts and their report died with them. It would buy him some time. He drew the dagger at Shir's side. She might die anyway—the impact on the stones had been vicious, and it would be a shame if such a sensitive and appreciative student of art and poetry should be left to struggle on blind or crippled.

Rollo cursed aloud, and slipped the dagger into his own waistband. If Shir died later, or lived her life infirmed, so be it. But he would not kill her, nor the other one.

Instead, after disposing of Ordell's dagger in a drain, he used their own belts and clothing to bind their limbs and gag their mouths. A few yards away he found a small alcove and dragged them there, doubting they would be found before morning. He ignored the nagging guilt at the thought that they might freeze to death during the bitter night. The halfling laid their indigo cloaks over them and told himself he had done the best he could. Besides, their chances were far better than his. By morning he would be on the run or, more likely, dead.

Tightening his own cloak against the night's chill and the risk of prying eyes, Rollo moved carefully to the end of the alley. There might be more of the Unbroken Chain combing the quarter in twos and threes, but he spotted none in the empty, unkempt street he navigated. To the south, he saw the ground rise toward Sentinel Hill. There, if he looked hard and long enough, he might be able to pick out his home, but he didn't try. His eyes looked past the fine dwellings to what lay beyond.

Towering over the city as a sword driven into the beating heart of the land, the tower of the Imperial Palace waited. It called to him like a beacon. And at the very top, high above the glory and decay of the city that both adored him and cowered beneath his tyranny, Valinor himself waited, surrounded by nigh-impregnable walls, royal guards, and the most potent mages in the Empire. To break into the palace was impossible. He had been there a hundred times, but only by the will of the Emperor himself, which no living soul dared defy. No one was getting into the palace tonight unless they were invited.

Or brought there by the Unbroken Chain.

Picking up his pace, Rollo Leafsinger headed for the palace, Shir's stolen dagger beneath his cloak and the first stirrings of a plan in his mind.



WAITING



The sound of hooves clattering in the courtyard brought the boy out of his bed.

With impatient steps, he hurried over to the window and flung it open. A blast of cold night air swept into the room and briefly stirred the dying fire. It made the boy wish he had brought the blanket with him. But when he leaned forward to look down on the scene far below, his quickened pulse made him forget all about the cold.

There were three prisoners, and they must have been important to Father, judging by the numbers of the Unbroken Chain dispatched to bring them here. He watched as the first of them, a human, was dragged from the wagon. They were all humans, the boy decided, for they moved with a lack of grace that would have shamed an elf. The first prisoner turned to one of the guards, who suddenly drove a vicious punch into the man's stomach that dropped him to the ground. Another guard kicked the fallen man, and several of them laughed.

The boy did not smile. Father's soldiers should be focused on their duties, not wasting time with such base amusements.

The other two prisoners followed the first out of the wagon. One, a tattooed female, had to be carried by the guards. Torchlight glittered off some gaudy trinkets in her ears as they dragged her, head lolling backward, toward the entrance to the inner chambers.

He had miscounted, the boy realized. There were four prisoners. The last of them, a dwarf, had walked between the guards on unsteady legs but with the air of someone who thought himself free. As the indigo-cloaked lead officer pointed toward the entrance, the dwarf began to gesture

wildly and back away, his pleading cries echoing off the courtyard walls.

One of the guards smashed the dwarf across the back of the head with his dagger hilt, and the soldiers dragged him away after the others.

The boy turned from the window, leaving it open. The cold air might help him sleep, he decided as he slumped back onto the bed and listened to the empty cart being pulled away. He felt an odd sense of disappointment. When the captives arrived, he'd figured this was the moment, but none of the feeble wretches now on their way to the interrogation chambers could possibly pose any sort of threat.

Perhaps his dream had been wrong. He'd never known it to happen before, but then, he so rarely understood his dreams.

He did not know what the four prisoners had done to provoke Father's wrath, but rebellion among humans and dwarfs did not surprise him. Father's shortsighted policies toward the other races were bound to lead to such an end. You simply could not force entire peoples to live among you as lower-class citizens and not expect defiance.

The boy wrapped himself in the blanket again and let his eyes drift to the bookshelf. When he was Emperor, he would do things a better way.



ASCENT



Rollo lowered himself to the frost-coated flagstones and let the now-empty cart roll away, keeping perfectly still to avoid being crushed by the wheels or spotted by the driver. He lay motionless, his breathing calm as he listened for the shouts of guards announcing his presence.

When none came, he rolled to his feet and slipped into the Sun Garden.

He had not expected it to be so easy, but then he had always been lucky. As he'd anticipated, the Unbroken Chain had chosen the fastest route to the palace for their wagon-bound prisoners. Most likely, they were keen to deliver their haul to the terror-shrouded cells beneath the palace. The officer in charge seemed angry, and would have been angrier still if he'd known that while his men beat a prisoner for some slight, an uninvited guest had slipped from the shadows and rolled under the wagon.

Those last few seconds had been among the most terrifying of Rollo's life, covering the three paces between the alley and the wagon, expecting at any moment to hear a shout or feel a blade punch through his ribs. But nothing came, and the prison transport lurched forward for the last stretch of its journey. No one checked the underside, either then or at the gates. After all, the Chamber of Repentance was the most feared place in Takish'Hiz. Who would ever dream of breaking *in*?

Rollo buried a twinge of regret that he would not live to sing songs of this night. Without question, it ranked among the greatest of his exploits. He felt certain Valinor would have chuckled at the tale, though the guards facing execution when

their failure was discovered would doubtless find it somewhat less charming.

The Sun Garden, its familiar scents unchanged by the onset of winter, sprawled between the tower wall and the half-observed tunnel entrance through which his fellow conspirators had been dragged. It had long been a place of tranquility, with its lush lawn and exquisite flowerbeds surrounded by high hedges and a dozen species of exotic trees.

How many times in this garden had Rollo recited poetry for the Empress Aletria and her quiet, enraptured son, or played the lute for the pretty, curly-haired Princess Illiana while she clapped her hands in delight? They might have been dal, and thus tainted with the same sin as Valinor, but he would miss them when this was all over. They had played no part in what happened at Stillwater, and he never dared speak of it to them. He would miss the warmth of Aletria's smiles, so free of the rigid formality most dal showed the other races, and the jubilant hugs of Princess Illiana, who saw him not as a halfling to be sneered at or ordered about, but as a treasured playmate little taller than she.

Rollo frowned as his thoughts turned to Miragul. Once, he had dared dream the boy might soften relations between the elves and the other races. So often had the prince requested that Rollo read him sonnets or share his thoughts on philosophy or art, that it seemed the child possessed the soul of a poet. How he'd loved stories of the genuine gratitude of the other kingdoms when his father saved the whole of Norrath from the perfidious evil of the shissar. As he grew older, though, Miragul had become sullen and withdrawn.

Rollo could hardly remember the last time he'd seen Valinor's son. It was a dozen visits to the palace or more since his last glimpse of the familiar tousled hair, lustrous gold to his parents' pale straw locks, his face thinning as he grew. At ten, he was only an inch or two taller than Rollo, but that would not last long. Once he came to be more like his father, what little remained of his interest in such trivial matters as art and poetry would no doubt fade forever.

No Poetry in Death

Rollo took off his boots when he reached the shadow of a huge swamp warden tree, a native of the Feerrott. Its towering trunk, so unnaturally tall for this climate, would have long since withered if not for the diligence of the druids who kept it verdant and glossy. Valinor had ordered its planting as a monument to his defeat of the ogres who had once lived in its shadow. Rollo had climbed it many times with the princess, and the route up its thick, warm trunk was still familiar. There were four guards by the side gate of the tower, clad in the green and gold tabard of House Tah'Re and talking amongst themselves, but Rollo knew he was safe from their gaze as long as he trod carefully. Concealing his boots beneath the hump of an exposed root, he quickly scaled his way to the branch he sought, a waist-thick bough cloaked in obscuring leaves that rose up from the garden and overhung the surrounding path until its fronds brushed the looming tower wall of the palace itself.

When he reached the end, moving carefully in case his weight shook the branch, he took a deep breath and stepped from the bough to the wall. His fingers easily caught the thin cracks between the stones. His bare, flexible toes found footholds with equal facility. He checked the stolen dagger still hung secure at his waist. Once, years earlier, Valinor had challenged him to see how high up the wall he could climb, so Rollo knew it could be done. Encouraged by the whoops of their old colleagues from the Toskirakk campaign, he had reached nearly a hundred feet up before the frantic cries of Valinor's infant children had brought the Empress running. Aletria had not shared their amusement. The climb back down, already more difficult than the ascent, had not been as fun, knowing the scolding that awaited at the bottom. Even the Emperor caught an earful that day.

Slowly, and after a quick exploratory glance at the oblivious guards fifty feet below, Rollo began to climb. This was the most dangerous part, he told himself, when the guards could still see him if one should peer too closely at the swamp warden. Another hundred feet or so, and he would be beyond the vision of any but star gazers.

At first, everything was as easy as he remembered. That

changed all too soon. During his last ascent he'd been younger, hardened by years campaigning in Valinor's retinue, and it had been a mild day. Now his fingers and toes ached as the frozen air and rock conspired against them, and his aging muscles burned with the effort of hauling the extra weight that hung around his midriff.

Seventy feet. He hardly dared look up at how much of the tower still stretched above him. Exertion brought warmth back to his body, but hardly enough to counter the icy breeze that grew stronger with each lurch upward. He forced himself to push the thought of the trial ahead from his mind, treating each step as a single small victory.

Had he made a mistake? No. This had to be done. For the good of all the races, the elves included. If they continued down this path, alienating the other kingdoms in the name of protecting themselves, they would soon make enemies of the whole world. The dal advisors dared not speak against their Emperor, who had long since stopped listening to anyone not of Koadal blood, even the halfling who had once enjoyed his trust. But Valinor had High Magic in his arsenal, and that devious witch Mizana D'Alyn whispering in his ear that as long as he had her to direct its power for him, any kingdom that stood against him was his merest word away from sharing Toskirakk's fate.

Rollo's mind drifted, detached from the sheer mechanical effort of gaining altitude. One hundred feet. Had there been a single, defining moment that changed Valinor? He had been so gallant when Rollo first met him, a figure from a romantic saga; tall, handsome, a ferocious warrior, yet one who could appreciate the beauty in nature. He had been cocky from the start, of course—what other young general, no matter how meteoric his rise, would seek out a famed halfling poet to be his biographer?—but that cockiness had not turned to arrogance until much later. Rollo had agreed to accompany him out of personal interest, but followed him to the mouth of the Greenblood out of respect, and stayed with him through the slaughter-filled march to Toskirakk out of love.

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Love, Rollo thought. I loved you then, Valinor. When you warned of the shissar threat, I stood at your side when others dismissed your concerns, and I marveled at the skill with which you outwitted the serpents and drove them from our lands. I trusted you when you said that the dal garrisons you stationed in every kingdom on Norrath were a temporary measure, and that the Unbroken Chain would exist only to root out lingering shissar influence. You were right about Quin'Sari's peril and the threat of the Daiku cult's influence among the ogres, even when the Thex king and others doubted you. I believed you when you told me that you'd underestimated the potency of the High Magic at the fall of Toskirakk. I told the true story of your regret at seeing the destruction you'd wrought, and helped spread the lie that you'd given the ogres every chance to surrender. Gods, I even believed that you would only take the title of Emperor to unite the lands, and told myself that the first excesses of the garrisons and the growing control of elven governors over the other races, even my own, was necessary and just. I believed you when you spoke the truth, and I pretended to believe you when I knew you lied. And I sang songs of your truths, real and otherwise, to your children.

One hundred and twenty feet. The toe and finger holds in the tower seemed harder to find with every yard he climbed.

But that was before Stillwater.

A dark mass of squawking, razor-beaked anger exploded from a shadowy crevice in the tower wall, its wingtip raking at Rollo's right eye. His hand came up to protect his face before his mind could control his instincts. Unbalanced, he felt the near-frozen toes of his right foot slip from the stone so that he swung out from the wall, half of his body dangling in space above the uncaring void.

Twisting with all his strength, the halfling flailed with his right hand. His fingertips caught hold of a lip of chipped rock and he pulled himself close to the tower despite the pain. He dropped his gaze onto the guards below.

His heart hammered, daring him to let go and make it quick. The guards had surely seen him. Alerted by the night bird, they stared upward now. He waited for the shout,

wondering if they had bows, and whether they could shoot an arrow so far up as to knock him from his precarious perch. Of course, they wouldn't need to. They could simply go to the window sixty feet above him and send their bolts singing into his eyes. Rollo kept gazing down, transfixed, as the guards scanned the tower. He didn't want to look up. He didn't want to see the arrow that killed him.

One of the guards suddenly laughed, and in an instant the four resumed their positions, their voices dropping to a distant murmur.

Rollo let his held breath escape with a quiet sigh. He'd come so close to a fall that would have felt like an eternity, even as it rushed to its sudden end. How tragic, he thought, for one such as he, renowned throughout the kingdoms as a purveyor of beauty and culture, to die such an ignoble death, reduced to a red smear of blood and flesh splattered across dispassionate stone. He shifted his grip and planted his toes before carefully reaching down with one hand to check his dagger. It had almost come loose, so he slid it gently back into place.

He closed his eyes and relaxed his breathing.

There was something comic about it all, Rollo realized. He had made his fortune and reputation telling tales of heroic endeavor and self-sacrifice, stories and songs that made meeting one's fate sound noble, even romantic. They were all just clever lies, he knew, for in the end, all death was ignoble. It was why even in the thick of brutal struggles in the Ferrott, or the midst of the desperate stand against the shissar upon the Hills of Shade, he had never killed. He had dodged, ducked, wounded, and even on occasion left enemies crippled for others to strike down. He had turned the battles of Valinor and his faithful Rollo into epic sagas known throughout the land, but for all his fine poetry he had never besmirched the beauty of this world by taking the life of another sentient being. There was no poetry in death.

Valinor had never understood the halfling's squeamishness. How the Emperor would laugh if he knew Rollo planned on breaking his vow tonight. He would scoff at Rollo's temerity

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in thinking he, of all people, could kill Valinor Tah'Re, the Emperor, the hero, the legend.

It was always going to come to this, Rollo realized with sudden clarity. The plot to kidnap the Tah'Re family had always been a fantasy, an improbable tale drawn to impossible reality from one of his novels. Even if they had somehow pulled it off, Valinor would have died before he negotiated, and nowhere on Norrath would have been safe from elven reprisals. All non-dal would have been held accountable.

At least, this way, a single halfling would bear the guilt.

A single execution would suffice.

Whether Rollo found him asleep in his bed, awake and speaking, or begging on his knees, Valinor would die with a stolen dal dagger in his heart. It had to be done. For the ogres of Toskirakk, for the humans and dwarves forced into servitude, for the gnomes imprisoned for daring to cry out at being starved.

For Stillwater.

Pushing the ghosts of the past away to focus purely on the deadly business of the moment, Rollo began to climb again.



LEGACY



Sleep had taken the boy by surprise. The night bird's cry did not. Though it wrenched him to wakefulness and left him floundering in a disoriented panic beneath the suffocating mass of his blankets, he knew he had expected it.

The bird had been in his dream, and he understood the words it said.

The thing that was coming for Father, coming for *him*, was close now. Close enough to feel the hatred emanating from it, growing stronger with every passing second. Where before the threat had been vague and unclear, now it coalesced like a thousand streams into a single river, dark and tarlike.

It would drown the boy, if he gave it the chance. He could sense its pain and its sorrow, but most of all he could sense the urgent need for vengeance that drove it forward, gathering momentum.

Sitting up in bed, he stretched his arms above his head and shook the sleep from his muscles. Three deep breaths were enough to clear the fog from his mind.

He would not give it that chance.

He pondered what Father could have done to create something so pure. The thing in his dream had been almost admirable in its quest for blood. The boy knew that terrible deeds had been done in Father's name, even if the Emperor himself had always told him that they were ultimately for the good of all his subjects, dal and others alike. What manner of shadowed creature was it that his sins had birthed?

With as much curiosity as fear, the boy leaned forward in his bed and awaited the thing that yearned to destroy him.



RECKONING



Rollo's hand reached the windowsill, and with a final gasping effort, he pulled himself into the bedroom.

He collapsed onto the floor, chest heaving with exertion and relief, and let the thick carpet embrace him. The hilt of the elven dagger was wedged painfully beneath his ribs, but he felt too drained to shift it. The room was warm despite the open window, and dimly lit by the still-smoldering embers of a dying fire on the far wall. The heat crept into his frozen fingers and toes, sparking a wave of pain as sensation returned.

His senses, overwhelmed by the near-endless torture of the ascent, began to clear. It surprised him that the window had not been closed on such a cold night. He was glad of it, though, for he would never have had the strength to force it open. His arms still felt leaden. If Valinor stirred in his bed now, Rollo doubted he could even make a fight of it.

In the faint light from the embers, he could just make out the frames of paintings along each wall, and of several ornate carvings resting on plinths. He recognized one of them, a rich dark wood representation of a troubadour playing a lute to soothe the sleeping basilisk that curled its thick tail around his legs. Rollo had given it to Miragul. Had he, then, given it to his father?

Resting his hand on the silver hilt of his dagger, he clambered to his knees.

"Rollo?"

The fire flared into roaring new life, flooding the room with light, and Rollo covered his eyes against the painful glare.

"This is a surprise," Miragul said. He made a gesture toward the fireplace and the flames settled into a comfortable glow.

“My Prince,” Rollo said, bowing.

The boy rose from his bed and padded softly across the carpet, his bare feet and pale ankles sticking out from beneath the thickness of his nightshirt. His voice was cool and high, still girlish despite his growing stature. “It’s been so long since I last saw you. I did not expect you to visit quite this way. I thought...never mind. Have you come to sign your latest book? I have three copies, you know.” He gestured to a shelf along the wall, where Rollo saw exquisitely bound copies of many of his plays and collected poetry amongst the throng of older, more battered tomes.

“Alas, Your Highness,” Rollo began, trying to keep his voice calm as he looked toward the bedroom door. “I am here on other matters.” *Fool*, he chastised himself. *You’ve come through the wrong window*. His mind scrambled to recall the layout of the castle tower, to seek the safest route to the Emperor’s rooms.

“Sign it,” Miragul said. The boy smiled, but the gesture failed to soften the note of command in his voice. “In fact, sign all three. You know how much I’ve always loved your stories. You’ll find ink and a quill on the desk there.”

Forcing a smile, Rollo walked over to the shelf and retrieved the three volumes. He carefully marked each copy “Leafsinger”, with a delicate flourish. Now that he was closer, he could make out the titles of the old books, some still half-coated in dust. Most he did not recognize, but the four he did brought a prickling feeling of unease. They were ancient treatises on magic, three elven and one Erudite, and all had unpleasant reputations. He wondered if Arch Mage D’Alyn had given them to the boy, but dismissed the thought. She would never deign to touch a book on human magic, and the others were unsavory even for her. Nor would Valinor have allowed it. The Emperor made little secret of his unwillingness to rely on magic, nor of his fears that it was prone to corruption.

Rollo left the signed books open for the ink to dry. *Not that it matters*. “My Prince,” he said, “I am most sorry to have intruded, but I have urgent business with the Emperor. Would you be so kind as to point me in the direction of your father’s chambers?”

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Miragul shrugged and waved half-heartedly toward the door. "That way, somewhere. Frankly, I lose track of things in this wretched old tower. I think, when I am Emperor, I shall tear it down and build a new one that better suits me." He frowned. "I rarely see my father these days. I fear, for tonight, neither shall you. He left before sunset for an inspection of the outlying garrisons, and will not return for days."

For an instant only, Rollo felt relief that he would not have to drive his dagger into his master's heart. Then despair hit him, rolling over him in waves. After all he'd gone through to reach him, Valinor was not here. The halfling would never get another chance. The Unbroken Chain would come for him soon enough, whether he made it out of this tower or not, and the Emperor, the tyrant, would continue his reign. There would be more Stillwaters. There would be no vengeance for the dead.

"Why, Rollo, you're crying." Miragul sounded perplexed. Perhaps, Rollo thought, that accounted for the half-smile that played on the boy prince's features as he gestured toward a cushioned bench near the foot of his bed. "Sit down."

Rollo slumped into the offered chair.

"You've made quite a climb, my dear bard," Miragul purred, walking across to the fireplace and resting his hand on the mantle. "Tell me, why you are so keen to see my lord father?"

"Have you ever heard of...Stillwater?" After so long not daring to say the word for fear of betraying himself, Rollo had to force it from his mouth. It tasted wrong, like a fine wine left too long on the table.

"In the Commonlands? Yes, I know of it."

"I grew up there," Rollo said. "I left when I was young, eager to seek my fortune, but most of my family remained. I would send them letters from time to time, describing the glories of Takish'Hiz and, later, tales of our victories in the Shissar War." Despite his sadness, he felt the tug of a smile at his lips as he remembered. "I don't think my parents ever really got used to the idea that their son had seen so much of Norrath, or that the Emperor himself loved the song I wrote after the battle for Salikash."

"I still catch him humming it sometimes," Miragul told him. "It's why he chose you as his biographer. Your parents must have been very proud."

"Yes," Rollo agreed. "They were. Of course, they were horrified to hear about Toskirakk, but it was all so far away from Stillwater." He paused, his mouth dry.

Miragul gave him an encouraging smile. "Go on."

Rollo nodded. "When your father was newly crowned and the first garrisons were established in the Commonlands, my people accepted it. No one wanted the shissar to reemerge near Stillwater, after all, and the garrisons paid good money for the food and goods they bought. My sister wrote that people were saying Stillwater was blessed, and that they hoped the garrison would stay forever."

He stopped, refusing to meet the boy's gaze. He had known Miragul all his young life, and now that he realized what he had to do next, he could not bear to look at him. As he felt Miragul's cool hand patting his, his resolve faltered. But then the words began to pour from his mouth again, as if the story itself demanded to be heard.

"One day, the garrison stopped paying. The soldiers had papers from the Imperial Court that said they were to be given anything they needed at no charge. The town elders wrote to me, through my sister, and asked whether I could aid them in protesting this treatment. I advised them to do as they were told." Rollo felt his hand twitch, and dug his fingers into his thigh as waves of guilt washed over him. "I was fond of my life at court...too fond to risk it by speaking to your father. He would only have told me it was necessary, that it was the price for defending the realm. Speaking up would have changed nothing, but our friendship would have been ruined. I'd have been just another malcontent halfling, exiled to the Low Quarter with the other rabble." He wanted to scream with frustration, with his anger at himself, and the worst of it was he knew nothing he could have done would have made a difference.

"It wasn't your fault," Miragul told him gently. "Father rarely listens to anyone. What happened then?"

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"Few took my advice," Rollo murmured. Where seconds before he had wanted to shout the story, now he could barely bring himself to speak it. "Some of the younger folk took to burgling from the garrison to get back what they were owed. They ambushed a wagon bringing pay to the encampment and roughed up the soldiers escorting it. Everyone in Stillwater thought it just, and no one came to any real harm, save for a bit of elven pride."

"We do have our pride," Miragul agreed, walking across the room to close the window.

"The next letter I received," Rollo said, the words staccato and cold, "was from my cousin. My sister was dead. My friends were dead. The garrison had surrounded the village and set it ablaze. They murdered the entire town."

The fire crackled, the popping of wood in flames the only sound in the room.

"Ah," Miragul said. "That would explain it."

It was the conversational tone that brought Rollo's eyes back up to look at the boy. Miragul stood in the center of the room, his hands behind his back. There was no obvious emotion on his face, except perhaps satisfaction, as if he had solved a riddle. Rollo stared at him. "Explain what?"

"Your anger," Miragul said. "The need for vengeance that consumes you. I can see it in your eyes, in your soul. It's like a starved wolf, you know. It won't stop baying until you feed it blood."

Rollo sat back in his chair, confused. "So you understand what I must do?"

"Of course," Miragul said, with a smile. "You came here to kill my father. In his absence, you now plan to kill me, though you question whether you really have it in you. You hope that the pain of my death will soften him, that as his subjects share his sorrow, he will look more kindly upon the other races."

The boy took a step closer, surprising Rollo with the way he seemed to loom over him despite the distance between them. Miragul had indeed grown since he had last seen him, but while the months had added a few inches to his height,

they had added something else to his eyes. His curious gaze was not that of a child anymore. There was wisdom there now—and something darker, too—but not a trace of fear.

The boy stood still a few more seconds, and then laughed. “I’m afraid you overestimate my worth, Rollo. No doubt my death would cause Father a moment of regret, but no more than that of a favored horse, and certainly less than the loss of one of his Teir’Dal. He would be just as happy for Illiana to take the throne, perhaps more so.”

Relief flooded through Rollo. Miragul understood. Somehow, it made this easier. He rose to his feet. “You’re wrong, My Prince,” he said gently. “Your father loves you, more than anything. He simply lacks the words to say it.”

“He never was very clever.” Miragul glowered, though his eyes flashed a flicker of doubt.

Rollo drew the dal blade.

Miragul’s gaze dropped to the naked steel. He burst out laughing. “Oh, Leafsinger, you *are* amusing.” He clapped his hands in delight. “You genuinely think you can harm me, don’t you?” The smile disappeared, replaced by a look of disdain. “It’s actually quite insulting. Do you really think I would let a *halfling* cause me harm? My father was too soft, allowing you ideas above your station. When I am Emperor, I shall not make the same mistake, not with any of Norrath’s lesser creatures. Do you have any inkling of how many ways I could have destroyed you since you entered this room?”

Rollo edged closer, the point of the weapon held low. He tried not to think about the sensation of the blade plunging into the boy. Just finish it, he told himself, though something else nagged at him. “Why didn’t you kill me, then?”

“Oh, I intend to,” Miragul said. “I just wanted you to tell me one last story first.”

The smile returned, the boy’s eyes burning with such sadistic joy that Rollo almost dropped the knife.

“You know how I love your stories.”



AWAKENING



Miragul wanted to giggle at the sheer terror in the halfling's eyes, but stopped himself. He wasn't a child anymore, and besides, the temerity of the little worm was vexing. A halfling dared to threaten *him*? He was Miragul Tah'Re, son of Valinor, heir to the throne of the Takish Empire.

This creature must be made to pay for his insult.

"Why do you think I closed the window?" He smiled at the confusion in the poet's eyes. "I didn't want you trying to escape the way you entered." It was a shame, in a way, that this had to be done. Rollo Leafsinger really did write beautifully. But he still held the knife. That wouldn't do.

Miragul pointed a finger and channeled the heat of the fireplace into the steel of the dagger. With a shriek, the halfling dropped the red-hot blade on the floor and clutched at his burned hand. This time, Miragul couldn't help the giggle that escaped his lips. Never mind, he told himself. No one was around to hear it. No one who would live, at least.

The halfling backed away, whimpering. Miragul saw his eyes glance at the doorway and stepped forward to cut off his escape.

Sudden pain flared in his foot. With a curse, he looked down. He'd stepped on the damned dagger, and its hot blade had seared his unprotected skin. With a snarl, he sent a wave of Ice onto the weapon, drowning the heat it held in a puff of steam. It did not stop the pain, but he knew enough of Healing to take care of the blisters later. Right now there were more pressing matters.

He looked up as Rollo wrenched open the door. Flicking out his fingers, Miragul cursed Lightning into it, shattering

the wood into a thousand tiny fragments. He heard the halfling squeal, but the slapping of bare feet against stone in the corridor outside told him that the door was all he had destroyed.

Bellowing with frustration, he stepped into the hallway. The halfling's back was to him as Rollo raced away. Smiling in triumph, Miragul raised his hands, only for someone else to step between him and his target.

"Master Rollo?" The girl stared after the halfling in surprise. She spun and saw her brother as he bore down on her. "Miragul, what's going on?"

"Out of my way, Illiana!" he shouted, shoving her back into the open doorway of her room. His damned sister! Was it not enough that she was Mother's favorite, and likely Father's too? The halfling disappeared around the corner.

Snarling because no words could give voice to his fury, Miragul followed.



DECENT



Rollo ran in heedless panic, without any thought but to escape the evil pursuing him. Through the haze of his own terror, he spotted a familiar archway and barreled toward the stairs he knew lay beyond it. Though events of recent years had caused his faith to wane, he found the words of a prayer to Taylin tumbling from his lips, begging for whatever scraps of fortune she might spare him. He reached the top of the long spiral staircase and slammed into a dal courtier who had just ascended. Both tumbled to the ground.

Looking back over his shoulder, Rollo tried to stand, but the elf spluttered and grabbed his arm. "Leafsinger? What's the meaning of this?"

Rollo half-recognized the dal—a minor noble he'd seen fawning over the Empress in simpler times. He slapped the elf's hand away and scrambled for the stairs as Miragul rounded the corner.

"Stop, halfling!" the dal shouted, grasping for Rollo's cloak. The courtier's fingers caught the material just as Miragul's spell struck him full in the spine, dissolving the elf into a fine pink mist. The fingers, now ending abruptly at the second knuckle, clung to the cloak for a moment before falling in Rollo's wake.

Rollo dove into the stairwell as the wall behind him exploded into fragments, and bounced rather than rolled downward. He heard the bone in his left wrist snap in two, but fear kept the pain at bay. Jumping up, he felt a warm rivulet of blood run down his cheek from an unseen gash on his skull. There was no time to check its severity. He heard Miragul's voice as he approached, more animal growl than dal, and

plowed on down the stairs, driven by the all-consuming need to keep one turn ahead of the murderous prince.

The staircase came to an abrupt halt and Rollo skidded out into the wide open space of the imperial receiving room. Two guards, positioned on either side of the entrance, stared at him as he sprawled on the carpet. An off-duty Teir'Dal and a gnome servant in Takish livery stood on the far side of the room. All shared the same look of shock and confusion.

For the first time since Miragul had first raised his hand, Rollo felt his wits edging through the numbing curtain of fear. "Don't just stand there," he snapped at the guards. "Get upstairs. Someone has attacked the Empress!"

Without questioning him, they turned and charged toward the stairs. The Teir'Dal, her eyes burning with near-religious fervor, raced after them. Ignoring the questioning look of the gnome, Rollo ran in the other direction. He didn't really care where he went. He had no plan more complicated than to reach the walls and try to jump into one of the trees below before disappearing into the Low Quarter.

He heard the roar of spellfire and a scream from the staircase, and caught a glimpse of one of the guards tumbling back down with smoke pouring from what was left of his head. Another innocent dead, and he doubted Miragul even noticed, let alone cared. Twice more he heard the thunder of the prince's spells, though he couldn't tell whether it was stone they hit or flesh. As terror pumped renewed vigor into his short legs, he plunged into the maze of hidden corridors used by palace servants. It was unlikely Miragul even knew they existed, but that did not mean Rollo was safe. The boy would turn the palace upside down to find him, and probably the Low Quarter too. But even if he made it out of the city, made it far away from Takish'Hiz, he still would not be safe.

None of them would.

He almost wanted to laugh at the irony of it all. How had he ever thought that Valinor, with his misguided jumble of dreams and schemes and noble ideals, was the greatest evil? That the lives of non-dal could not get any worse? Before this

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was over, there would be a dozen Toskirakks, and a thousand Stillwaters. The races would beg, *beg*, for the simple oppression they faced now. He had looked into Miragul's eyes and knew what lurked in the darkness behind them.

He had seen the death of the world.



DREAMS



Miragul let the officer finish his report, fighting the urge to destroy the fool, and then dismissed the guard with a curt flick of his hand.

There was no sign of Rollo Leafsinger. Despite dispatching the Watch and the Unbroken Chain, and a search of the entire palace, they couldn't complete the simple task of finding the traitorous halfling. No matter. The little wretch was no threat. In fact, his treachery had already proven useful.

Barely an hour into the dawning day, the city was abuzz with stories. Leafsinger, noted poet and biographer of the great Emperor, may his reign be long, had entered the palace under the mantle of friendship and attempted to murder the blessed Empress Aletria as she slept. Only the heroic actions of her loving son, Miragul, had saved her. Sadly, her defense had not come without cost, for four noble elves fell victim to the pernicious sorcery the halfling had borne to complete his sordid task. The Arch Mage was investigating, and already it was whispered that even she had never encountered powers so devilish and cruel. The Emperor himself, may his reign be glorious, was rushing back from his tour of the garrisons and had vowed to hunt the would-be regicide to the ends of Norrath for this unprovoked attack on his family. There was general agreement that stricter measures need be taken to control the lesser races, who had shown once again why they were not fit to walk among elves.

What was not in doubt was that Prince Miragul had engaged the halfling in a magical duel and defeated him, though the boy was said to be distraught that he had not been able to save the dal who had died in the struggle, victims of the traitor Leafsinger.

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What, Miragul wondered, would his father make of that? It was magic that had saved the day, not the feeble armies and blades the Emperor put such faith in. Perhaps, at long last, Valinor might embrace High Magic and set aside his foolish insistence that steel was the only way to protect the Empire. He might even embrace his son's gifts, embrace his *son*...

Miragul frowned and pushed the thought away. Alone once again, he strode across to the window and opened it. Outside, the assembled ranks of palace servants stood facing the four prisoners lined up along the road outside the Chamber of Repentance, their hands bound and their mouths gagged. Distance couldn't obscure the soft glimmer of tears rolling down the shaking dwarf's florid cheeks.

An officer marched out onto the cobbles, the sound of his clattering boots drifting up to Miragul from the near-silent courtyard. Trailing him at a respectful distance came the shuffling, loathsome mass of an ogre, naked but for a loincloth and a steel helm that obscured his face. The morning sunlight glinted off the polished blade of the thing's huge axe like a warning beacon. The officer forced the first prisoner to his knees and stepped back. A single barked command brought the axe down, and a faint gasp rippled through the crowd of servants.

Three of the prisoners died well, Miragul grudgingly admitted, particularly the old man who showed no trace of fear even to the end. It took the whistling swing of the axe to cut short the blubbering of the dwarf, before gnome servants rushed out to collect the heads and scrub the stones clean of their crimson gore. A final command echoed from the tower walls, the crowd dispersed, and as suddenly as it had begun, the spectacle was over.

Miragul disapproved. Though it amused him to make another lesser creature perform the deed, the blade was far too benign a death for traitors and animals. He felt certain he could have arranged something much more fitting. Doubtless Father would be angry that the prisoners had been executed before the Unbroken Chain had fully questioned them, but

Miragul already had his lie planned. Shaken by how close their plot to kill the Empress had come to fruition, and fearing that Leafsinger might have trained the conspirators to somehow gain access to the family apartments again, he had begged his mother to order their execution. He was sorry, but he believed it necessary to make a show of strength.

The latter, Miragul was sure, would appeal to his father. Valinor valued strength above all else. How shameful it was, the boy mused as he looked out over the stirring city in the cold morning light, that Valinor lacked true strength—the will to do that which was necessary.

Envy of the elves would spur the other races to do them harm. Fear of High Magic would keep them in line, but without the will to use it, it was a worthless bluff. Though he never spoke of it aloud, Miragul knew his father still had regrets about what he had done to Toskirakk. That was weakness. When he had learned what had happened at Stillwater, his father had ordered criminal trials of the garrison commander and his officers while keeping the news of the massacre from Rollo. Weakness. He allowed halflings to buy property on Sentinel Hill, and humans and dwarves to own houses in the Low Quarter.

Weakness. All weakness.

Miragul leaned on the windowsill and drew in deep breaths of chilled air. He frowned. As the corpses were dragged away, their opened bowels left marks on the stones just yards from the hallowed grounds of the Sun Garden. Even in death, the lesser races polluted the land.

When Miragul was younger, his father was fond of standing beside him at this very window, telling him that everything his eyes could see would one day belong to him. That was weakness, too. Who cared about one city, no matter how beautiful? Who cared about a continent? All the Empire needed was for a single leader to rise up with the strength to do what was needed, to crush the lesser races beneath his heel, to wield High Magic to its full potential. The Arch Mage had required twenty acolytes to destroy Toskirakk and bind

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its brutish people into slavery. Once he was attuned to High Magic and had stripped his books of the last of their secrets, Miragul would level cities with his power alone.

There was a whole world beyond this window, and whole realms beyond this world.

One day, they would all be his.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



British author Robert Lassen created his first fictional dragon at the age of eight. It was the start of a life-long love of writing fiction, and the genesis of an unwavering dream to earn his living as a novelist. Putting it all temporarily on hold in order to serve his country, Lassen joined the Royal Air Force in 2002. Eleven years and two wars later, he blended his military experience with his love of dark fantasy in his debut novel, *Wrathful Skies* - the first in a trilogy set during the dark depths of the Second World War, when the end truly justified the means and no weapon was beyond consideration, no matter how sinister.

Lassen lives in England with his Californian wife and their two children, and loves every minute he spends facing once again the dragons of his youth on behalf of Sony Online Entertainment.

Keep up to date with what he is doing on his office website, www.robertlassen.com.