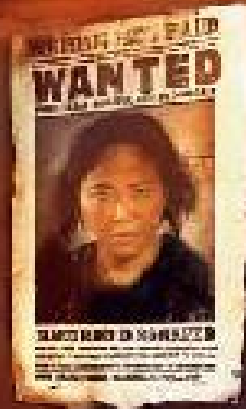


LINDSAY BUROKER



WANTED

LEGACY OF MAGIC
BOOK SEVEN

WANTED

LEGACY OF MAGIC
BOOK 7

LINDSAY BUROKER

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Author's Note

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We all knew I couldn't write just six books with Matti and Sarrlevi. So, here is the seventh, and, as I get this ready for publication, I'm working on an eighth.

Thank you for following along, and thank you to my beta readers, Sarah Engelke and Cindy Wilkinson, and my editor, Shelley Holloway, for sticking with me. Thank you, as well, to Gene Mollica Studio for the cover art and Vivienne Leheny for narrating the audiobooks.

“TINJA HAS REQUESTED THAT YOU MAKE AN APPEARANCE IN A FEW OF HER instructional videos.” I squeezed Sarrlevi’s hand as we ambled up the path from Green Lake toward the neighborhood where I now lived and he visited often. Our height difference made the hand-holding a touch awkward, but I didn’t mind. Walking side-by-side with the man—the elf—I loved was worth having my arm crooked like a chicken wing. “Feel free to say no, but she did mention being willing to pay for models.”

“Models?” Sarrlevi arched an elegant blond eyebrow.

“Gorgeous people with perfect cheekbones, mysterious and alluring eyes, and firm musculature that can cause consumers surfing video sites to halt and watch in utter captivation.”

“I am an assassin, not a model.”

“I know, but you stop traffic with your looks. Just now on our walk, a teenage girl skated off the path and into the lake because she was ogling you and missed seeing a mom with a stroller heading her way.”

“I would assist you with your plumbing projects before posing for the salacious entertainment needs of the humans of this world.”

“Well, this may work out perfectly then. For her next video, Tinja wants me to instruct people on how to plumb a tiny house. You can hold my tools.” I grinned, though I didn’t truly expect Sarrlevi to wander through Tinja’s marketing videos. His pride aside, the military *and* the police wanted him for breaking into Fort Lewis months earlier. While it was unlikely the authorities spent a lot of time on YouTube learning to build tiny homes, it would be a pain if a video led them to my doorstep.

“Does she pay *you*?”

“No. I’m not a model.”

We crossed busy Green Lake Way and headed up the street toward my house.

“No? Your musculature is firm.” Sarrlevi gave me a sidelong smile and shared his memory of me from that morning, during which we’d experimented with a sex position called the wheelbarrow on Earth and *erathgu* in Elven. Apparently, they’d named it after some libidinous forest animals that I’d never seen.

My cheeks heated, though only the autumn trees scattering yellow leaves on the sidewalk were close enough to overhear us. “Female models aren’t supposed to have a lot of muscles, at least not on Earth. Sturdy women are quite normal and admired on Dun Kroth.”

It bemused me how often I’d been hit on by dwarves during my last month’s visits to learn enchanting and smithing from my mother. After years of struggling to attract quality men in Seattle, I now found myself catnip to the stout bearded males of Dun Kroth.

“Naturally,” Sarrlevi said as my Victorian house came into view.

The new windows gleamed in the sun, and the recently replaced roof and siding were free of moss and grime. A few leafy vines that I didn’t remember planting wound their way up trellises, such things being expected, of course, when one dated an elf. The roof of Tinja’s tiny home was visible above the six-foot fence in the backyard.

Given that she was a goblin, and numerous of her kind visited her, it was good that the solid fence hid the area, but I wished I could show off the patio, gazebo, and garden beds I’d built. Since the fall weather remained nice, maybe it was time to host a small barbecue for a few friends and my family. I could invite my mother and father.

“Why do you do so much work for the goblin female?” Sarrlevi asked. “For free?”

“She’s my friend.”

“You do not believe she takes advantage of your generosity?”

“Oh, she does, but seeing her becoming successful and knowing I’ve helped her along the way makes me happy. I like to be useful to others, and a lot of people crap on goblins, so they can use some help.”

“Successful? She lives in a dwelling on wheels in your yard and eats your food.”

“That’s successful for a goblin.” I smirked. “Besides, she’s selling house plans now and getting closer to finishing her architecture degree. As she assures me, she’ll someday have her own urban goblin sanctuary, vast sums of money, and then she’ll hardly ever need to eat my cheese.”

“When that time comes, it will be a relief for you.”

“And my cheese grotto.” I didn’t mind sharing, but the three-and-a-half-foot-tall Tinja seemed to have more stomachs than a cow.

“How will the videos help this process along?” Sarrlevi glanced at my phone, which I’d used to show him Tinja’s social-media channels.

“If one goes viral—gets viewed and shared a lot because it’s useful or entertaining—it’ll bring a lot of awareness to her work. Some of the people who see it might want to buy her house plans.”

“This would happen if I appeared in the video?” Sarrlevi touched his chest.

“Uh, probably not. You’re very handsome, as you know, but I’m not sure that alone would prompt virality.”

“Because my face is not useful or entertaining.”

“Well, it’s kind of useful.” I nudged him with my elbow. “For attracting discerning half-dwarf ladies.”

“You are attracted by my loyalty, honorableness, and good taste in gifts.”

“Especially that last one.”

“Yes.” Sarrlevi lifted an arm for a hug but paused, his head swiveling toward the house.

I sensed our across-the-street neighbor, the dragon Lord Zavryd’nokquetal, in that direction. He wasn’t in his home, or his *lair*, as he called it, but on the sidewalk in front of *my* house.

Numerous wards protected my property, and I’d enchanted everything from the lamppost to the mailbox to a decorative windmill to spit magical projectiles at enemies that trespassed, but the weaponry wouldn’t activate if Zavryd or his mate, Val, came over. At this point, I considered them friends. Sarrlevi, however, did not. Oh, he might not mind Val, though their relationship had begun when he’d been hired to assassinate her, but he did *not* care for Zavryd.

“Why is that vile dragon standing outside your house?” Sarrlevi asked as we rounded the corner and said dragon came into sight.

Zavryd was in his human form, wearing his silver-trimmed elven robe and yellow Crocs, as he glowered at my front door with his arms folded

across his chest. Curious, I peered toward my porch. All I saw was the hanging swing I'd added and my dragon-shaped door knocker, a housewarming gift from Dimitri.

Zavryd's scowl turned from my front door to me—no, to Sarrlevi.

“*You.*” He pointed an accusing finger at Sarrlevi's chest.

Even though we'd been out for a relaxing after-lunch walk, Sarrlevi wore his twin long swords in scabbards on his back, and he did not appear concerned by Zavryd's ire.

“Are *you* responsible for the despoliation of my dragon topiaries?” Zavryd's pointing finger shifted toward the foliage guardians framing the walkway leading to the covered porch of Val's Victorian house.

They weren't as *despoiled* as they had been that morning. When I'd peeked outside at dawn, hearing laughter and heavy footsteps as people ran away, they'd been covered in shaving cream. Burned shreds of toilet paper had also hung from them, smoke wafting from the topiaries' nostrils suggesting the magical guardians had tried to deal with the affront. Though I hadn't *seen* the desecration, I'd had no trouble imagining neighborhood teenagers chucking rolls of TP at the shrubs from a distance.

Now, little remained of the mess, though a few clumps of shaving cream lingered, drooping from the leaves.

“I am not,” Sarrlevi said, “but were your wards not sufficient to protect your property from such an intrusion? If not, I would question the abilities of he who laid them.”

Zavryd's violet eyes narrowed. “You know full well that *I* laid them, you odious elf, and the property's defenses *did* activate. They blasted much of the detritus, but they were designed to keep out intruders, not protect themselves from the flinging of disrespectful and heinous debris. I believe *you* were responsible.”

“Juvenile pranks are beneath a mature elf assassin.”

“It was not *beneath* you when your vines grew up to clog the air-intake damper on my mate's meat smoker.”

Sarrlevi smiled tightly. “It is not *my* fault you do not tend your garden sufficiently to keep down the overgrowth. If I encouraged the sprouting of vines, it was only because *you* smashed Mataalii's new pathway lamps with your scaly tail when you landed last week.”

“Those lamps were angled such that they flood the area with light at night, intrusively brightening our nest.”

“Your nest should have fewer sheer draperies,” Sarrlevi said. “The lights are to make it more difficult for assassins to creep up on the property at night and test the wards under the shroud of darkness. You should be thankful for that addition, since your mate is also often targeted by enemies.”

I nudged Sarrlevi. “Why are you trying to pick a fight with him?”

“His despoiled shrubberies are making him cranky.” Sarrlevi did not take his gaze from Zavryd. “I believe he intentionally stomped over here because he’s in the mood for a duel.”

“Are *you* in the mood for a duel?”

“I would enjoy a little exercise.”

“Didn’t we exercise enough this morning?”

“The morning *was* stimulating, but I must keep my blade skills as honed as my bedroom skills. Especially since I’ve been unable to convince the Assassins’ Guild leader to remove the issuance that declared you the prestige hunt for the year.” His jaw tightened as he met my gaze, his eyes fierce.

“I *am* glad you’re keeping all your skills honed.” I squeezed his hand again, then released it and stood in front of him, hoping I could halt any duels before they broke out. Things tended to be damaged if not outright destroyed when Zavryd and Sarrlevi battled. “Some of the neighborhood kids were responsible, Zavryd. Halloween is coming up. Between your topiaries with the glowing eyes, the fairy ring in your yard, and the vampire in your basement, I have a feeling your house is going to be popular.”

“Matti,” Tinja called, not from the tiny home in the backyard but through the open front window in my house. She waved a wrench. “Will you come assist me with two new videos? I’ve acquired cedar shingles to demonstrate affixing siding, and I’ve also removed your sink so you can show viewers how to install one.”

“You’ve removed *my* sink?” I pointed to the house.

“Yes, indeed. The agate vessel sink in the master bathroom. It’s beautiful and will attract viewers. I’m ready to record as soon as you are. I can’t wait to publish these instructional videos for this new marketing plan. I hope that I’ll sell many, *many* more of my plans by teaching people how to build their own tiny homes. Purchasing land to construct a goblin sanctuary is not inexpensive, though I *have* located a neighborhood where properties are selling at a discount.”

“Where’s that?” Though the news of a missing sink had me alarmed, and I wanted to make sure Tinja hadn’t damaged it, I looked at Sarrlevi before

heading for the front door. He and Zavryd had fallen silent, but they continued to glare at each other. The insults might have gone telepathic.

“Nearby.” Tinja waved airily.

“Would you like to help me install siding, Varlesh?” I touched his arm. “Isn’t it better to model for a goblin video than goad a dragon into a duel? The latter is *not* good for one’s health.”

I will accompany you into your abode, he told me without looking away from Zavryd, *as soon as I know this dragon is not scheming revenge for a slight which I did not deliver*.

I sighed, afraid the duel was inevitable. *If you end up fighting, try not to take out any of the neighbors’ mailboxes this time, please*.

As I headed for the porch, I wondered if texting Val and asking her to calm her mate would do any good. Or maybe I could have meat delivered to Zavryd’s front door. A few servings of brisket and ribs might distract him from his ire over someone’s prank.

“Will your handsome elven assassin join us for the video?” Tinja asked hopefully as she led me into the house.

“I don’t think he’s interested in becoming a YouTube celebrity.”

“Did you tell him I am willing to pay for models?”

“Yes, but he’s already wealthy. I doubt you have enough funds to tempt him.”

“Will he share his wealth with you when you are married in the human way and cohabitating in this abode?” Tinja took me through the kitchen, where my cheese grotto—the bamboo box on the counter—was now empty, with orange and yellow crumbs scattering the counter around it.

The tray of homemade peanut brittle my grandmother had sent over hadn’t been touched, possibly because the pieces were hard enough to break teeth, even sturdy goblin teeth. Maybe I would keep the tray by the door in case I needed projectiles to throw at assassins. Some of the pointier pieces reminded me of Japanese throwing stars.

“We haven’t talked about marriage yet,” I said.

We *had* talked about one day having children and Sarrlevi helping me raise them, so he might be amenable to a wedding, but I enjoyed spending time with him the way things were right now and didn’t see a reason to rush—despite my sister’s admonitions that I was getting older and that raising children was a project for the young and vigor-filled. Besides, until I figured out how to get the bounty off my head and make sure the organization that

had kidnapped my parents forgot about me, it wouldn't be safe to have babies. Right now, it wasn't even safe to walk around town without my magical dwarven war hammer.

"Also," I added, "I'm not looking for him to share his money with me. Like you, I'm building my business and want to be successful on my own."

"Yes, that is a noble aspiration. However, if someone offers you great wealth, it is rude not to accept it. Much like great fromage. You should instruct the assassin to bring more of the *dokdok* cheese."

"I'm a little surprised that the entire half wheel that was there this morning is missing."

We stepped out onto the back porch. Several rows of my recently installed siding had been removed, and a stack of cedar shingles lay beside the wall. Apparently, I would be demonstrating how to install siding on *my* house instead of the tiny home. I had no idea where my sink was.

"I cut the leftover cheese into pieces to give as samples to those who came to see the tiny home." Tinja waved at the dwelling on wheels, the trailer lined up parallel to the fence, my hose and an electrical cord running to it. "I sold two sets of plans this morning."

Being a patient and supportive half-dwarf, I didn't point out that Sarrlevi's rare *dokdok* cheese had probably cost him a lot more than what she'd earned from those house-plans sales. I also didn't mention that she might have removed the siding from the tiny home instead of *my* house.

"Will you allow me to use your phone for the recording, Matti? I made a collapsible and adjustable-height tripod for it." Tinja waved grandly toward a contraption made from PVC pipe, mattress springs, and pitch.

"Go ahead." Careful to avoid the pitch, I propped my phone on her tripod.

As she instructed me on what to say and how to stand, I wondered if Sarrlevi was right. Maybe I *was* letting Tinja take advantage of me. Even though my business partner, Abbas, and I had sold all but one of our recently built homes and hadn't taken on our next project, I was busy with numerous renovations that still needed to be done to my new home. In particular, I had to reinstall the sink that I'd just installed...

"Begin instruction, Matti." Tinja hit record.

After a long sigh, I spoke about felt underlayments and whether it was better to use nails or staples for shingle installation. She frowned and pursed her lips. Maybe my delivery wasn't entertaining enough?

Tinja lifted a finger, as if to start directing, when a clatter came from

above. Before I could see them, I sensed Zavryd and Sarrlevi on the roof of my house.

What the hell?

Clangs rang out, then footsteps thudded. Sarrlevi came into view first, leaping off the roof, somersaulting through the air with his cloak flapping, and landing lightly on the slightly angled roof of the tiny home. He took two steps, whirled, and drew his swords to face his foe.

Coming right after him, Zavryd also leaped from the roof toward the tiny home. With a magical shield in one hand and a sword made from fire in the other, he didn't somersault and landed with more of a thump. That didn't keep him from appearing any less threatening.

Shouting curses in Elven—or maybe Dragon?—Sarrlevi and Zavryd came together, weapons blurring as they cut and slashed at each other.

“Not the tiny home,” I groaned, afraid they would damage it, especially since sparks were flying from Zavryd's fiery sword. “I'm sorry, Tinja,” I called over the noise of the battle. Somehow, even made from magical fire, Zavryd's sword clanged when it met Sarrlevi's, parrying and returning blows. “I shouldn't have left them alone out front.”

More than that, I shouldn't have made it so my wards and defenses didn't trigger for Zavryd. Maybe if he'd been pelted with tranquilizer darts or a mild acid, he would have thought twice about chasing Sarrlevi over the roof of my house.

Roaring more like a dragon than a human, Zavryd lunged at Sarrlevi and swept low with the fiery sword. With his face as calm as if he were playing a game of poker, Sarrlevi leaped up to avoid it. Once more, he somersaulted, this time coming down on the patio beside the tiny house.

When Zavryd jumped down next to him, Sarrlevi ran toward the side of my house. I'd never seen him run from Zavryd—from anyone—before, but instead of leaving the backyard, he sprinted up the side of the house, defying gravity. As far as I could tell, he didn't even use magic as he ran up and out of reach. Then, when gravity caught up to him, he sprang away from the house and somersaulted again, this time backward and over the approaching Zavryd.

Though Zavryd spun quickly and raised his shield as Sarrlevi landed behind him, Sarrlevi thrust his twin longswords in so quickly that they slipped past his opponent's defenses. The blades plunged for Zavryd's chest, and a wave of power blasted Zavryd into the side of the house.

“Varlesh!” I cried, shocked as our neighbor crumpled—why hadn’t Zavryd’s defenses been up? “What are you *doing*?”

I ran to put a stop to the battle. What would I tell Val if her mate came home full of holes? Holes that my elf lover had been responsible for?

But Sarrlevi lowered his swords before I reached him. To my surprise, Zavryd rose lithely to his feet. As one, they turned not toward me but toward Tinja and bowed.

At some point, she’d plucked my phone from the tripod to follow the action.

A huge grin split her green-skinned face. “I think I got it all!”

I stared back and forth from Sarrlevi to Zavryd. “That was planned?”

“More improvised than planned.” Zavryd touched a cut on his lip and gave Sarrlevi a dark look.

“Yes.” Sarrlevi touched a lump swelling at his temple. “As we battled, I explained virality to him and how it might eventually result in goblin success.”

“Which would lead to the overly tall *tiny home* that blocks my mate’s view of the lake leaving the premises across the street.”

“We moved it into the backyard so it wouldn’t block her view anymore,” I said. “At least not from the turret.”

“It is now visible from the living room window. She looks forward to its departure.” Zavryd turned his dark look on Tinja.

She was too busy gleefully going over the video footage to notice.

Zavryd thrust a fist toward Sarrlevi, who raised an arm in case it was a punch he needed to block. But Zavryd held it out without connecting and let it hang in the air.

“What are you doing, dragon?” Sarrlevi asked.

“I am employing the human ritual known as the fist bump. You are supposed to reciprocate by clashing your knuckles against mine.”

“Did you learn this ritual from your mate?”

Sarrlevi looked at me. For verification that it was a legitimate human thing?

“From her offspring,” Zavryd said. “She has explained to me that she is a cultural authority on this world.”

I nodded to Sarrlevi, though I questioned whether teenaged Amber was an authority on anything except fashion for young people.

As Tinja cackled with delight, presumably because she’d caught most of

Sarrlevi and Zavryd's battle and not because of my useful information on felt underlayments, the magic of a portal formed in the backyard.

I tensed and looked for my hammer, though only a few people that I'd invited—and instructed the wards to allow in—ought to be able to pop out of a portal on my property.

“That is elven magic.” Sarrlevi squinted suspiciously and drew his weapons, as if he expected an enemy.

“Maybe your mother is coming to visit,” I said.

“No.”

“An assassin?”

One powerful enough to get past my wards to open a portal directly to my house?

“We shall find out,” Sarrlevi said.

THE ELF WHO CAME OUT OF THE PORTAL WAS NOT AN ASSASSIN. VAL'S HALF-SISTER, Princess Freysha, emerged, landing in the grass near the tiny home.

I stared in surprise. Though I had invited her to visit anytime, she usually showed up at Val's house when she came to Earth.

Sarrlevi sheathed his swords, but he did not relax. He eyed her warily. Expecting trouble?

Freysha, her blonde hair back in a braid with twigs and flowers twined into it, formally greeted Zavryd, then nodded at Tinja and me, but she ultimately faced Sarrlevi.

Not drawing close to him, she gripped the hem of her tunic, tools in the pockets clanking as she kneaded it. Nervously? Freysha didn't still believe Sarrlevi was a threat to her, did she?

After taking a deep breath, she said, "My father, King Eireth, has reviewed your request and says that, while your mother is welcome to leave anytime to see you, you are not permitted to visit Veleshna Var. While he agrees that the acts perpetrated against your mother were heinous, and that you were within your rights to come to our world to seek someone capable of creating a cure for her, nothing about your past has changed. You have killed elven citizens, including his cousin Persylvar, so you will remain in exile. My father hopes you won't challenge his authority by stepping foot on Veleshna Var, but he says his guards will attempt to drive you away or capture you if you do."

Sarrlevi's jaw clenched, and I expected him to haughtily say they could try to drive him away.

All he did was nod curtly, unlock his jaw, and say, “As I expected.”

He might have expected it, but he radiated irritation at the denial. Though I could understand that he wanted to be able to visit his mother, I hadn’t realized he’d requested to have his exile lifted. Maybe he missed more about his home world than his mother and longed to return.

Permanently? Or just to visit? When he’d spoken of raising children in my new house with me, I’d thought... Well, maybe I’d *hoped* he would want to make Seattle his main residence.

“I am sorry to deliver this news to you,” Freysha told Sarrlevi.

“Are you the official elven envoy to Earth?” I asked her.

“No. I am the elf who comes to visit the house across from where Varlesh Sarrlevi is often found.” Freysha smiled at him, but it remained a nervous smile, as if she expected him to lash out at her.

He didn’t, but he also didn’t return the smile.

After an awkward silent moment, Freysha said, “Now that the message is delivered, I will visit my sister.”

“I will accompany you. My mate’s meat smoker has a problem with an intrusive weed.” Zavryd turned a cool squint toward Sarrlevi. “Perhaps you can eradicate it and ensure it does not interfere with the preparation of ribs again.”

Freysha mouthed *weed*, as if she weren’t familiar with the term—maybe elves believed that all plants had their place—but she nodded. “Certainly, Lord Zavryd’nokquetal.”

As they departed through the gate instead of over the roof, I took Sarrlevi’s hand and drew him aside. “You requested that your exile be lifted?”

His mother had promised to speak with the elven king and queen and tell them all about Princess Barothla’s machinations, and I’d gathered his mother wanted her son to be able to return home, but I’d never heard him express such an interest.

Maybe the signs had been there though. I remembered him sighing longingly and pressing his face against the mossy trees of his homeland when we’d visited. He missed his home. It wasn’t a lack of interest that had kept him from asking to return but a lack of belief that it would be permitted.

“My mother asked me to put in a formal request for consideration.” Sarrlevi gazed at the fence, his expression pensive. “She’d already done so but believed it would carry more weight if it came from me, the person in

exile. I did not think that would prove true, but, to please her, I did so.”

“You didn’t think the king would say yes, but a part of you hoped he would?” I watched his face, my heart aching for him. We’d accomplished his goal of saving his mother’s life, and she’d visited him at his chalet on Jiaga, so he had to be somewhat happy, but it made sense that he would long for more.

Not answering the question, he said, “My mother is not a mage with the power to create a portal on her own. When she visited last month, the king himself created a portal for her, but she has not come to see me again. Before she left, she mentioned that she had few acquaintances who could make portals and who agreed that it was worth her time to come see me.” His pensive expression didn’t change, but a muscle in his cheek twitched. “The king is busy and often not at home. *I* am also not always in the same place.”

“So her visiting you isn’t as easy as you’d hoped.”

“Prior to this, I had not seen her for centuries, so even the occasional visit is an improvement. And she is no longer ill.” Sarrlevi lifted his chin. “It is enough.”

It might be enough, but it wasn’t all he wanted. I rubbed my thumb over the back of his hand, wishing I could do something to change the king’s mind about him.

Soon after we’d met, Sarrlevi had told me the story of assassinating the king’s cousin and said he was a despicable person who’d shown a respectable side in public but beaten his family at home, much like Sarrlevi’s own father had. But the king hadn’t known about that. If he did, would it make a difference? If I told him, would he believe me?

Probably not. Not when I had no proof and Sarrlevi had been the one to convey the story to me. Besides, the elves had no reason to trust or even think highly of me. My dwarven grandfather had accepted me into his world after I’d brought Mom back to him, but elves had no love for mongrels of any kind, as Val had assured me, and I didn’t even have any elven blood.

A screech came from the street out front. Sarrlevi spun, drawing his weapons again.

When I swept out with my senses, I detected Freysha and Zavryd with Val in their house, but they weren’t the only ones nearby with magical blood. Orcs were coming up the street. *Numerous* orcs.

Sarrlevi ran for the fence and vaulted over it. Since it was taller than I, I veered for the gate. He beat me to the front yard and crouched with his

swords in his hands as a black cargo van rolled slowly past my house.

An orc driver and passenger leered through the open window, not at Sarrlevi but at me. Saliva glistened on their tusks, and their beady eyes were cold and calculating. I raised my hammer, expecting an attack, especially since I sensed more orcs in the windowless back of the van.

The front-seat passenger lifted his hand, a magical grenade in his grip, but the driver blocked him and pointed at Sarrlevi and then across the street at Val's house. Or maybe at the dragon he had to sense inside.

The driver pointed at me, drew his hand across his neck in a throat-cutting motion, then stabbed his finger toward me again. I was tempted to hurl my hammer and take out one of their tires—or maybe his head—but I spotted Sarrlevi reaching for a dagger and ran up to his side.

“Don't.” I gripped his arm before he could throw the weapon.

The van turned the corner and headed away.

“They threatened you.”

“I know, but unless they actually commit a crime, it would be illegal for us to attack them.” I eyed his dagger. “And *especially* kill them.”

It wasn't legal to hurl daggers at people even if they *did* perpetrate a crime, but since I now worked for Colonel Willard, who commanded a special US Army unit in Seattle, I could more easily get away with my vigilante justice, as she'd once called it. Even so, my attacks had to be justified.

“I did not recognize them as members of the Assassins' Guild,” Sarrlevi said, “but it is possible they've heard of the reward out for you and wish to collect it.”

“I have no doubt.” Sighing, I lowered my hammer. Though my life had improved since I'd found my parents and been a part of taking down the Caretaker and Varlat the scheming dragon, everything wasn't entirely peachy. “I'm going to have to figure out a way to get that bounty off my head and make sure the members of the organization that we irked forget about me.”

Until I did, I wouldn't be safe, my family and friends wouldn't be safe, and I couldn't think of having children. Even hosting a backyard barbecue could be fraught unless I invited a dragon to come. Could I cook enough meat on my little charcoal grill to *feed* a dragon?

Sarrlevi's gaze shifted to me, and, perhaps reading my thoughts, he wrapped an arm around my shoulders. “I will assist you with those things.”

“You said you’ve already tried to get the Assassins’ Guild leader to refund the reward money and make someone else the prestige hunt.”

“I have made the request, yes. Nesheeva seemed to consider it, but the bounty remains posted. We may have to confront those who placed it to ensure its removal.”

“Hart is the one who did it, I think, and he’s dead.”

“But there are many others in that organization.”

“Unfortunately, yes.” I sighed again.

“Some may have the authority to act on the deceased’s behalf. Do you have their names?” His eyelids drooped as he considered me. “The locations of their domiciles?”

I hesitated. “When you say *confront*, do you mean assassinate?”

“If they will not remove the bounty, yes. I should have acted before this to end the threat to you.”

“Uhm, while I appreciate that you want to protect me—and I really mean that—this isn’t the Cosmic Realms. You can’t go around killing people on Earth willy-nilly. We have laws against that.”

“You do not believe there are such laws on the rest of the worlds in the Realms? Assassins are paid excellent money for the risks they take and the jobs they do *because* killing people is illegal. Even ogres and trolls have laws against such methods of problem solving.”

I supposed I’d known that, or assumed it to be the case, but since I’d fallen in love with Sarrlevi, and he was good to me, I had a hard time thinking of him as a criminal. He was, as he often stated, honorable, in his own assassinly way. I envisioned him leaping into the office of an eighty-year-old oil baron and challenging him to a duel.

“If my targets are aged and enfeebled,” he said, still reading my mind, “I invite them to find a worthy second to pit against me for the battle.”

“And then you kill both of them?”

“Only the one I was hired to kill. Or—” his voice grew cold and dangerous, “—the one who threatened the person I care about.”

“Logical,” I murmured, not any less disturbed. “I’ll see if Willard still has that list of some of the organization members and has made any updates.”

Then I would figure out what to do. I couldn’t imagine handing the names over to Sarrlevi for him to dispatch. The thought of the future father of my children murdering people, even nefarious schemers who might deserve foul ends, was too disturbing to contemplate.

We would find another way. This was my home, and I didn't want to be an accomplice to murder or be wanted by the police. It was bad enough being wanted by assassins.

“Good.” Sarrlevi's voice softened, and he pushed a hand through my hair, his fingers massaging my scalp. “I will deal with them to ensure your safety and that of your family and any offspring we might one day have.”

I leaned against his side, glad he cared, even if the words *deal with* sent a chill through me. How was I supposed to figure out a way to get him invited back to his home world if he kept killing people?

3

“WHO’S THAT?” I ASKED VAL AS WE WALKED INTO THE COFFEE DRAGON.

With my hammer slung over my shoulder, I was prepared for trouble, but I hoped nothing would happen. We were meeting Colonel Willard to receive payment for a mission from the week before.

Already seated inside, Willard wore nondescript civilian clothes, though her short hair and stern face always made her appear military whether she was in uniform or not. Today, however, her face was *somewhat* softer than usual as she sipped coffee and looked at a handsome dark-skinned man seated across the table from her. A handsome *shifter*, I amended, sensing his magical blood, though he appeared fully human in a tailored suit, silk tie, and expensive leather shoes.

“That is Dr. Daku Walker.” Val ambled to a table near the couple and sat down. She tossed a thumbs-up to Willard while smirking at her coffee companion, then turned her focus to me. “They’re not dating and haven’t been for over a year.”

“In a similar way to how your mother isn’t dating the werewolf who lives across the street from her?”

I hadn’t been to Val’s mother’s house or met the werewolf, but Val often updated me on her family when we were sparring in her backyard. In between sword and hammer blows, it was important to take breaks to wipe sweat and share news. I told her about my niece and nephew and how my sister had let our father see them one time before asking him not to come around. Val kept me apprised on her mother’s, ex-husband’s, and daughter’s dating lives.

“Exactly like that,” Val said, still smirking. “I see two manila envelopes with our money in them, so I’m not going to go over and tease, torment, or otherwise pester Willard about him.”

“You’re a good and respectful subordinate.”

“I’m an independent contractor, and don’t say things like that when Willard is close enough to hear, or you’ll make her snort her coffee. I understand the high-octane Goblin Blend can sear your nose hairs off if it comes out your nostrils.”

“I won’t ask who gave you that particular information.”

“More people than you’d think. Our coffee shop fills its patrons with joy. Laughter is common here.”

“Laughter involving drink snorting?”

“Yup.”

After asking Val if I could order her a drink, I got in line behind three female goblins waiting at the coffee stand. Instead of purses, they toted large bags with dice inside, the contents clacking as the goblins gesticulated and cheered whenever the barista handed out a drink. With perk like that, they had to be heavily caffeinated already, and I wondered if their nose hairs were intact.

One peered back and up at me. At three to four feet tall, goblins joined gnomes and dwarves as the only magical races that had to look up to meet my eyes.

“You are the half-dwarf enchanter who works for Work Leader Tinja,” she said. “Plumber Puletasi.”

I kept from rolling my eyes, though it took a heroic effort. “*Work Leader Tinja* is my intern. She works for me and my partner Abbas in our home-renovating business.”

“Did you not build her tiny home for her?”

“Yes, as a favor.”

“That is the work of an *employee*. Favors involve such small niceties as getting coffee for someone, not building a house.”

“It’s a *tiny* house. And it was a *big* favor.”

The goblin shook her head, looking at me as if I were dim. Sighing, I decided it didn’t matter if Tinja’s people thought I worked for her. It was good that she was earning the respect of those in her community.

“It is nice to see that you are willing to work for a goblin,” the female said. “Humans and dwarves and many taller species ignore or openly shun

our kind because of our diminutive height.”

I thought about pointing out that their *height* probably wasn't the reason, and that it might have more to do with infrequent bathing practices and a tendency to scrounge junk to build their homes—and everything else—but that didn't seem polite.

“Yes,” was all I said.

“Especially since you are becoming a powerful enchanter. When you arrived, I sensed your aura before the Ruin Bringer's.”

“I am pretty wicked with drainpipes.”

The barista handed out their orders, huge lattes and iced coffees with whipped cream on top. After cheering, the three goblins scurried off.

“A mocha, please,” I said, setting a can of Val's La Croix on the counter.

The barista's eyes widened. “Oh, you're Matti Puletasi, right?”

“Yes.”

“One moment.” She hurried into the kitchen.

I scratched my jaw and looked over my shoulder. The handsome shifter doctor had risen to leave but not before capturing Willard's hand and kissing the back of it. The action prompted Willard to somehow manage to smile at him and scowl over at Val simultaneously. Val was smirking at Willard with her elbow on the back of her chair and her chin propped on her fist. When the doctor headed for the door, Willard strode toward Val's table, the scowl firmly in place.

“Matti?” Nin asked, coming out of the kitchen, her black hair dyed orange this week and swept back in a perky ponytail. “I'm glad you came here today. I need to warn you of something.” She looked toward Val's table, and I thought Val might need to be included in the warning, but she only turned back to me. “A half-orc visitor tried to bribe my barista.”

“Oh?” Unease thudded into the pit of my stomach.

Nin opened a drawer behind the counter and pulled out a tiny vial of a yellow liquid. “To put this in your drink the next time you came in.”

“Poison?”

“They did not tell her what it is, but I assume so. Here.” Nin offered it to me. “Perhaps Zoltan can figure out what it is.”

I wanted to chuck it into Puget Sound, not take it to Val's overpriced alchemist roommate, but I supposed it would be better to know what it was than not. Maybe knowing would offer a clue. A half-orc might be related to the full-blooded orc thugs who'd driven by in the van, but he might not be.

“There is more,” Nin said.

“More poison?”

“No.” She drew out a rolled-up piece of paper. Or was that *parchment*? “You are aware that we added the bar and started serving alcohol in the evenings, yes?”

I glanced toward the corner where said bar had been installed, a sturdiness enchantment on the wood and stools, and a translucent protective barrier over the bottles of booze lined up on shelves behind it. “I heard about the project, though it surprised me, given how rowdy some of your clients already are.”

“Alcohol has a sedative effect on ogres and orcs, so problems are actually fewer than when we served only coffee at night. The main difficulty is moving the heavy slumbering bodies outside at closing time. Dimitri has promised to build a very large dolly for us.”

“A dolly or a forklift?”

“I trust he will come up with a solution. Yesterday, someone affixed this parchment to the front of the bar.” Nin handed it to me.

I unrolled it. My own face looked back at me, along with the words *Reward! Wanted: Dead*. It looked like something out of the Old West.

“Of course we removed it as soon as we saw it, but I thought you should know.”

“Yeah.” I read the fine print bleakly. It promised a reward to anyone who brought my body to the coffee shop. Much less of a reward than what the person who turned my head in at the Assassin’s Guild would receive, but how many people on Earth would know about that gig? There wasn’t a name or any information about who’d created the sign.

“Brazen and very rude of them to attempt to use our establishment to facilitate your death,” Nin said.

“Rude, yes. That’s the part that bugs me the most too.”

Nin nodded firmly.

“Thanks for letting me know. And please tell your barista thanks for not accepting the bribe.”

“I will, but of course she knows not to do such a thing. We do not facilitate murder here.”

A loud *thud-clunk* echoed from the gaming loft upstairs, followed by the cackle of goblins.

“Except by braining people with dice?” I fished in my pocket for cash and

put a twenty in the tip jar, hoping to encourage the barista to turn down future bribes as well.

“Braining someone with dice thrown in a game would result in accidental death, not murder,” Nin said, “but that is also discouraged. It is why the goblins now play their games upstairs instead of in the main dining area.”

“I’m going to have a barbecue next weekend,” I said, firming up my decision to invite a few people over. “You and your barista are welcome to come.” Free food and proffers of friendship might also encourage coffee-shop workers to turn down bribes.

“Thank you. I would love—”

Two dice struck a wall and clattered down the stairs before rolling to a stop by Val’s table. Willard had joined her, and she looked down, raising her eyebrows. Accustomed to the boisterous goblin gaming, Val didn’t glance at the dice.

Nin cursed, left the coffee bar, and snatched up the dice. She stalked up the stairs to lecture the rowdy goblins.

“Problem?” Val asked me when I brought over our drinks and sat down.

“Nin doesn’t approve of accidental braining.” I nodded at Willard. “Good afternoon, ma’am.”

“You see how polite she is, Thorvald?” Willard asked Val. “She calls me *ma’am* and doesn’t start our conversations by asking how many times I got laid this weekend.”

Val grinned wickedly at her. “That’s only because she hasn’t known you long enough to note your atypical rosy glow and assume you want to dish.”

“I do *not* want to divulge the details of my personal life to one of my Army contractors. It’s bad enough you tell *me* about how randy your dragon is. I’m grateful that Puletasi doesn’t give me details about *her* love life.”

“Are you? You’re not curious about what positions the athletic and reputedly vastly experienced elf assassin contorts her into?” Val turned her wicked grin on me.

Since the morning *had* started off with a creative lovemaking session, my cheeks scorched like the surface of the sun.

“Is that our payment?” I blurted, hoping to divert the conversation.

“For the yeti mission, yes.” Willard pushed an envelope over to Val before handing the other to me.

“Thank you, ma’am,” I said. “Do you, by chance, still have the names of the people in the organization that kidnapped my parents? There’s still a

reward out for my head, and I'm... looking to rectify that. Hopefully without unleashing an assassin of my own."

Willard's brows rose again, and she looked at Val. "I have concerns about that relationship that have nothing to do with sexual positions."

"Aw, come on, Willard. Matti and Sarrlevi are a lovely couple."

"Like Bonnie and Clyde."

I scowled at her. I'd thought she'd gotten past considering me a vigilante.

"They're not robbing banks," Val said.

"Bonnie and Clyde also killed civilians and police officers. Are you still not reading any books that don't have dragons in them, Thorvald?"

"We're not killing anyone," I whispered, horrified both by the conversation and that they'd read through my vagueness to know exactly what I was worried about. "Sarrlevi wants to protect me, but I'm not going to let him do it *that* way. I just want the names so I can..." I groped at the air. "Figure something out."

"Uh huh," Willard said.

"You think the world would miss a bunch of overly moneyed capitalist pigs who were plotting the downfall of humanity?" Val asked.

"No," Willard said, "but I can't endorse *assassination* as a solution. I'm already pretending it's not disturbing that one of my operatives is involved with a professional hit man—hit *elf*."

"You didn't object to me marrying Zav."

"Because he's a law enforcer for his people."

"Yeah, but his people rule the Cosmic Realms by force, like flying and fanged mafia bosses," Val said.

"Don't remind me." Willard shook her head and sipped from her coffee mug.

"We can't all fall for respectable doctors," Val said, "with tails and marsupial pouches."

I blinked.

"He's a Thylacoleonidae shifter," Val told me. "A supposedly extinct marsupial lion."

"I'll get my latest version of that list and send it to you, Puletasi," Willard said, "as long as you promise that unleashing your assassin isn't your plan for dealing with the people on it. Even if I didn't object to that—and I do—a lot of the names on my list are there by supposition, because they were at that meeting at the fancy hotel in Dubai, not because I know for certain that

they're a part of that organization. Army operatives are still combing through what we found in the base on the Olympic Peninsula, but I've heard that there wasn't much there to tie things back to those who were responsible for funding its construction."

"Of course not," Val murmured.

Gunfire rang out in the street, and bullets pinged off the magically protected windows of the coffee shop.

"Everyone down." Val sprang to her feet, drawing her magical submachine pistol from her thigh holster.

I snatched up Sorka, barked, "*Hygorocho*," and charged for the door with her.

Also reacting quickly, Willard drew a gun from a concealed holster and ran after us.

Val pushed open the door and paused to use the wall for cover. Protected by Sorka's magical barrier, I ducked under her arm and ran outside.

A familiar van was rolling down the street, the sliding door open and orcs armed with semiautomatic weapons leaning out. Right away, they spotted me and shifted their aim from the building to my chest.

Though my instincts made me want to dive for cover, I trusted Sorka to protect me and sprinted toward the van.

Finally, a chance to protect the downtrodden from the vile, she announced into my mind, almost a cheer.

Bullets deflected off her magical barrier as I ran. The driver, the same tusked orc that had been at the wheel outside my house, accelerated.

Unfortunately, my half-dwarven legs weren't a match for the speed of a van, and I fell behind. Gunfire came from the front of the coffee shop, Val and Willard opening fire.

Since Willard's gun was mundane, her bullets clanged off the magically armored van, but Val's weapon pounded holes into the frame. She *tried* to pound holes into the orcs, too, but they stopped firing to raise a barrier that kept even her magical bullets from getting through.

As I ran after the van, hoping it would slow down and I could catch the orcs, Val holstered her firearm, drew her sword, and also sprinted after it.

Nin appeared in the doorway with Willard and hurled a magical grenade. "Pigs, stay away from my establishment," she cried.

Though she wasn't muscular and didn't appear athletic, the grenade arced after the van with impressive speed. Still, the vehicle was two blocks away

now, and the weapon wouldn't reach it. Not unless...

With a whisper of my power, I willed a gust of air to throw the grenade faster and farther before it blew up. It wasn't an enchantment, and nobody had taught me how to manipulate air, but the magic worked regardless. Like a bullet, the grenade zipped after the van and struck it in the back.

It exploded with a boom that echoed from the storefronts to either side of the street. Flames erupted, and smoke obscured the orcs and their vehicle. Val, with her longer legs, caught up with me, and we ran together after the van. A piece of the metal frame flew off and would have given me a haircut if my barrier hadn't deflected it. I didn't even duck.

A screech sounded as the van wobbled out of the smoke and turned toward a corner. The grenade had damaged it but not taken it out completely. The orcs slammed the sliding door shut with a great wrenching of metal.

At least the attack had slowed down the vehicle. Val caught up to it before it fully rounded the corner. She sprang into the air, caught a hole torn in the frame, and pulled herself onto the top.

I reached the back of the van and pounded my hammer into the rear door, envisioning ripping it open so I could climb in. Sorka punctured the armored metal and caught. The van sped up, still wobbling but threatening to outpace me.

With my hammer hooked, I jumped, my feet finding the dented bumper. Meanwhile, the citizens of Fremont gaped out the doors of their storefronts. Moms with toddlers and strollers veered away from the smoking van as it clattered past.

Burning rubber and metal made the air stink, and I debated how to get inside. One misstep, and I would tumble into the street and be out of the fight.

A wrenching noise sounded above me. Val using her sword to cut a hole in the top of the van? Gunfire came from inside, and she swore. The orcs were firing through the roof of their own vehicle to try to kill her.

I reached out with my senses to the engine, finding the crankshaft, pistons, and connecting rods. With a few trickles of magic, I corroded the metal, willing the engine to seize up.

Above me, Val swore and jammed her sword through what had to be the hole-filled roof of the van. An orc roared, thrusting a hand upward and trying to grab her. She stomped on that hand and slashed into it with her blade.

A great grinding noise came from under the hood, and the van halted so

abruptly that I found myself plastered to the rear door. Val cursed but managed to scramble inside through one of the holes she'd cut.

I hopped off the fender, ran to the sliding door, and wrenched the warped metal open. Two orcs almost flattened me as they jumped out, trying to escape from Val and her glowing sword.

As I sprang aside, I pounded my hammer into the chest of the closest orc. When he flew backward, I lunged after the other in time to send a spinning side kick into his back. He sprawled to the pavement, an axe clattering away from him.

A third orc flew out of the van, narrowly missing me. I swept my hammer into his back to make sure he fell and didn't get up anytime soon.

An orc with a more powerful aura stepped out from between two nearby buildings. Dressed in red robes and bone jewelry, he didn't look like he made his home on Earth.

When he raised a staff, I faced him, anticipating magical blows. But a portal formed, and he barked something in Orcish.

Those orcs still capable of running sprinted for the portal. Val and I surged after them, trying to keep them from escaping, but that was when the magical attack I'd expected came.

A great surge of power knocked into us like a battering ram. Val flew backward, her shoulder slamming into the van. Thanks to Sorka's protection, the same didn't happen to me, but I couldn't push against the wave of power to catch the orcs.

Since all of the warriors were busy fleeing instead of attacking, I risked throwing my hammer, hoping to derail the mage and halt his attack. With a surge of my own power, I willed Sorka to break through whatever defenses he had around himself.

The hammer slammed into the mage's chest, but a clank rang out, promising he wore armor under that robe. Even so, the wave of power did halt as the mage grunted and stepped back. He snatched at the air, trying to grab Sorka, but even before I yelled, "*Vishgronik*," she flew back toward me.

All the warriors had escaped through the portal, some carrying the injured over their shoulders, but the mage remained.

With her magical gun in hand again, Val opened fire on him. He snarled and erected a barrier around himself, and her bullets ricocheted off. He sprinted for the portal.

When my hammer landed back in my grip, I charged, but the mage

reached the portal ahead of me. I swung, hoping to get lucky, but all I managed was to clip him in the ass as he disappeared through it.

For a second, I thought of following him through, but the portal-generation artifact my mother had given me was at home. I would end up trapped on an orc-filled world with no way back.

Val came to stand beside me as the portal winked out of existence, leaving us alone in the street with the wrecked van.

“At least you gave that one a headache,” she said. “An *ass* ache.”

“I hope so.”

“I’m glad the magical defenses of the Coffee Dragon stood up to the bullets. It had been a while since anyone did a drive-by shooting to try to take me out, but it was only a matter of time.”

“I think they were trying to take *me* out,” I said glumly. “I shouldn’t have been hanging out in your coffee shop when that was a possibility. Sorry.”

Val waved dismissively. “For all we know, they were trying to take Gondo out. Or Dimitri for selling them a defective dragon door knocker.”

“Yes, of course. They had the look of jilted consumers.” Since the same orcs had driven by my house that morning, I knew they’d been after me—the mage with the power to make the portal might have been an Assassin’s Guild member—and I was about to say as much, but Willard strode up with a dented license plate in hand, a bullet hole through the center.

“I’ll run this and see who the van belonged to,” she said.

“I’m sure it was stolen,” Val said. “You don’t see a lot of orcs filling out financing paperwork at car dealerships.”

Willard twitched a shoulder. “You never know when a lead will come out of a little investigation.”

“Which is why I’d like to investigate the names on that list, ma’am,” I said, not wanting her to forget that.

“I’ll send over what I have later.” Willard squinted at me. “As long as you promise not to hand it over to your assassin with a bag of coins.”

She was really worried about that, wasn’t she? Probably rightfully so. Sarrlevi was a professional hitman after all.

“I won’t,” I said. “Though I don’t think I would have to pay him for a job.”

“Not with coin anyway.” Val, whose cheeks were flushed with exhilaration after the fight, smirked and thumped me on the shoulder.

I couldn’t manage a snarky rejoinder. All I wanted was to get these

assassins off my back so my life could return to normal and I could think about the future.

TO NORMAL NEIGHBORS WHO STROLLED PAST, I WAS INSTALLING LANDSCAPING features in my front yard. To Sarrlevi and anyone around who could sense magic, I was adding a few more special home-security measures. What looked like an eight-foot-tall decorative windmill would pepper anyone presumptuous enough to ignore the warning buzz of the wards with tranquilizer darts.

When Val's mother, Sigrid, and her half-dark-elf tracker friend, Arwen, arrived across the street, I didn't think anything of it. Lots of interesting guests visited Val's home.

Then they crouched beside the dragon topiaries and started poking at the lawn. Arwen had her magical bone-and-wood bow with her and kept it close, occasionally glancing around, as if she feared enemies would jump out at them.

Do you need help with anything? I asked telepathically after their search had gone on for a few minutes, the soles of Sigrid's bare feet toward me as she prodded the grass.

Arwen twitched at the mental contact, half-lifting her bow before looking toward me with wide eyes. She must have seen or sensed that I was there, but maybe she hadn't expected me to speak to her.

We were invited, she assured me.

I figured that was the case since the topiaries weren't objecting to their presence.

Sigrid waved without rising from her knees. "We're fine," she called. "My daughter's mate asked us to track down the people who've been

molesting his topiaries.”

“He wants you to hunt down the teenagers toilet-papering them at night?” I asked.

“Apparently.” Sigrid smiled and shrugged as if it wasn’t the strangest thing she’d been asked to track, not by far. “We’re also giving an after-school wilderness-survival class to some grade-schoolers over at Green Lake.”

Arwen smiled in agreement, though it looked more like a grimace. Had she been talked into helping with that class?

Is she all right? I asked Sigrid telepathically. Sarrlevi, I recalled, hadn’t been tickled by Arwen’s dark-elven heritage. If others could tell, would they blame her for having a parent from that demon-worshipping race? *She’s a little twitchy. Is someone hunting her?*

I don’t think so, Sigrid answered, *but she’s always twitchy when we’re around people.*

People? I looked up and down the street. Other than Sigrid and me, there wasn’t anyone in sight, not unless one peered around the corner and toward the always-busy walking path around the lake.

Yes, she finds the city crowded. As do I. Duvall is much more to my tastes. And the woods beyond it. Sigrid looked at Arwen. *She doesn’t even like Duvall now that the population is creeping toward nine thousand.*

Yeah, it’s turning into a megalopolis.

Arwen rose, pointed at the strip of grass in the median and then toward a tree a few houses down. Sigrid joined her, and they headed off down the street.

Hey, Arwen? I asked before they disappeared from view.

She jumped. *Yes?*

I didn’t get much of a chance to thank you for helping Val and Zavryd find the dragon’s lair on the Olympic Peninsula. Thanks for that.

You are welcome. You found your parents, right?

Yeah. They’re great. If you want to meet them, I’m hosting a barbecue soon. You and Sigrid could come.

A stricken, almost pained look crossed Arwen’s face. I supposed even a small family-and-friends barbecue could be traumatic to someone with a fear of crowds.

Or I could send some smoked ribs to a remote rock outside of Duvall.

I said it as a joke, but her brows rose in what might have been interest or even hope. *I like ribs.*

Who doesn't?

Arwen gave me a tentative smile. Maybe I *would* learn where she hung out and have some leftovers sent.

I waved as Sigrid led her down the street, and wondered what they would do if they found the teenage delinquents.

After they disappeared, I mounted more tranquilizer guns on the windmill. As I worked, vines sprouted from the grass and meandered up past my boots. Since I'd climbed three feet up the structure to add the finishing touches, that signified impressively quick growth.

"Vines aren't necessary, Varlesh," I called toward a rock-lined bed of sawdust in the corner of the yard.

He was helping me with the *security* aspect of my landscaping, laying stone pavers to form a path, with every third one covering a booby trap that would trigger if unwelcome visitors with magical blood walked that way. I hated installing such devices, but until there weren't assassins after me, I felt compelled to protect my new home—and those inside it.

When I'd gone over to ask Zoltan to identify the substance Nin had given me at the coffee shop, Val had suggested keeping the protections even after I dealt with the assassin problem. Since I worked for Willard on the side now, Val believed it was inevitable that I would accumulate future enemies.

"Once they sprout luscious leaves and flowers, the decorative vines will keep people from noticing the various defenses you are installing." Sarrlevi pointed toward the visible gun barrels attached to the frame under windmill blades shaped like fern fronds.

"I don't mind if *magical* people notice them. That could be a deterrent. Especially if they believe these shoot deadly bullets instead of tranquilizer darts. Admittedly, it would be good if mundane humans couldn't see them. None of the weapons will go off for them anyway. The wards only urge ordinary people away from the premises." I was worried about assassins from other worlds, not kids looking for lost pets.

After considering my words, Sarrlevi used his magic to grow the vines higher, twining around the frame and sprouting leaves to drop deep shadows over the gun barrels. All right, maybe that *did* look better. A little camouflage was never a bad idea, right?

One of the vines curled gently around my wrist and stroked the back of my hand. I looked over at Sarrlevi, but he was working on the pavers.

"Your vine is getting fresh with me," I told him, not sure if he'd been

responsible or not.

He rose, brushing dirt from his hands, and smiled at me as he waved a finger at the vine. It detached itself from me and twined around one leg of the windmill. “My magic has always been drawn to you.”

“Due to my sexy dwarven allure?”

“Probably your intriguing dwarven enchanting power.” Sarrlevi walked past me, brushing my leg on the way, and headed toward the sidewalk. “I, however, like your allure.”

“I’m glad.”

“Have you considered hedges along this public walking path? To add further impediments?”

“If the topiaries across the street are anything to go by, bushes out front invite shenanigans.” I waved toward the dragon-shaped shrubs, now cleaned of toilet paper and shaving cream.

“You could mount more hidden weapons among their leaves. I know of a vendor who makes miniature crossbows that can be magically linked together to launch their quarrels all at once.”

“I’m not putting in any *deadly* defenses. I don’t need an accident happening and landing me in jail.”

As I put the finishing touches on the windmill, a woman in a tight sweater and skirt strolled into view, her pumps scattering fallen leaves on the sidewalk. She carried fliers and a drone and beelined for Sarrlevi. Though she appeared fully human, she had the aura of a shifter and the grace and confidence of a predator. As she sauntered toward him, pursing her full, pouty lips and swaying her hips, she reminded me of the horny female werewolves at Wolf Winery. She had a feline vibe, however, not a lupine one. A cougar shifter?

“Hello. I’m Amelia.” She smiled at him and turned to display the curve of her chest. “I’m listing a house for sale down the street, and I wanted to let the neighbors know. Do you live here?” Her gaze drifted to his pointed ears, but her smile didn’t falter. “Do you know anyone in the market for a house in a surprisingly affordable neighborhood with excellent proximity to Green Lake and all its amenities?”

“I only visit this domicile, and no.”

I *wanted* him to live here but wasn’t surprised that he didn’t yet consider it his home.

“Oh, then I suppose you wouldn’t know anyone interested in getting a

glass of wine this evening at the Barrel Thief?” She fluttered her lashes at him.

I rolled my eyes and thought about running over there to stand next to Sarrlevi while thrusting out *my* chest, but I refused to act so insecure. He’d said he loved me, and he prized loyalty, so I didn’t need to worry about random people hitting on him, even sexy shifter women. Still, as Amelia kept batting her eyelashes at him—had a bug flown in there?—it did occur to me that we hadn’t sworn to be monogamous with each other.

He’d told me he felt we were *fused*, like two trees that had grown together in the forest, but did that mean he didn’t have interest in having sex with anyone else? I didn’t know a lot about elven cultural practices or if monogamy was something they valued. Maybe I should ask Val or Freysha about what was typical. Or, I could be a mature adult and open a dialogue on the topic with Sarrlevi.

Why did that seem so daunting?

Because he might say that elves often took lovers on the side even when they were mated to someone else? Or because, even if that wasn’t a part of his culture, he might admit that *he* wanted to do so? After all, he’d been quite promiscuous once. He’d admitted that himself and had suggested he regretted the reputation it had garnered, but he clearly enjoyed sex. What would happen if he one day grew bored with me?

“I do not know anyone with that interest, no,” Sarrlevi replied to the shifter. There wasn’t any hint of invitation in his voice. He sounded like he wanted her to leave him alone.

Good. I attempted to shove my concerns aside.

“Here’s my card if anything changes.” Amelia winked and offered it to him. “Or if you hear of anyone looking to buy a house.”

Sarrlevi accepted it but didn’t appear to know what it was for. “I am not a native to this world and am unlikely to encounter home buyers. If that is what you seek, you may wish to speak with the owner of this property. My female.” He lifted his chin and extended an arm toward me.

Amelia’s chin drooped as she looked over at me. “You have a... female?”

“I do.”

The Earth term is girlfriend, I told Sarrlevi telepathically.

That is inadequate. We are more than friends.

Well, yes, and I appreciate you telling her that, but my female makes it sound like we hooked up when you turned ogre, clubbed me over the head,

and hauled me back to your cave to have sex on a pile of furs.

His eyes glinted as he regarded me. *I believe you do not mind.*

He was right. I wanted others to know we were together and liked that he'd told her.

Sarrlevi's knowing gaze was smug, so it surprised me when it softened, and he added, *If there is a term you prefer, tell me. What is a proper Earth term that connotes our fused status?*

He was being serious and nice, so why did silly words like *sweet cakes* and *snuggle bunny* leap to mind? I would be mortified by those.

How about partner? I suggested. *If we get married, we could also use husband and wife.*

I will consider these options. Humor returned to his eyes as he added, *Snuggle bunny.*

You're a pain in the ass.

Yes.

"Oh," Amelia said after a long, stunned pause, as if she couldn't believe a guy as hot as Sarrlevi might be taken by someone like me. "Okay. I'll go prepare my drone. I need to get some aerial photos of the neighborhood and house to go in the listing."

I supposed I shouldn't hope for Zavryd's topiaries to be offended and shoot down the drone with their glowing eyes and fire.

After she departed, Sarrlevi walked across the street and flicked the card toward the head of one of the topiaries. Its eyes lit, and fire shot out, incinerating the rectangle of paper. *Almost as good as drone destruction.*

My phone rang, and I pulled it out, hoping it would be Willard letting me know she had that list for me. But Zadie's name popped up. Did she have news about the last home Abbas and I had on the market?

"Hey, Zadie," I answered.

"Hi, Matti. What's up?"

"Smoke wafting from the topiaries across the street."

"Again?"

"Someone triggered them." I smiled my approval at Sarrlevi, but he'd returned to examining the ground next to the sidewalk. Envisioning crossbow-filled hedges?

"That happens a lot. I've got an offer for you and Abbas to look over. Two offers, actually. You can thank your goblin roommate because people love the homes you guys built."

“Tinja didn’t have a lot of input into them,” I said dryly, “other than suggesting that we put two offices in each to attract the work-from-home crowd.”

“You didn’t do that, did you? Other than to add a desk in the laundry room.”

“That’s right. Her suggestions were a little high-end for that neighborhood. And our budget.”

“Well, people like what you did. I’ll send the offers over for you to look at. You and Abbas might be able to take a nice vacation this winter.”

“Because we’ll make oodles of money? Or because there aren’t many new listings coming on the market, right now?” Things usually dried up in fall and winter, but Zadie often found fixers for us, regardless of the time of year.

“Both.”

As we spoke, a clattering arose a few blocks away, and I sensed goblins approaching, Tinja’s aura among them. Was she riding around again on that steam-powered jalopy of a truck? Collecting junk for projects?

“We need to celebrate, Matti,” Zadie said.

“I’m planning a barbecue next weekend for my family if you want to come.”

“I was thinking more wine, fine dining, and indoors.”

“You’re an elitist.”

“It’s almost November. Barbecue season is over. Anyway, I have some other news for you too, and I want to share it sooner. What are you doing tonight?”

“Rewarding my boyfriend for not being interested in entreaties by other women,” I said.

Sarrlevi must have heard that, because he nodded and strolled over to join me. I leaned against him as he wrapped an arm around me.

“What are you doing *before* that?” Zadie asked.

“Just trying not to be killed by assassins. Do you want to come over for dinner?” With all the booby-traps we’d installed, it ought to be relatively safe to have guests over for dinner.

“I was going to suggest a restaurant. Your house is weird.”

“It’s well-defended from magical and mundane intruders.”

“Yeah. That’s why it’s *weird*. The remodeling you’ve done so far is great, but there’s a life-sized catapult made from junk in the side yard and cement

frogs in the garden beds that spit water.”

“That’s acid, actually, courtesy of Zoltan the alchemist. And Tinja built the catapult, her contribution to home security.”

“That doesn’t make any of it less weird.”

“No,” I agreed, watching as the goblin jalopy clattered around the corner, screws, springs, and other pieces of junk flying out of the open bed as the vehicle bumped against a curb. Tinja stood in the front seat next to a male goblin driver with spiky white hair. “But it makes the house safe.”

“From cameramen thinking of photographing it for a magazine, yes.”

“*That* wasn’t going to happen regardless.”

“That’s what you think. That’s what I want to talk to you about tonight, but don’t make me spoil the news.”

“Okay.” I leaned even more against Sarrlevi as he pushed a hand through my hair, his nails grazing my scalp. I loved it when he did that. “Can you come around six? We like to go to bed early.”

“*Very* early,” Sarrlevi murmured. He sent a trickle of magic through me, the pleasure immediately making me regret putting out an invitation at all.

But Zadie’s teaser about a magazine possibly being interested in my work intrigued me, and I wanted to hear about it. How amazing would it be if my work was highlighted in a respectable design magazine? I could show it to Penina. Maybe then, she would believe that all the time I’d put into my business had been worthwhile, and that I shouldn’t be focused on finding a guy to support me while I had children. I could have kids *and* a successful business.

“I won’t get in the way of your sexy times,” Zadie said. “I’ll bring wine and something for dessert. I trust you’ll have cheese.”

“If Tinja hasn’t eaten it all.”

Surprisingly, the goblin jalopy didn’t stop in front of my house to let her out. It rattled farther down the street and halted next to a new for-sale sign. Was that the home the real-estate agent was preparing to list?

“Great. I’ll see you then,” Zadie said. “Maybe invite Abbas too. Assuming the acid-spitting frogs won’t attack him.”

“No, and they won’t attack you either. They only spit at strangers.”

“So weird.”

“Yup.” As I returned my phone to my pocket, I watched no fewer than twenty goblins clamber out of the jalopy and swarm across the yard toward the house.

“The open house isn’t until Saturday,” Amelia called, sounding a touch frazzled.

Maybe the goblin incursion would keep her distracted so she wouldn’t come back to hit on Sarrlevi again.

“Your roommate will not locate her urban goblin sanctuary on *this* street, will she?” Sarrlevi was also watching the invasion, his lips twisted with distaste. Maybe he didn’t think goblins would be good neighbors.

“Probably not. I think she wants to buy land and build it from scratch—or hire *me* to build it.” I wasn’t positive about that though, especially since this was the second house on this street that had come up for sale and that the goblins had shown up to look at. “Even if Tinja would consider remodeling an existing home for her sanctuary, I don’t think she can afford a house in the city, even a *discounted* house.”

“Will only she raise the funds for the domicile? Or will her zealots also contribute?”

“I’m not sure.” It hadn’t occurred to me that *Work Leader* Tinja might attract donations from those who wanted to see goblins succeed—or at least *her* specifically. I’d seen no fewer than four male goblins interested in her. Apparently, an entrepreneurial female was very attractive to their kind.

The shifter agent ran for the front door, yelling at goblins that had let themselves in. Tinja departed from the mob with a familiar male goblin at her side. Gondo. Given that it was the middle of the workday, I was surprised he wasn’t in Willard’s office, but maybe secretary-slash-informants didn’t keep regular hours.

“Greetings, Plumber Puletasi.” Gondo waved vigorously as they crossed into the yard. “And fearsome elf assassin.”

Perhaps unwisely, I’d put Gondo on the guest list, so my defenses didn’t activate. But since he did errands for Willard, he came around often.

“Have you heard the good news?” Gondo added. “About Work Leader Tinja?”

“There *is* good news,” Tinja told me.

They both gave Sarrlevi a wide berth and approached from my side farthest from him, though they noted his arm around my waist and didn’t get too close. I’d never seen Sarrlevi raise a sword toward a goblin—he wouldn’t consider them worthy opponents—but that didn’t keep them from being wary.

“What news?” I asked.

“Since the instructional video on shingles went viral, house plans are flying off the virtual shelves like digital hot cakes.” Tinja clapped her hands and spun in a circle.

“What is a hot cake?” Gondo asked.

“A human breakfast sweet covered in maple syrup,” Tinja said.

“I have not sampled one.”

“Tell the Ruin Bringer to add them to the Coffee Dragon’s menu.”

“I will do so. Maple syrup is *delicious*. This is for you, Plumber Puleyasi.” Gondo pulled a crinkled wad of paper out of his pocket and thrust it at me. “From Colonel Willard.”

“The video went viral?” I accepted the wad of paper, though it looked like something meant for a trash bin—or to throw at a mouthy subordinate. It was oddly damp. “Already?”

“Yes.” Tinja nodded vigorously. “It was as I suspected. Having a handsome elf in the background made it very appealing to humans. And having a handsome dragon *also* appear made it even better.”

“Surely, it was our battle prowess rather than our visages that proved of interest,” Sarrlevi said.

“Your *handsome* battle prowess.” Tinja clasped her hands together and radiated approval at him. “It was so fortuitous that your duel carried you into the yard as I was recording. And that my quick thinking allowed me to turn the camera to capture your confrontation.”

“Fortuitous, yes,” Sarrlevi murmured, meeting my gaze.

Since I knew he’d arranged that, somehow convincing Zavryd to participate as well, I slid my arm around him and hugged him.

“Many, many humans are now viewing my video,” Tinja said, “even without additional marketing. And approximately one in one hundred visitors is purchasing a set of blueprints. Many have also requested other floor plans. Even though I made sure to create the most efficient floor plan with the most storage, I understand the desire for uniqueness and variety. I will get to work drawing many more. Then people might even purchase more than one set of plans.”

“Work Leader Tinja is going to be a wealthy goblin soon,” Gondo declared. “She will realize her dream of building an urban sanctuary for our people.”

“In this location?” Sarrlevi asked.

“Possibly!” Tinja spread her arms. “This neighborhood is delightfully

urban, with many nearby amenities that attract goblins, such as the dumpsters at the park, the detritus-filled backyards, and the great bathing lake.”

“Just make sure to wear a swimming suit for the bathing,” I murmured as I succeeded in flattening the paper enough to read.

Tinja cocked her head in puzzlement.

“Never mind.”

Are you certain you do not wish to abandon this domicile in its overly busy neighborhood and live with me in my chalet? Sarrlevi asked me telepathically.

There aren't any homes to renovate in your neighborhood.

There aren't any homes at all.

Exactly. My breath caught as I read the contents of the page. Names and addresses of people involved in the organization. “Gondo. Why was this crumpled up?”

“The colonel said I couldn't let anyone else see it or know about the contents because *she's* not supposed to share the information, per her superiors. A general called her office this morning about this very matter and instructed her to say nothing to anyone about the former dragon lair on your Olympic Peninsula.”

“How would crumpling up the paper keep someone from reading it?” Sarrlevi asked.

“By making it look like useless garbage. I also spat on it and rubbed it under my armpit to further ensure its lack of appeal to thieves.”

I curled a lip and held the paper by the corner and at arm's length.

“Gondo acts like a simple goblin,” Tinja said, “but sometimes he is clever.”

“Yes.” I waved the paper to dry it. “He's a mastermind.”

“Now that we've delivered the important information and news,” Tinja said, “we will return to the sanctuary-scouting party.”

A blood-curdling noise came from the direction of that house, something between a shriek and a roar.

“I believe the real-estate agent is eager to service your kind,” I said.

“It would be an honor for her to sell a home to Work Leader Tinja,” Gondo said.

“I have no doubt.”

They walked back down the street toward the house, leaving me with the moist paper dangling from my fingers.

Sarrlevi's eyes narrowed as he regarded it. "Those are all the people who might have been involved in the posting of the reward for your death?"

He lifted his hand, as if to take the list from me, but lowered it again, probably deterred by Gondo's anti-theft measures. Maybe Gondo *was* a mastermind.

"Most of them probably don't know anything about it since Hart was the one who put it out, but maybe he had a couple of close colleagues that he confided in and that would, if convinced to do so, be able to rescind it." I thought of the real-estate mogul who'd been at Hart's party. He was the only one of the guests whose name I knew, but he hadn't seemed that clued in to the greater scheme. His main interest had been getting me and my boobs in the hot tub with him.

"If you make a copy of that for me, I will visit each of the individuals and do my best to *convince* them that you are of no interest to them."

"You don't want the original?" I waved the damp paper at him.

He took a step back as if it were a viper. His hand twitched toward the pocket where he kept his magical cleaning kerchief, but he must not have believed that would be sufficient to sanitize the paper. "You will wish to keep that for your records. A copy will suffice."

"Ah." Since I'd promised Willard that assassinations wouldn't be employed to deal with the problem, I was hesitant to share the names with him. At the least, I wanted to mull over my options first. Spoken by Sarrlevi, the word *convince* came with the possibility of slaying. "I don't see many local addresses on here. Only a couple in the Seattle area and one in Bellingham. A lot of the addresses aren't even in the country, though we suspected that."

Sarrlevi went from studying the paper to looking toward the street, and I soon sensed more magical beings headed into the neighborhood. Another goblin and... more orcs.

I grimaced, the memory of the shooting from the day before coming to mind. "Please don't tell me more trouble is heading this way."

A long black limousine drove slowly into view, the outside decorated with bicycle rims, cogs, springs, and smashed beer cans. The windows were tinted, but my senses told me that the goblin rode inside with the orcs.

"That's an unlikely combination," I murmured.

"Perhaps they are here for your increasingly famous roommate." Sarrlevi released me and stepped to the side so he had room to draw his weapons.

I glanced at the porch where Sorka leaned. When the limo stopped at the curb in front of my house, I called, “*Vishgronik*,” to summon her.

As one of the back doors opened on the limo, my hammer flew across the yard and landed comfortably in my grasp.

There will be a battle? Sorka asked.

Knowing my luck, probably.

TWO ORCS IN ILL-FITTING SUITS SLID OUT OF THE BACK OF THE LIMO, BARELY managing to keep from clunking their heads on the door frame. They radiated enough power that I suspected they were mages, or at least had the potential for the profession, but when they pulled out magical Tommy guns, they looked more like gangsters from the 1920s.

A goblin in a pinstripe suit hopped out after the orcs, patting one on the thigh to convince him to move. From the sidewalk, he straightened his lapels and surveyed my house, Sarrlevi, and finally me. He had neatly combed white hair, a handgun in a hip holster, and a slightly smashed red flower sticking out of his breast pocket.

The orcs took up positions to either side of him like bodyguards. The goblin stepped toward the walkway but stopped before I could issue a warning about the defenses. He squinted at the grass, the cement frogs, the pavers, and finally the windmill, as if he sensed every magical trinket I'd installed.

“Good day, daughter of Princess Rodarska.” He spoke in a typical high-pitched goblin voice, though his accent—or maybe affectation—reminded me of the actors in mob movies. “It’s a privilege to meet you and visit your Earth home.”

My *Earth* home? Did this guy think I had bolt-holes across the Cosmic Realms? He was the first local who’d addressed me as my mother’s daughter, which promptly made me wonder if he *was* a local.

“I’m sure it is,” I said. “What can I do for you?”

“Ah, my lady, it is actually the elf assassin, Varlesh Sarrlevi, whom my

boss wishes to make the acquaintance of.” The goblin bowed toward Sarrlevi, who was exchanging glowers with the bodyguards and hadn’t yet lowered his swords.

“Who’s your boss?” I asked. “And who are you?”

“I’m Vintok, a simple goblin of modest means, but I am also the cousin of Mikki the Wrench. His means are anything but modest, and if he wishes to make one’s acquaintance, it is most wise to acquiesce to his desire.”

“Uh huh. What does Mikki want with Sarrlevi?”

“*The Wrench*,” Vintok said, as if calling him by first name wasn’t appropriate, “wishes to hire him, of course. To make a dastardly foe sleep with the fishes, as they say. Varlesh Sarrlevi is, as I’m certain you’re aware, an accomplished assassin on more than twelve worlds.”

“That is on his business card, yes.” I glanced at Sarrlevi, wondering how he felt about this.

“I do not have business cards,” he murmured, as if *that* was why I’d looked at him. He raised his voice and addressed the goblin. “I am not seeking employment at this time.”

“It is unwise to refuse to service *The Wrench*.”

“I have a feeling it’s unwise *to* service him too,” I muttered.

Sarrlevi snorted and nodded in what might have been agreement. “In the future, I might have openings in my schedule, but for now—” he eyed the list I still held, “—I am occupied.”

“It is now, not in the future, that my boss needs your services. You would be wise to come with us to visit his business establishment. His penthouse is nearby and has a lovely view. You will enjoy it. If you do not come...” Vintok narrowed his eyes, but even with the gun, a goblin couldn’t manage to exude that much menace. The hulking orcs, on the other hand, effectively oozed a threatening demeanor as they pointed their Tommy guns at Sarrlevi. More orcs remained inside the limo, a further threat waiting to pounce.

Even so, I wasn’t that worried, not as long as I had Sorka in my hand. And I *knew* Sarrlevi wasn’t worried. Even dragons didn’t faze him.

“But let us not resort to threats,” Vintok said, an affable smile finding his face. “*The Wrench* is a reasonable goblin. Should you assist him with his problem, he may be in a position to assist you, Lord Elf. As a non-native to this world, I imagine you find it confusing to navigate. He has lived on Earth for many decades and has vast resources at his disposal.”

“He knows how to locate people?” Sarrlevi asked.

I elbowed him. “You don’t need a goblin *mobster* to help you find anyone.”

He gazed blandly at me. “You are unwilling to share the addresses of your enemies with me.”

“I’m not *unwilling*.” And I hadn’t told him that. I’d only been *thinking* it. Of course, since he could read minds, that was all it took. “I’m... just not that willing yet. You didn’t want to touch the damp armpit document anyway.”

“The Wrench can find *anyone*,” Vintok assured us. “Whether they wish to be found or not. Further, he pays the people who work for him well. Come, Lord Elf.” Vintok bowed to Sarrlevi and gestured toward the limo. “I assure you that the foe is surrounded by dangerous men and that you will find the job stimulating.”

Hell, that promise would appeal to Sarrlevi more than anything else. Especially since it had been a while since he’d seen a fight. Coercing vines to grow up the legs of a windmill couldn’t be that exciting for someone who craved danger and regularly sought out challenges.

“I will hear what this goblin has to say,” Sarrlevi said.

I groaned, not wanting him to go off and start a relationship with someone who thought nothing of hiring assassins in broad daylight. Or at any time at all. Even if I wouldn’t usually think a goblin could be dangerous, Mikki the Wrench sounded like an exception.

“Excellent.” Vintok gazed in the direction of the backyard—of the tiny house?—before tilting his head toward his orc bodyguards. “If the elf doesn’t mind waiting, we could also make the acquaintance of the goblin Tinja while we are here. The Wrench has expressed an interest in her.”

A chill went through me. “What kind of interest?”

Vintok smiled enigmatically at me. What the hell did *that* mean?

“She is becoming known,” he said.

“Yeah, by people who want to build tiny homes.” I hoped not by anyone else.

“Indeed.”

“Tinja isn’t home right now.” I pointedly did not look toward the house for sale, hoping this guy hadn’t met Tinja before and couldn’t pick her aura out of a crowd of goblins. “And Sarrlevi is a *very* busy assassin who leaves Earth often, so I think you should take him directly to your boss now for this appointment. You were lucky to catch him here.”

Sarrlevi watched me but didn’t naysay the words. If he was reading my

thoughts, he knew I felt protective of Tinja.

“That is true.” Vintok gestured toward the open door of the limo. “Lord Elf?”

“You did not mention who your employer wants assassinated.” Sarrlevi looked across the street toward Val’s house.

The reminder that he’d once been hired to kill Val sent a chill through me.

“Nobody from the magical community but a human of vast wealth who has many magical minions and protections. The name is Victor Woodward.” Vintok gazed not at Sarrlevi but at me, as if the name should mean something.

It *did* sound familiar. In fact...

I lifted the list and skimmed through the names. Two-thirds of the way down the page, it was there. Victor Woodward.

“Huh.” I showed Sarrlevi.

“I will come.” Sarrlevi nodded firmly, sheathed his swords, and headed for the limo.

“And so will I,” I blurted, hurrying after him.

Vintok opened his mouth, as if he might object, but he shrugged and nodded to the orcs.

Sarrlevi, however, stopped at the limo door to regard me. *You wish to come with me to negotiate an assassination contract? When you do not approve of my career?*

I want to know who this goblin is and why he wants someone on my list killed.

I can acquire that information and let you know.

I hesitated. Though I trusted that Sarrlevi could and would do that, the significant look Vintok had given me made me think there was something more going on here than a random hit. And that it was tied in with me more than Sarrlevi. Someone might be setting him up to walk into a trap to get him away from me so that I would be an easier target.

You will come, he agreed, nodding to the limo.

Reading my thoughts, again?

Even though you are a capable warrior in your own right, I must keep a close eye on you in order to protect you.

That was a yes, right?

Yes. He touched my arm and smiled.

I got into the limo with him.

“Can’t wait to see this great view,” I murmured, settling next to Sarrlevi on a seat opposite two muscled orcs in suits.

6

AFTER VINTOK AND HIS TWO BODYGUARDS CLIMBED INTO THE BACK OF THE limo, it grew crowded. Sarrlevi and I sat shoulder to shoulder, his sword scabbards between his legs and my hammer between mine. An orc hulked to either side of us.

As posh as the limo might once have been, with blue carpet and velour seats, it hadn't been sized appropriately for eight-foot-tall occupants. Rips in the upholstery and holes in the ceiling suggested the orcs and their tusks had either gotten rowdy in here a few times or shifters were invited for wild rides in their animal forms.

Realizing it might be a good idea to let people know where we were going, I slipped my phone out to surreptitiously text Val and ask if she'd heard of Mikki the Wrench. While waiting for a response, I started to text Zadie to let her know dinner might be late when someone else's phone rang.

Vintok pulled his out of an inside breast pocket and answered. "Yes. Yes, I have him." He smiled easily, nodded at us, and switched to Goblin.

When he wasn't looking, I eased my hand into my pocket, looking for the translation charm on my keychain. The two orcs across from me squinted, and one growled. I rubbed the book-shaped charm and pulled my hand slowly out, showing them that I wasn't drawing a weapon. Besides, I would use the hammer between my legs if I wanted to brain them all.

"...yes, he is most eager to work for you, my lord," Vintok was saying in Goblin.

My Lord? As in Lord Mikki the Wrench?

"I'm on my way with him and the enchanter." Vintok smiled at me, an

oily smile. “Do you wish me to show them the freezer and what happens to those who do not make themselves allies to you?”

I kept my face blank, not letting on that I could understand.

“A good choice,” Vintok replied on the phone. “I assume there is no need at this juncture to apply pressure. And the enchanter was most eager to join the assassin so threats may not be needed. Perhaps she will give you a demonstration of her work. Or perhaps she can arrange for the dwarven princess to create some pieces of work for you.”

Maybe coming along hadn’t been a good idea. I imagined a goblin overlord ordering his thugs to rough me up and convince me to beg my mother to do work for him. How had the word gotten out that she was free now?

“How long a delay?” Vintok asked, responding to words that I couldn’t hear. “I do not know that the elf will be willing to wait a long time. He almost refused the job.”

The words on the other side grew louder, and I picked up, “*Better... not leave... pay well. See to it, Vintok.*”

“Yes, my lord. Of course. I’ll arrange some entertainment to be waiting for him. He’s with the enchanter, but I do not know if they are mates. Even if they are, his reputation suggests an appreciation for beautiful women.”

I couldn’t keep myself from scowling and, afraid I would give away my understanding, looked out the window. Maybe Vintok would think the busy freeway was the reason for my expression. The limo had merged onto I-5 heading south, with a half-orc driver at the wheel, and was weaving in and out of traffic. We’d passed the downtown exits. Where was this guy’s *penthouse*?

“Yes, my lord. I will.” After the call ended, Vintok slipped the phone into his inner pocket. Switching back to English, he said, “We will arrive shortly. The Wrench is pleased you are both coming.”

Maybe not a complete lie, but *The Wrench* had sounded more grumpy than pleased. Vintok didn’t mention my mother or that his boss might want her work.

Did your eavesdropping result in you learning anything useful? Sarrlevi asked telepathically.

Not really, except that they may want to use me to get to my mom for enchanting work.

Use you? His eyelids drooped, and his gaze grew more dangerous as he

looked at Vintok.

They didn't go into details. Hopefully, they don't have kidnapping and extortion in mind.

I will not allow that.

They've got entertainment lined up to keep you busy.

I am not easily entertained.

Except in bed by sexy half-dwarves?

By sexy half-dwarves that I can trust not to betray me, yes. Not by females working for potential enemies.

I think he's angling to be your employer rather than your enemy.

In my line of work, the two are often synonymous.

The driver took the West Seattle Bridge exit but didn't head across, instead driving us down to Harbor Island, a place I vaguely knew about from maps but had never visited. As far as I knew, it was controlled by the Port of Seattle and nobody lived on it.

We drove past rows and rows of shipping containers, over a swath of railroad tracks, and past terminals and huge oil storage tanks before rolling into a strange mist that made my senses tingle. My ability to detect and assess magic had improved with my enchanting lessons, and I could tell the mist not only camouflaged the area from mundane human eyes but also muted sounds.

A towering brick warehouse rose from the center, the walls and interior emanating magic. The dense mist didn't quite hide guard towers manned by ogres, and were those cannons mounted at intervals on the flat roof?

This guy must have a lot of money, I told Sarrlevi.

Had The Wrench been something besides a goblin, it wouldn't have surprised me that a being with magical blood would have the power to accumulate wealth and resources here on Earth, but I'd yet to encounter a goblin entrepreneur that made much money. Tinja might turn out to be an exception. Their people seemed to care more about eking out a living by building things they were passionate about rather than amassing fortunes.

Or control bracelets, Sarrlevi replied, though I do not detect such, or anything similar, on these bodyguards or the driver.

I hope The Wrench doesn't want to acquire bracelets to ensure his employees' continuing support.

I'd had a few talks with Mom while she taught me enchanting in Dun Kroth, and she'd hinted about how distressed she'd been, forced to work for the dragon Varlat and his accomplices, doing work she never would have

done if her family hadn't been in danger. She hadn't been that open about it all, but I'd caught the haunted looks in her eyes. I didn't blame her. If she hadn't spent so many years stuck in that stasis chamber, only being let out under Varlat's supervision to craft and enchant the tools the organization wanted, she might have been able to find a way to escape and protect her family on her own. But her captors had been careful not to give her any freedom unless someone more powerful than she—specifically that dragon—had been around to ensure her compliance.

The limo came to a stop in front of one of several giant garage doors. It rolled up, and we drove into a warehouse filled with crates and metal shipping containers similar to those we'd seen driving onto the island. Writing in different languages lined their sides. A few workers—orc, ogre, and goblin—were unloading crates, and one was moving items around with a forklift.

Someone opened the door for Vintok to get out, and the scents of fish and seaweed wafted in on the salty air. After sliding out, Vintok waved for us to follow him.

More orc bodyguards waited on the cracked cement floor of the warehouse with magical Tommy guns similar to what the others carried in their arms. They might have been modeled after century-old Thompson submachine guns, but I had no doubt they were new and that the magical bullets might be strong enough to go through Sorka's barrier.

The orcs also wore wide-brimmed hats, and a couple clenched cigars in their bluish lips, with pungent smoke rising from the orange tips. Ash smeared one orc's tusks, and I wondered if they burned themselves often.

One of the guards removed his cigar, smirked down at my chest, and slid his tongue along his lips and up one tusk.

"I didn't know a female was coming along with the assassin," he said in Orcish, elbowing one of his buddies. "She looks feisty. Maybe we can have some fun with her while the boss is talking to the elf."

"She's not going to want to have *fun* with you any more than the boss's whores do."

The orc squinted at me. "Maybe it won't be a choice for her."

Sarrlevi was staying close to me, and I doubted the orc would do anything, but I couldn't keep from tightening my grip on Sorka and growling, "Maybe you getting your nuts crushed by a dwarven hammer won't be a choice for you."

I didn't know if Sorka understood Orcish, but she knew my body language and flared silver-blue while emanating eagerness to go into battle.

The guard must have felt secure in his boss's warehouse with his colleagues nearby. He merely snorted, flicked ash off the tip of his cigar, and told his buddy, "*Feisty,*" again.

You have nothing to fear from them, Sarrlevi told me, though he kept eyeing the orcs while scanning the interior of the warehouse for further threats. More than one of those shipping containers emanated magic, and the walls themselves radiated a sturdiness enchantment and were dotted with defense systems far more deadly than my tranquilizing windmill.

Because you'll ruthlessly slay anyone who puts his hands on me or because you know I'm capable of pounding them into anchovy paste myself?

Yes.

"This way." Vintok didn't comment on the exchange other than to slant a knowing look toward my pocket before ambling toward an elevator in the back.

Great, I'd let him know I had a translation charm.

"Does the Port of Seattle know this place exists?" I asked, hoping to make him forget I'd understood the orcs.

"It knew once but has forgotten."

"Funny how some magical illusions can prompt that to happen," I said.

"Yes. Funny."

Two orcs stepped into the large cargo elevator with us, fortunately not the one who liked his women feisty. They had to duck their heads, and a hole in the ceiling suggested one had forgotten once. Or maybe there'd been a battle in the elevator. The sides were dented, and a dark splotch on the floor might have been a bloodstain.

The elevator rose and opened on the rooftop. Squawking seagulls wheeled overhead, the blue sky in view, the mist less thick up here. We had a view of Puget Sound, downtown Seattle, and ships unloading at the terminals.

A house I might have called a mansion was built on the roof, and a pair of ogre guards waited to either side of the modern metal double doors. Ornamental trees grew from large planters lining a brick path that led past a pair of fountains spurting water.

"This is one sturdy roof to support all that," I murmured, though magic probably reinforced it.

One of the ogre guards was female and eyed Sarrlevi with interest as Vintok led us through the doors. At least she didn't have tusks.

One wonders what the entertainment options here might be, I said to Sarrlevi as we entered a marble foyer. The modern architectural style of the house was exactly what I'd expect from some rich dude, but the walls were decorated with art pieces made from recycled junk, including a suit of armor crafted from flattened Campbell soup cans, most of the labels still attached. *Cream of Mushroom* figured prominently in the helmet's visor.

"You can see I like to support goblin artists," a new voice said, the mobster-movie accent similar to Vintok's.

Sarrlevi already faced the speaker, another goblin in a suit, a very expensive suit that had been tailored to his three-and-a-half feet in height, including a paunch belly. The button-down yellow shirt might have been made of silk. Gold cufflinks in the shape of wrenches drew the eye to his wrists, and a matching wrench clip kept a tie in place.

Since most goblins had white hair, it wasn't an indicator of age, but lines creased his brow and formed crow's feet at the corners of his yellow eyes. He carried an iPad under his arm, had a phone jutting out of his pocket, and wore a smart watch on his wrist.

A few of the items were magical, and I promptly wanted a closer look at them. It had never crossed my mind to learn to enchant electronics, but could I? Was there a spell that would keep a phone battery from ever dying? A screen from cracking?

"My lord." Vintok bowed to him. "Allow me to introduce Varlesh Sarrlevi, the elven assassin infamous on more than twelve worlds, and Matti Puletasi, the half-dwarf enchanter and daughter of Princess Rodarska, recently returned to the dwarven home world."

There were a lot of details in that introduction that we didn't share with him, I thought to Sarrlevi.

I'm accustomed to people researching me before reaching out to hire me, he replied.

Do they also typically research your girlfriends?

There have not been girlfriends, as I've informed you, but it is not uncommon for them to know about my habits and status among my people.

"I am Mikki the Wrench, formerly Mikolok of the Daknott Clan, until most of my people were extinguished and we refugees fled to this world." He scowled but soon waved, as if to dismiss it as something that had happened

long ago. “Thank you for coming, Lord Sarrlevi.” Mikki tilted his head. “Is that the correct honorific? The research I had done indicated you were born into the nobility on your world but were also eventually exiled.”

“That is correct,” Sarrlevi said coolly. “My title was revoked along with my citizenship.”

“Unfortunate. Elves are so judgmental, are they not?”

Sarrlevi didn’t answer.

“Ms. Puleyasi,” Mikki said, “I hadn’t anticipated that you would come along with the assassin. Do you assist him with his work?”

I almost gagged on that but managed to keep my answer to, “No.” After a pause, I added, “I’m trying to get him to assist me with *my* work.”

“Enchanting items that you craft or renovating homes?”

Why did I feel like this guy’s file on me was as large as the one Willard kept? If he brought up my high-school grades, I was going to be creeped out.

“Renovating homes. That’s my main business. The enchanting hobby is recent.”

“I see.” His tone sounded skeptical. “And you wish an assassin to assist you with... hammering nails?”

“He makes some mean repair vines.”

Mean? Sarrlevi protested telepathically. *Have we not discovered that my magic is fond of you and quite gentle?*

Mean is slang for high-quality. You might want to consult the cultural authority of Val’s teenage daughter for an education on such things.

So I can also run around extending my fists to my dueling opponents?

Yup.

The sound of a helicopter approaching made it through the insulating magic of the home, and I shifted uneasily, reminded of the enchanted aircraft my mother had made for her kidnappers. It wasn’t possible this goblin was a part of that organization, was it? My earlier thought that this might be a trap returned, full throttle.

“Ah,” Mikki said. “The impromptu appointment I hadn’t planned for but must take is here. Vintok, take our guests to the parlor and show them the refreshments and entertainment options. This should only take an hour or so. One must make sure not to purchase damaged goods.”

An hour? Hell, I could have finished my home defenses and shopped for dinner groceries in that time.

“Yes, my lord.” Vintok opened a set of double doors, waving for us to

follow him, as The Wrench headed toward the back of the house.

The sound of the helicopter approaching grew louder. Was there a landing pad on the roof?

I eyed the ceiling, probing upward with my senses, trying to tell if the helicopter was magical. All the magic in the house made it difficult to detect.

It's one of your mother's enchanted helicopters, Sarrlevi, with his more powerful fully elven senses, told me.

Shit.

SHIT, I REPEATED AS THE HELICOPTER FLEW CLOSE ENOUGH FOR ME TO SENSE more fully. It *had* been enchanted by my mother.

Sarrlevi glanced at me. *Is that also Earth slang?*

No, I'm saying this situation is like actual shit. The Wrench must be affiliated with the organization.

That does seem possible.

He could have lured us here to unleash assassins on us. Keep your eyes out.

My senses are always alert, and I'm ready for battle.

I know.

Vintok, who'd started into the parlor, waved again for us to follow him.

Warily, Sarrlevi and I walked into a large marble-floored room with numerous seating areas, a white grand piano, and more goblin art. We were ready for assassins to spring out at us; instead, three voluptuous women strolled in from another entrance to greet us. To greet *Sarrlevi*.

They wore what I charitably called bikinis but suspected were underwear. Lace and fluff were strategically placed to cover... very little.

"There are private rooms through that door where you can take as many companions as you wish," Vintok told Sarrlevi, smiling a little. "If you wish entertainment of your own, Ms. Puleyasi, that can also be arranged."

He snapped his fingers and whistled before I could lift my hand and say no. The clatter of dishes sounded in the distance, light footsteps pattered on the marble tiles, and a young goblin male rushed into the parlor. He almost tripped over a rug as he tugged a T-shirt over his head. He tossed it over his

shoulder, pushed his fingers through his hair, and thrust his chest out as he looked at Sarrlevi.

Vintok pointed at me. The goblin nodded affably and switched his attention to me. He was fit for a goblin, but I couldn't say I'd ever fantasized about having sex with one of their kind.

"Entertainment is not necessary," Sarrlevi said, his tone cool and uninviting.

That didn't keep the women from sashaying toward him. The goblin ambled toward me, flexing his little muscles as he came.

"Yeah, we don't like entertainment," I told Vintok, lifting my hammer in case I had to fend off the kid. Hopefully not. Unlike the leering orc, he didn't look like he had much interest in me. "We're workaholics," I added. "Maybe you have something in need of repair? I'm great at toilets and drainpipes. And Sarrlevi does those vines."

"You do not wish to enjoy yourselves while you wait?" Vintok appeared surprised. What kinds of guests did The Wrench *usually* have up here?

"No," Sarrlevi said.

"Nope," I added, stepping close to him.

"You are certain you don't wish to join us?" one of the girls asked Sarrlevi.

They'd stopped approaching, perhaps intimidated by his cool expression and the aura of danger that cloaked him, but they weren't easily dissuaded and wiggled everything they had at him as they made kissing motions with their painted lips.

"You look tense," the chatty one said. "We can help you take the edge off before the meeting."

"I like my edges." Sarrlevi lifted a palm to keep them at bay. "Leave us."

Vintok looked from Sarrlevi to me and back, and enlightenment dawned on his face. Had he figured out we were a couple?

"Well, if you grow bored with waiting, they will remain available. If you prefer your own company—" a twinkle entered his eyes, "—the furnishings in the parlor are *quite* comfortable."

"We don't get bored easily," I said. "Thanks."

Vintok departed with his guards, waving for the goblin and the girls to leave as well. As they sauntered out, one woman shot me a look of loathing, though we hadn't even made eye contact previously. Maybe she was pissed that Sarrlevi wasn't shoing *me* away.

“Not sure whether that’s better than being ignored or not,” I muttered.

Sarrlevi gazed at me as the girls departed, closing the door and leaving us alone in the parlor. A window overlooking Puget Sound offered a view of ships being unloaded, but we couldn’t see the helicopter. I could, however, sense that it had landed.

“You do like your edges.” I leaned against Sarrlevi’s arm.

“You like them as well.” He smiled with certainty.

“I have learned to appreciate them.”

Sarrlevi offered his hand. When I clasped it, he led me to a white leather sofa near the window. He removed his sword harness, resting the weapons within reach, and we sat. I leaned Sorka against the sofa, also within reach.

It bothers you when females proposition me, he said telepathically.

I couldn’t tell if it was a question or not. *A little, I guess. It’s not like it’s your fault. I do like it when you shoo them away.*

I know this.

His mind-reading penchant made me wonder if he already knew all about my fears and insecurities. I thought I’d been good about not saying anything or acting like a jealous lover whenever other women batted their eyelashes at him, but if he read my thoughts at those moments, he knew how I felt. How was a girl supposed to keep even her *thoughts* mature and self-confident?

When you have read the minds of many, Sarrlevi said, *as well as looked within, you realize that only the vain and unaware have no insecurities.*

Oh? What are yours? Not that I’ll leave you for another man, I know.

You will not leave me because we are fused.

People get divorced, you know. I squeezed his hand to let him know I was arguing for the sake of it, not because I planned to ditch him. Though he had to already know that.

Trees do not. Once they grow together, they are together for the rest of their lives.

It occurred to me that I could voice the questions I’d had earlier, telepathically if not aloud. Maybe this wasn’t the ideal place to get deep and ponder our relationship, but we’d refused the entertainment, and there wasn’t much else going on in the parlor.

Can I ask you a question possibly based on my insecurities but possibly also my lack of knowledge of elven culture? Or some of both, I suppose.

Ask all questions you wish about elves. And me.

Is it usual for your people, when they’re in relationships, to be

monogamous? Is it usual for you? I silently admitted I didn't care that much about elven culture and only wanted to know *his* intentions.

Some elves in relationships are monogamous. Others are not. Sarrlevi shared an image of Slehvya.

I winced. I would have been fine forgetting about her forever—and that she'd apparently been using Sarrlevi to piss off her husband for a long time.

Our predominant religion speaks little of it, Sarrlevi continued. *I have not been in a relationship involving feelings and caring for a very long time. Perhaps I have never been in one such as you might consider it. But I understand that you would like a monogamous relationship and also wish to engage in that with you.*

The lump that stuck in my throat made me glad we were speaking telepathically. Otherwise my, *Good*, would have been raspy. As it was, that was an inadequate response, and I groped for something better. *I appreciate that. I know you can have whoever you wish and that you probably get, uhm, urges to explore new partners.*

I enjoy having you satisfy my urges. The corners of his eyes crinkled. *Also, you have stood by my side when others have not. As I've told you before, this means a great deal to me. I do not wish to hurt you in any way.*

I buried my face against his shoulder, not wanting to tear up in a mob goblin's waiting room, but the words touched me. I was glad I'd mustered the courage to ask him.

Sarrlevi shifted to wrap his arm around my shoulders, and romantic jazz music started playing from a nearby speaker. A door opened.

Sarrlevi tensed and reached for his swords, but it was the dish goblin. His shirt back on, he pushed a trolley into the parlor, an open bottle of champagne in an ice-filled bucket and glasses resting next to a dish of strawberries. He didn't presume to pour drinks, merely leaving the trolley in front of Sarrlevi, bowing to us, and trotting back out. He shut the door behind him.

Curious, I pulled the bottle far enough out of the ice to read the label. Dom Pérignon.

“Expensive stuff.” And nothing I'd ever had. Under different circumstances—circumstances in which we didn't suspect The Wrench of being an enemy—I would have been tempted to try it. “Too bad it could be poisoned.”

Sarrlevi sniffed. “Poisoned or not, it would be unwise to drink an

alcoholic beverage in the lair of an enemy. Or a prospective employer.”

“Yeah.” Too bad. It and the strawberries looked scrumptious. Reluctantly, I let the bottle slide back into the ice.

The jazz music grew a touch louder.

I think they want us to get jiggy with each other, I said, returning to telepathy.

To what?

Have sex. They offered the girls—and dish goblin—first. Then Vintok figured out we’re a couple, so he’s arranged this. I can only think of one reason why he and his boss would want us to have sex in their parlor.

Because goblins are perverts and enjoy watching displays of intercourse?

Okay, I can only think of two reasons.

They may wish us to grow distracted so they can spring a trap, one which would fail if we were alert. His eyes narrowed as he brushed his fingers over the hilt of one of his swords. *The offer to hire me may have been part of a ruse.*

Yeah. Maybe as soon as you and I get horizontal, with you far too busy to worry about keeping your weapons nearby, they’ll do... whatever they plan to do with us. Kill me, I suppose, if The Wrench is a part of the organization.

They are foolish if they believe I could not spring to defend myself—and you—while engaged in sex.

I nodded. *Yes, if they knew you, they would know what a talented multitasker you are. How many times have you cleaned my entropy while we’re having sex?*

He eyed me sidelong. *I do that before the sex.*

But while we’re kissing.

To tidy the area so we can thoroughly enjoy ourselves during our joining.

I suppose you’d be horrified if I admitted I’d had sex on the floor on a pile of dirty laundry before.

Mystified is the word you seek.

The clean laundry was on the bed and hadn’t been put away yet. I didn’t want to mess it up.

So you rolled around in soiled garments smelling of body odor?

I think they still smelled of botanical rain, actually. I grinned at him.

Equally odious.

His indignant expression prompted me to touch his jaw and think about kissing him. Too bad this was a setup and we couldn’t relax, enjoy the

champagne and strawberries, and spend a delightful afternoon together.

Sarrlevi's eyelids drooped as he no doubt followed along with my thoughts. *Perhaps we should spring the trap.*

How? Have sex and see what the goblins do?

We could feign a greater distraction than we feel while being prepared to grab our weapons and defend ourselves when their minions charge in. If we could capture Vintok or The Wrench and get one alone for a moment, I believe I could scour his mind and learn the details of their scheme—and whether they're tied in with the organization. Sarrlevi lifted his hand to rub the back of my neck.

I'm not sure I could feign being distracted by you. Even as I said the words, my head bent, and I slumped more deeply against him, already basking in the neck massage. *And what happens if the minions don't charge in, and it's some magical booby trap instead? The walls could be designed to close in and smash us like pancakes.*

Sarrlevi considered the room, his gaze probing the corners and the ceiling. Searching for monitoring devices as well as moveable walls?

I didn't see any cameras, but that didn't mean there weren't magical doodads keeping an eye on us. In fact, I would be shocked if there weren't. How else would the goblins know when their guests were getting busy with each other?

If the walls came together to smash us, Sarrlevi said, the homeowner's furniture and goblin art collection would also be smashed.

I don't think goblin art is worth much.

The grand piano might be another story.

Sarrlevi's eyelids lowered, and he smiled at me, the achingly handsome smile that still made my insides jitter. He slid his other arm around me and shifted me onto his lap. I started to reach for my hammer, to make sure it wasn't out of easy reach, but I was supposed to be too distracted for that. Besides, it wasn't far, and neither were his weapons.

No magic, I told Sarrlevi as I lifted my mouth to his for a kiss.

No? You wish to mate like animals in the forest?

We're not going to mate, dude. I imagined orcs charging in while Sarrlevi had his trousers around his ankles, and my underwear dangled from one of the light fixtures.

The light fixture? Really. He shared an image of our clothes folded in neat stacks on the coffee table when the orcs burst in.

They're not going to believe us too distracted to defend ourselves if you're magically folding clothes while we make out.

Hm.

He obeyed my wishes to leave out the magic, but he slid a hand under my shirt, fingers raising goosebumps as they trailed over my skin. My body soon grew heated, and I caught myself wiggling closer to him, feeling the hard contours of his muscles through our clothing. Of their own volition, my arms wrapped around his shoulders, and I pushed one hand through his short hair, rubbing his scalp as our kisses deepened. He stroked me with his tongue as his fingers drifted up to brush the side of my breast. He didn't loosen my bra, and I almost murmured a protest before remembering that we would be interrupted at any moment and have to fight.

It was hard to keep that in mind with his deft hands sending delicious waves of desire through me. Even without magic, touching him, and being touched by him, aroused me quickly. Sitting in his lap, I could tell he was having a similar experience.

That didn't keep him from saying, *I've identified a magical monitoring device.* He shared an image of a small dome painted the same white as the piano and resting atop it. *Vintok is in the back of the house. I believe he may be watching. His guards are with him as well as a number of other goblins.*

Great. I love an audience.

The Wrench remains on the rooftop with the helicopter and whoever arrived with it.

What do we do if they don't interrupt us?

Smiling against my mouth, he cupped my breast, thumb brushing my nipple and making me wish, however unwise it would have been, that he *had* removed my bra. Removed everything.

With people watching? I asked. *I didn't think you were an exhibitionist.*

No. Perhaps we do not appear sufficiently distracted.

I could moan a little. Or you could moan. They're probably more worried about you than me. My roaming hand found its way to his belt, and a way to make him appear *thoroughly* distracted popped into my mind, but I didn't want him grabbing for his sagging trousers if an army rushed in.

It would be foolish for them to believe you're not a threat. Were you more ruthless and less law-abiding, you could deal with the members of the organization yourself.

I hesitated. *Is that what you want?*

No. I like you as you are. And I like protecting you. Sarrlevi returned a hand to the back of my neck, massaging me as he added, *I am prepared to take care of those who continue to threaten you. Starting with the goblin, I will one-by-one take out the members of that organization until those who remain agree to remove the bounty and leave you alone.*

That sent a cold chill through me, quenching some of my desire, and I planted my palms on his chest. *I'm not prepared for that, Varlesh. You can't go down that list, murdering people. Besides, we don't know for certain that The Wrench has anything to do with those guys.*

One of the enchanted helicopters your mother made is on his roof at this very moment.

I know, but—

Mataalii. His eyes were intense as he held my gaze. *I intend to ensure your safety and that of any offspring we might have.*

I appreciate that, but—

I memorized the names and locations of those on the list, he added, still holding my gaze.

I stared at him. *The crinkled damp list that I only showed you for a few seconds?*

You know I have a good memory.

I slumped against him, dropping my head on his shoulder.

It meant a lot to me that he cared and wanted to protect me, but I couldn't help but remember Willard's comparison of us to Bonnie and Clyde. Even though I wanted to vow that there wasn't any similarity, that would be hard if people started showing up with their throats cut. And what if the police linked the deaths back to me and came to my door?

With a twinge of frustration, I used my power to fuse the insides of the monitoring device together. A faint snap sounded, and smoke wafted from it.

If your world foolishly turns its back on you, a talented enchanter they should be courting, you will always have a home with me. Sarrlevi shared his memory of us relaxing in his mountain chalet on Jiaga.

Always? I asked, touched even though I didn't want to have to leave Earth. This was my home.

Yes.

Thanks.

Sarrlevi's gaze lost some of its intensity as he looked toward the smoking monitoring device.

Sorry, but I don't think they were going to spring anyway, not if they hadn't already.

Perhaps not. Sarrlevi lifted his gaze toward the ceiling. *There are more goblins than I realized up there with The Wrench and the flying conveyance.*

We never saw any goblins in control bracelets and working for the organization.

No. Sarrlevi shifted me out of his lap. *We will join in earnest later.* He gave me a smoldering bedroom look. *And you will not pause when you reach my belt then.*

I love when you give me orders.

His lids drooped further so that he looked at me through his lashes. *You love when I give you orders that you wish to obey.*

I wanted to shake my head, but a little tingle of anticipation went through me as I imagined the orders he would give later.

He smiled smugly.

You're still a bastard sometimes, I told him.

Yes. Sarrlevi stood, folded his arms over his chest, and looked toward what might have been another monitoring device mounted in a ceiling corner. "We will entertain you no further, goblins. The Wrench will propose his assignment now, or we will leave."

I smoothed my shirt and stood next to him, gripping the haft of my hammer and nodding firmly.

As the seconds ticked past and nothing happened, I wondered if we'd been wrong. Maybe nobody had been watching us at all.

IT WASN'T THE WRENCH BUT VINTOK WHO WALKED IN FIFTEEN OR TWENTY minutes after Sarrlevi and I stopped our sofa groping and stood to wait like normal people.

“The boss will see you in his office now.” Vintok plucked a strawberry from the untouched bowl on the table. “We are most disappointed that you didn't continue. The staff always enjoys a show. Such small entertainments motivate goblins to work harder.” As he chomped on the strawberry, he made a dish-scrubbing motion with one arm.

“You keep servants here to have sex with The Wrench's clients so your goblin staff can watch?” I raised my eyebrows.

“It is entertainment for all.” Vintok smiled, then led us back into the foyer, down a wide hall, and into a library, the built-in bookcases filled with hardbound editions. Desks with goblin-sized chairs held numerous computers, and large TV screens were mounted on the walls. “The Wrench is on his way. Help yourself to a drink if you wish.” He waved to a bottle of whiskey and glasses on a silver tray on a side table. The tray and drinks were normal, but the table was made from yellow yield and red stop signs.

“They really want you to get sloshed here,” I murmured.

The Wrench soon walked in wearing a cheerful smile.

“I'm getting an enchanted helicopter at a tremendous discount,” he announced. “I've always wanted a helicopter. It's going to be fabulous.”

“That helicopter is here because it's for sale?” I pointed upward, sensing it hadn't left the roof and that the goblins Sarrlevi had noted remained near it.

Had they *brought* it? Having seen goblins drive their jalopy through my

neighborhood, I couldn't imagine one flying a helicopter. An image of a green-skinned pilot sitting on a stack of phonebooks came to mind.

"Indeed. A goblin scouting team that caters to high-end clients found it among the wreckage after a battle on the Olympic Peninsula. I believe you know something about that, yes? They fixed it up and assure me it's running wonderfully now. I will, of course, insist on a test flight once we are done here. As much as it pains me to say it about my own kind, one can't always trust goblin engineers. They're not like *dwarves*." The Wrench smiled at me.

"They're a little more creative than dwarves." I scratched my cheek, no longer certain where this meeting was going. If this was a trap, it was one of the stranger ones I'd wandered into.

"*Very* creative." The Wrench hopped up on his chair and then the wooden desk to face Sarrlevi from a position of greater height. Though not *much* greater height since Sarrlevi was over six feet tall. "Lord Elf, as I believe my associate told you, I need a wealthy human with magical defenses slain. He preys not only upon his own kind but upon innocent goblins." The Wrench planted an aggrieved hand on his chest, though I hardly thought a rich goblin arranging the assassination of someone counted as *innocent*.

"Victor Woodward," Sarrlevi said.

"Yes."

"You do not wish to strike at him yourself because you fear reprisal from the organization of which he is a member?" Sarrlevi nodded at me, fishing for information.

"I do not wish to strike at him myself because I'm a *goblin*." The Wrench pointed at his biceps. "Do I look like someone who can sneak past magical defenses, overpower guards, and slay an enemy?"

"You have numerous warriors surrounding you."

"None of whom are sufficient for such a task. They defend my home and my person. That is all."

"What do you know about the organization that Woodward is part of?" Sarrlevi asked. "You must have some awareness of it, especially if you are contemplating buying one of their helicopters."

"I heard the helicopters belonged to a dragon named Varlatativa."

"*Dragons* have no need for flying machines."

"I suppose that's true. I will do some research on allies that Woodward might have, but allow me to make my offer of payment, and perhaps you will find it sufficient to compensate you for any retaliation that might come your

way.” The Wrench hopped off the desk, opened a cabinet to reveal a vault, and crouched before it, pressing his palm against a reader. He returned with a small chest that he lugged over to Sarrlevi, the weight hinting at the contents before he opened the lid. One-ounce gold bars, as well as a few magical rings, lay within. “My research suggests that this is fifty percent above your usual fee. I’ve learned that your female, in addition to preferring your company over that of our goblin dish boy, enjoys cheese. Should you agree to the mission, I will throw in twenty boxes of my favorite kind.”

“Boxes?” I mouthed.

The Wrench clunked the chest onto the desk, then opened a wood panel with a refrigerator behind it and pulled out a yellow box. I snorted in recognition before he thunked it down next to the gold.

Velveeta.

When Sarrlevi also recognized it, his lips rippled with distaste. “Should I agree to the mission, you will *keep* that.”

“Your female does not enjoy it?” The Wrench gaped at me in surprise, then lifted the lid and pointed at the half-eaten cheese sloppily wrapped in foil inside. “The texture is superb, and it is so smooth and perfectly formed. I enjoy it vastly. All goblins do.”

“Tinja prefers the quality stuff you bring from other worlds,” I murmured to Sarrlevi.

“Tinja.” The Wrench snapped his fingers. “Yes, I wish to ask about her.”

The wariness I’d felt before returned like a portcullis slamming down. “Why?”

“She is of interest to me.”

The Wrench’s smile was affable, but that didn’t reassure me in the least. I was tempted to repeat *why*, but Sarrlevi spoke first.

“If you are unaware of and presumably not offended by the organization that Woodward is affiliated with, why do you wish him assassinated?”

“Because he is an enemy of goblins.” The Wrench’s smile vanished, and he made a dagger-thrusting motion with his hand. “His logging corporation owns forest land northeast of Arlington, and a clan of goblins is making a home among the trees. When he found out, he ordered hunters with rifles to drive around in trucks and eradicate them. *Eradicate*. As if they’re rats or wasps and not intelligent beings. The goblins do not harm the trees, which Woodward is not even interested in logging at this time, and they bother no one. Yet his hunters killed several of them and wounded many more.” The

Wrench flung his arms in the air and clambered onto the desk again. “When I found out about this, I attempted to buy the land from him so the goblins could stay. I have no desire to log, but timberland is a decent investment, so it wouldn’t have been a bad business decision. But even though I offered ten percent above fair market value, and explained that goblins are intelligent beings, Woodward refused to sell to me. Not only that, he had the gall to say he would send his hunters after *me* if I pestered him again.”

“I’m sorry that goblins lost their lives.” I didn’t know whether the story was true or not but believed the kind of people who’d been plotting to send humanity into a nuclear war wouldn’t care about offing a few goblins. Still, I would ask Gondo about The Wrench as soon as I got back and see if he could verify the story. With as much information as filtered through him, he ought to have heard of this guy.

“It is heinous. Woodward deserves death.” The Wrench put a foot on the Velveeta box and faced Sarrlevi. “He deserves decapitation by a skilled elf assassin. Will you take this assignment?”

“I will consider it,” Sarrlevi said.

“Here.” The Wrench counted out five gold bars from the box, hopped down, and placed them in Sarrlevi’s hand. “Take your female out for a good time on the town while you consider this. The rest of the gold will be here for you when you return with Woodward’s head stuck upon the point of your sword.”

Sarrlevi held out his palm and accepted the bars. “I usually store the heads in a magical moisture-proof bag until I deliver them.”

“At which point, *I* will impale it on a sword, then mount it outside my warehouse for all my enemies to see.” The Wrench bent, opened a drawer, and pulled out not a sword but a letter opener. He stabbed it into the air with relish.

“Your enemies who can find this place through the magical mist?” I asked.

“Precisely.” The Wrench nodded toward us, then pointed at the door. “Vintok will take you back to your residence. When you return, perhaps you will tell me more about Tinja.”

I’d taken a couple steps toward the door but froze.

“Everything she wants people to know is on the internet. She has a business selling house plans.”

“Yes, I’ve heard that is her business. *Tiny*-house plans.”

“Yeah.”

“Perfect.” Mikki thrust his letter opener into the Velveeta and clasped his hands together. “That’s perfect.”

I stared at him as Sarrlevi drew me out.

I have reservations about The Wrench, I told Sarrlevi telepathically, a little uneasy that he’d accepted the gold. If he hadn’t planned to take the assignment, he wouldn’t have. *A lot of reservations.*

You will research him. He must have seen in my thoughts that I planned to talk to Gondo.

What will you do?

Sarrlevi’s telepathic voice was cool and determined as he said, *Research the target.*

“YOU KNOW HE GAVE YOU TEN THOUSAND DOLLARS’ WORTH OF GOLD, right?” I murmured to Sarrlevi as the limo rolled into my neighborhood. Vintok had sent the driver and two orcs, not coming himself, so I didn’t worry much about speaking aloud.

Sarrlevi gave me a blank look. “Is that a substantial amount on Earth?”

“Pretty substantial. You could take me out for a good time on the town for a hundred. Maybe seventy-five. I’m pretty easy. Movie, popcorn, and Twizzlers, and I’ll be in your lap, getting you excited.”

Sarrlevi smiled, switching to telepathy to respond. *Tonight, you will excite me, and I you, regardless of the presence of Twizzlers.*

You have no idea what those are, do you?

I know your excitement does not require them, not when I am with you.

That is true. They’re kind of a bonus perk. I bumped my shoulder against his arm and smiled. *Will you join Zadie and me for dinner tonight? I’m thinking of inviting Val and Abbas too.* I didn’t mention that I would feel obligated to invite Val’s mate at the same time. *I know you’re not crazy about my dinner gatherings.*

I prefer when only the two of us gather. He let his smile linger and drooped his eyelids at me. *I may find other work to do tonight.*

You’re a touch on the antisocial side, you know. I hoped the work he had in mind wasn’t assassinating The Wrench’s target. I wanted to learn more about who in the organization could remove that bounty before letting Sarrlevi go after any of them. Maybe it would be worth making a portal to Dun Kroth and asking my mother if she knew who might be able to revoke

the bounty. She seemed to be doing her best to reassimilate into dwarven culture and forget about her time on Earth, but she ought to want to help me.

On Earth, do assassins have vast networks of colleagues that they spend time with? Sarrlevi asked. *That would be atypical based on my experience.*

I thought you had those Guild get-togethers where you all discuss work while nobly refraining from stabbing each other.

Rarely. I believe the gatherings we've had have only been because the Assassins' Guild currently has a female leader. She is also social. Perhaps it is a flaw of the sex.

Oh, I'm sure. I was about to point out that his people lived *socially* in cities of interconnected tree houses, but he turned in the seat to frown in the direction we were going. Toward my house.

I reached out with my senses, certain that Zadie wouldn't have prompted such a frown. Since she was a mundane human, he wouldn't have sensed her regardless.

As the limo turned onto my street, I spotted the silver glow of a portal before it winked out. I also sensed that a full-blooded elf had come out of it. A *familiar* full-blooded elf, though I hadn't run into her for months and wouldn't have expected her to come to Earth.

"Slehvyra," Sarrlevi said with distaste.

"What could *she* want?"

He met my gaze but didn't answer. Did that look mean, *Me*?

I didn't respond to it, but I couldn't keep from bristling. The last time the elf ex-princess had made a deal for a night with Sarrlevi, she hadn't mentioned that she'd also arranged for dragons to come to his home and destroy it the next morning. All because he'd refused to have sex with her once before.

"Whatever she wants, she's not invited to my dinner." As the limo slowed, I grabbed my hammer and tried to keep fantasies of smashing the elf's head out of my thoughts. Because she was a powerful mage and could read minds, not because they didn't belong there.

Slehvyra stood on the sidewalk, alternately eyeing my house and the house across the street. Little had changed about her. She was still blonde, tall, and beautiful in an emerald-green dress that hugged her hips, complemented by matching sandals with straps that looked like vines—or maybe *were* vines.

Her gaze lingered on the dragon topiaries, though they weren't doing

anything at the moment. They did emanate elven magic since Freysha had helped Zavryd create them.

When the limo stopped, Sarrlevi held up a hand and got out first. Did he want me to wait inside?

Too bad. I scrambled out after him. I wouldn't let her try to manipulate him, insult him, or suck him into a scheme. Oh, he could take care of himself—the reputation he'd established in his career attested to that—but he had a tendency to take crap from females that he wouldn't from males. He'd never admitted it, but I suspected it was because his father had abused his mother and sister. Sarrlevi refused to be anything like him.

Clangs came from Val's backyard, and I sensed her and her daughter there, having a sword-fighting lesson most likely. Though I didn't detect Zavryd, Val's presence heartened me. If Slehvya had camouflaged allies—or dragons—nearby, waiting to pounce on Sarrlevi, we would have help we could call upon.

The limo departed, the orcs indifferent to the elf on the sidewalk. Well, mostly. One rolled down the window and leered and whistled at her as the vehicle drove away.

Ignoring the orc, Slehvya turned a curled lip toward Sarrlevi. Her disdainful gaze passed over me so quickly that I might have been a weed sprouting from a sidewalk crack.

Sarrlevi didn't draw his weapons as he approached her—that shouldn't have disappointed me, I supposed—but tension bunched his shoulders.

Though I was sure nothing flattering would come out of Slehvya's mouth, I rubbed the translation charm in my pocket.

“Varlesh, you look as fit and handsome as ever, but what a hovel you're domiciling yourself in.” Slehvya flicked dismissive fingers toward my house, my house with its new roof, siding, and landscaping. It looked damn good, thank you very much. “It's built on the ground, like an animal den,” she continued. “Surely, after your heroic deeds, you deserve a fitting home.”

Heroic deeds? I hadn't thought elves considered assassins heroic in any way.

“Why are you here, Slehvya?” Sarrlevi didn't ask what heroic deeds she referenced, nor did he point out that at least some of his homes were built on the ground. Admittedly, the two I'd seen had been perched atop cliffs that overlooked the surrounding land from great heights, so maybe elves considered them similar to tree houses.

“For you, of course.” Slehvyra smiled as she looked him up and down.

“I am not available.”

I came to stand at his side, though she continued to ignore me.

“No? My colleagues and I have a renewed interest in you. We heard that you killed a dragon recently, Varlatastiva. Not only is that a magnificent act, the mere thought of which sets my delicate female insides aflutter, but it’s one that we’d like to know all about.” Her eyelids lowered, her eyes slits. “It is not easy to kill a dragon, as we all know.”

While I gagged over the thought of the ex-princess’s delicate insides fluttering, Sarrlevi lifted his chin and said nothing. Though I’d seen him kill Varlat and knew he’d taken the already-injured dragon by surprise, I wouldn’t do anything to downplay his magnificence. Let the Cosmic Realms think he could kill dragons with one hand tied behind his back. *Especially* let the assassins who were after me think that.

“Those who wish to see an end to the dragons’ rule over the Realms would be particularly interested in learning the details,” Slehvyra added.

“The fight was brief and took place during a greater battle,” Sarrlevi said. “There are few details to share, and I have no interest in attacking other dragons, if that is what brings you here.”

“No? A shame and a little unexpected, given how poorly dragons have treated you.” She raised her slender blonde eyebrows expectantly.

He gave her nothing. Good. Maybe she would go away.

Not deterred, Slehvyra said, “I have heard about something that *does* interest you.”

Again, Sarrlevi didn’t speak.

“You hope the king will revoke your exile and allow you to return to Veleshna Var.” Slehvyra smiled widely, as if she’d not only dug up a huge secret but thought she had a trump card now. “You wish to visit your mother whenever you like and return to living among civilized people in the welcoming bows of the hylithla tree.”

“My mother wishes that,” Sarrlevi said.

“And you do not? Have you not spoken with longing of the forests of our home world? The aching beauty of the mountains and the lakes? The comforting presence of those who are like you?”

I shifted my weight, bothered by the idea that he might have admitted such things to her, even if it had been long ago. She was an enemy, not an ally, and she was here now, trying to manipulate him.

Any chance we can go inside and leave her on the sidewalk? I asked Sarrlevi telepathically. *I need to start preparing dinner, and she's not invited.*

You may go in, he said. *When she does not succeed at goading me into whatever scheme she's attempting to deploy, she should leave.*

You don't think she'll leave if we abandon her to the sidewalk? It's not very interesting out here.

Unfortunately, she is powerful enough to break your enchantments and vindictive enough to do so if we ignore her. You may go. He touched my shoulder and nodded toward the house.

"Yes, send her away," Slehvya said, her first acknowledgment that I existed. "You'll not have to lower yourself to rutting with mongrels once you're welcome back on Veleshna Var. You'll once again have access to the captivating beauties of the elven court."

"He'd rather eat mud than sleep with a bunch of manipulative bitches," I said before I could think better of it.

Irritation flashed in Slehvya's eyes, and she gathered power about her.

"*Hygorotho,*" I whispered, holding up Sorka. Her barrier formed around me.

Slehvya sneered and, instead of attacking me, looked toward my windmill.

Sarrlevi raised a hand and stepped forward, creating a magical wall between her and it. "Finish what you came to say, Slehvya. You are not welcome on Mataalii's property."

"Or standing in front of it like a stalker either," I muttered.

"I came to invite you to visit my home on the coast of Tramondor," Slehvya said. "So we can discuss how we will sway our people to welcome you back to Veleshna Var."

"Your home in Tramondor rather than in the capital where you live with your husband," he said.

"Precisely. He may be less interested in your return. But there are elves who heard about your slaying of a dragon and approve. They also know you were responsible for our people learning of the formula that cures Shiserathi Disease. *Many* would like to see you invited home."

"Only the king's opinion on the subject matters, and Eireth does not like me."

"Eireth might not be king that much longer."

I frowned at Slehvya. What did *that* mean? She wasn't an assassin and

couldn't be thinking of killing him. But could she know about someone else's plot? My memory of the frosty elf queen came to mind. Even if she was Freysha's mother, it was easy for me to imagine her scheming against Eireth.

"What are you implying, Slehvya?" Sarrlevi asked.

"Exactly what you think I'm implying. Come to my home on Tramondor tomorrow, satisfy me suitably, and, when the time comes, I'll make sure the new king wants you in his court." Slehvya stepped closer to him, her voice lowering to a sultry register as she added, "For what you've done, you could be a hero to our people, no longer a scorned outcast. No longer in exile. You could be given your noble title and lands back, all that should have been yours when your father passed. Your mother would be proud of you, not ashamed."

Sarrlevi's jaw tightened.

She's not ashamed of you, I told him telepathically, certain that was true. She understands what happened. You were both victims.

He didn't look at me. He wasn't looking at Slehvya either. Instead, his gaze had shifted past her shoulder, as if in contemplation.

"Consider my offer, dear Varlesh." Slehvya reached out and drew a fingernail along his jaw.

Remembering my aunt's poisonous fingernail polish, I loosed a battle cry and sprang at Slehvya. As soon as I started swinging my hammer, I knew it was an overreaction, but I hardly cared.

Sarrlevi reached out, his power surprising me by tearing a hole through Sorka's barrier, and caught my hammer by the haft as the wide-eyed Slehvya scrambled back. She whipped up a barrier of her own, but she didn't carry any weapons. A part of me felt like a bully for trying to attack her; a part of me wished Sarrlevi had let me connect.

Sorka growled irritation in my mind and fed more power into our barrier, trying to force Sarrlevi to let go of her.

With my blow stopped, he did so, letting his hand drop. *You do not wish her for an enemy, he told me. Trust me.*

I wanted to snarl that she wouldn't be my enemy if she were dead, but we both knew I wouldn't kill anyone. Besides, he'd implied once that she had a powerful family and friends, so maybe I *would* have new elven enemies even if she died.

"That mongrel bitch," Slehvya snarled at me, raising a hand, her magic swelling. A swirling ball of fire appeared above her fingers, and she drew

back her arm, as if to throw it like a baseball.

“Stop.” Sarrlevi shifted his wall and funneled power into it to make it impenetrable to her magic. And unfortunately to mine as well.

Reluctantly, I lowered my hammer and stepped back. I’d overreacted anyway, though it rankled that Sarrlevi had the power to get through Sorka’s barrier when he needed to. I’d known that, but I hadn’t expected him to keep me from clobbering someone who deserved it. An enemy who’d manipulated him before and wanted to do so again.

“She must have a tongue like an *esyxslar*.”

The charm translated that to *anteater*, though I trusted it was some elven animal.

“I can’t imagine what else about her would make you defend her and want to rut with her,” Slehvya told him.

“She is a loyal companion who doesn’t manipulate me,” Sarrlevi said. “Leave now. I am not interested in your offer.”

“Uh, I’m a little interested.” I might not want Sarrlevi to have anything to do with Slehvya, but I sure as hell wanted to know if King Eireth was in danger.

Freysha would be crushed if her father were murdered, and even if Val was tougher and hadn’t known him her whole life, she would be distressed as well. I had no doubt. They’d both done favors for me—Val, especially. I couldn’t ignore a threat to their father’s life.

Slevhya stared at me in surprise but then startled me by laughing. “But of course you are interested. Dwarves, unimpressed by the squat brick lovers offered up by their own world, have *always* lusted after elves.”

Her fireball evaporated, and she slid her hand down her side to rest on her hip as she turned her chest toward me, flicking a glance toward Sarrlevi as she posed.

“That’s not what I meant,” I said.

“Isn’t it?” Slehvya smirked knowingly at me. “Perhaps you imagine the three of us could enjoy some sport.” She chuckled and looked at Sarrlevi again to gauge his reaction. What, did she think *this* would interest him when she alone hadn’t?

He wasn’t reacting at all, his face masked as he kept the wall of power up between Slehvya and me.

“Nope. Not imagining that in the least.” I took another step back, though my heel caught on the grass, and I flailed before recovering. My cheeks

heated in embarrassment.

Slehvyra laughed. “I’ve flustered her with my offer. Goodness.” She slid her hand along her side again and swished her hips.

“Ten seconds ago, you wanted to kill me,” I said.

“It wouldn’t be the first time a battle has led to the bedroom.”

“Go home, Slehvya,” Sarrlevi said, sounding weary.

“I’ll go to Tramondor and wait for you. Perhaps the *two* of you.” Slehvya wiggled her hips again before stepping into the street and forming a portal.

Two blonde heads watched from the fence attached to Val’s house, and I realized the clanks from her backyard had stopped some time ago. Now, she and Amber were both staring, their dangling jaws just visible over the fence.

Witnesses were always fun when one was being invited to join a threesome. I didn’t know how much Elven Val understood, but Slehvya’s body language had probably made the proposition clear even without words.

Slehvyra did something similar to blowing a kiss at Sarrlevi before springing through the portal.

“She is tedious,” Sarrlevi said as it disappeared. “I had hoped she’d forgotten about me.”

“You’re rousing the interest of a lot of women today. Maybe you’re emitting more pheromones than usual and exuding extra allure right now.” I glanced at Val and grew more grim. “Do you think Slehvya was bullshitting about Eireth?”

Sarrlevi mouthed *bullshitting* but must have caught the gist. “I do not know.”

“We should warn him, right? In case there’s something to it. Do you think he’ll listen to us if we go there?”

“To me, certainly not. I would be forbidden from seeing him. And you...” Sarrlevi spread a hand upward. He didn’t know if I’d be forbidden from seeing the elven king or not.

Neither did I. I didn’t think Eireth had a strong opinion about me, but his wife didn’t like me.

“I’ll tell Val,” I said, “and she and Zavryd can figure out how to get a message to him.”

I took a step in that direction, but Sarrlevi stopped me with a raised hand. “If Slehvya’s family is genuinely plotting against King Eireth, and you get in the way of their plans, she may send someone after you.”

“An assassin?” I snorted. “How will that be any different from my current

predicament?”

“The humans of Earth will be easier to deal with than elves.” He clenched his jaw, reminding me that he already had plans to start *dealing* with those humans.

I gripped his arm. “Let me talk to my mother and find out more about the organization before you start going after people, okay?”

“You should talk to your mother, yes.”

I squinted at him, not certain if that was a statement of agreement or he was making the suggestion so I would leave Earth and not get in the way of his plans.

“I’m going to talk to Val first,” I said.

“Even if there is someone plotting Eireth’s assassination,” Sarrlevi said, “I suspect you—or even Thorvald—would need proof to give the king and his guards for them to believe the threat.”

“I’m going to tell her anyway. She can at least give him a heads-up.” I looked pointedly at the magical wall that he hadn’t yet lowered. It blocked my path.

Sarrlevi hesitated, then dropped it. “You must do this because of your dwarven stubbornness and loyalty.”

“That’s right,” I said, though humans could be stubborn and loyal too.

He smiled faintly and kissed me on the top of my head. “I understand.”

I touched his hip before heading across the street, wishing all I had to do was explain Slehvya’s bizarre invitation, not tell Val that her father was being targeted for assassination.

“HEY, VAL, AMBER,” I SAID AFTER LETTING MYSELF THROUGH THE GATE IN the fence, a fence *I* wasn’t tall enough to see over. My senses told me they’d returned to the patio, but they hadn’t yet resumed their sparring lesson. “I have some news.”

“That some basic elf bih was trying to steal your man?” Amber asked.

Some basic what?

“Is *that* what she was trying to do?” Val eyed me, apparently deciphering her daughter’s question without trouble. “I thought it looked like something else, at least at the end.”

“It’s complicated,” I said.

“I’m sorry we spied on you,” Val said, “but when I sensed the portal form and a strange elf come out, I thought you might be in danger.”

“Oh, I was. But it’s okay. That’s my life these days.” I glanced at Amber. I didn’t know if she’d spent much time with her elven grandfather, but assassinations didn’t seem like something we should discuss in front of her.

“Can I talk to you in private, Val?”

Amber propped a fist on her hip. “I’m going to be sixteen in the spring. I’m almost an adult. And I know *all* about sex.”

That proclamation caused a troubled frown to crease Val’s brow as she considered her daughter.

“It’s about elven politics,” I told Amber.

She wrinkled her nose.

Val touched Amber’s arm and pointed to the house. “Why don’t you get the jewelry you’ve been working on? You wanted to ask Matti about

enchanting the earrings, right?”

“Oh, right.”

Thanks to the ongoing assassin problem, Amber hadn't yet started working in the business with me and Abbas, but I'd given her a few crafting lessons. I was glad to hear she was working on her jewelry projects outside of the limited time we'd spent together.

“And stop for a minute to sample the cookies in the kitchen,” Val added. “For five minutes, maybe. They're very enjoyable cookies.”

Amber rolled her eyes. “Just text me when you're done talking about *elven politics*, Val.”

Val gave her a thumbs-up.

Once the door shut, she asked, “Everything okay? I assume you're not contemplating... whatever the elf chick was proposing.”

“No, and no. She wants Sarrlevi, not me.”

“I assume that's not okay with you either. I saw you try to take a swing at her head.”

“That was an overreaction to someone putting fingernails on Sarrlevi.” I waved in dismissal. “I came over because she implied King Eireth is in danger.”

“What kind of danger?”

“Someone might try to assassinate him and put a new king on the throne.”

“Ugh. Who is *she* to know that, and why would she tell you about it?”

“She used to be a princess before Eireth was put on the throne by the dragons, and I gather her family wants to be in power again. She told Sarrlevi about the assassination while I had my translation charm activated, not that she would have cared if she knew I understood anyway. Her name is Slehvya.”

“As in, rhymes with Elvira?”

“Something like that. I got some of her story from Sarrlevi after we first met. And a warning not to make an enemy of her.”

“Hence you swinging a hammer at her head.”

“I don't always *heed* people's warnings.”

“Yeah, me either.” Frowning, Val walked a lap around the patio, her eyes toward the ground.

I summed up the rest of the conversation for her.

“It seems strange that she would *tell* people if she or her colleagues were planning an assassination.”

“Well, since Sarrlevi is an assassin himself and ostracized, maybe she thought he couldn’t rat her out, even if he wanted to. It sounded like she wanted to pull him into her web.”

“Her web or her bed?”

“They’re probably similar places.” I shrugged. “I doubt King Eireth would agree to meet with me if I tried to warn him, but you’re his daughter. If you went to him, he would listen, right?”

“Maybe. I don’t suppose you got the names of any of her accomplices and when and where the deed would take place. If I just tell Eireth that an assassin is gunning for him, I think his reply would be that such things happen to kings often and that he has bodyguards.”

“Oddly, she didn’t hand me her date book and go into details about the big day.”

Val stopped pacing and faced me. “Is there any way you—or, more likely, Sarrlevi—could get more details from her?”

“Probably not without having sex with her.”

Val arched her eyebrows.

“Probably not without *him* having sex with her,” I clarified.

She smiled faintly, though worry lurked in her eyes. “I gather he’s not interested in that arrangement.”

“He’s interested in *our* arrangement.”

“Well, that’s good. Sarrlevi probably doesn’t want to do me—or Eireth—any favors anyway.”

“Maybe not *you*, as you’re the across-the-street mate of his nemesis, but he might help Eireth. He, or at least his mother, is lobbying to get him invited back to Veleshna Var. Eireth is the one who could make that happen.”

“So Sarrlevi is willing to suck up?”

I hesitated. “He’s not very good at that. *I* could suck up. My pride revolves only around my craftsmanship, not my person. Though I’m possibly offended by being called an anteater.”

“Elves have anteaters?”

“They have *esyxslars*, I think it was. My translation charm filled in anteater.”

“A heinous insult.”

A portal formed above the roof, one emanating dragon magic.

“I’m expecting Zav,” Val said before I could decide if I should be worried. “He was going to join me to do a driving lesson with Amber, but I’ll

ask if he can give me a ride to Veleshna Var. Even if we don't have any details for Eireth, I'll do my best to warn him."

"Good. Er, driving lesson?"

"Amber got her learner's permit."

"And your dragon mate has experience driving cars and can teach?"

"Oh, no, but I promised him we would hit up a drive-thru restaurant while we were out and get him some chicken strips. I mostly thought it would be a good idea for someone with powerful dragon magic to be on hand to save the day in case Amber tried to drive off a cliff."

"There aren't a lot of cliffs in Green Lake."

"She could also drive us into the water."

"I'm sure that won't happen." Since I didn't yet have children, I didn't know how common it was for things to go awry during driver's ed, but I doubted there would be many drivers in the world if half of them went off cliffs or into lakes when they were learning. "Is your ex-husband too nervous to teach her?"

"I understand that his *BMW* is too nervous," Val said as Zavryd flew out of the portal. "Thad thinks my Jeep is a more appropriate vehicle for a kid to learn to drive in."

"It does go over curbs without trouble."

"And orc bodies, too, if necessary."

"Being a polite neighbor, I won't ask why you know that."

Val waved to Zavryd. He circled a few times while, I guessed, she telepathically shared my warning with him, then arrowed toward the patio. As he dove, his form blurred, and he shifted into a human, landing in a crouch on the flagstones.

"Have you details about the assassin and the place where this attempt will occur, friend of my mate?" Zavryd asked me.

"Sorry, no."

"Hm."

"If you can take me to Veleshna Var," Val told him, "we can give Eireth a heads-up."

"I believe he will find the source untrustworthy."

I stuck both fists on my hips, nearly clunking a flowerpot with my hammer in the process.

"The *original* source," Zavryd said. "The infamous and notorious elf assassin and his former lover."

“She wasn’t his lover,” I snapped, wishing I could deny that Sarrlevi was infamous too, but Eireth would find him exactly that.

“They did not engage in coitus?” Zavryd looked at Val.

Damn, how many details had she given him?

“They had sex,” I said, “but there was no love involved.”

“Recreational mating,” Val translated for Zavryd.

He waved a hand. “Regardless, King Eireth will be suspicious of the source. He may believe that you, my mate, are being used to trick him into changing his behavior when that is exactly what the assassins desire.”

“Just don’t mention Sarrlevi, Val,” I suggested. “For all Eireth knows, Slehvya regularly comes to our neighborhood and spouts her dire plans at me.”

“We’ll do our best to warn him.” Val patted me on the shoulder. “But if you could get any more details, it would be helpful. I do appreciate you telling me though.”

Zavryd formed another portal.

“Tell Amber we’ll continue her lesson later, please, Matti,” Val added.

“I will.”

Not wasting any time, they leaped through the portal and disappeared.

I wished I *could* get Val more details, that I could be more useful. After all the favors she’d done for me, I wanted to help her. And I wanted Sarrlevi to help Eireth, for it to be *known* that he’d helped Eireth. Then the king might stop hating him so much.

A part of me wanted to suggest that Sarrlevi should play along with Slehvya in an attempt to learn more, but he had lots of pride and might object to that. Besides, it wasn’t as if Slehvya could be trusted. It was possible the assassination implications were made up, and I’d sent Val to warn Eireth about an empty threat.

The back door opened, and Amber peered out. “Val left?”

“With Zavryd, yes.”

She wrinkled her nose and walked out, silver earrings she was working on in hand. “Normally, I’d be ecstatic about my sword lesson being over early, but she was supposed to let me drive around a parking lot in her Jeep.”

“So I heard. Congrats on getting your learner’s permit.” I spoke absently, still musing about whether Sarrlevi could gather more information if he went to Slehvya’s house.

“Thanks, but it was easy.” Amber waved airily.

Sarrlevi wouldn't have to go as far as having sex with Slehvya. That certainly wasn't something I wanted to encourage. Maybe he could go to her place and chat her up, distract her while someone else poked around and looked for condemning evidence.

Someone else... like me?

Slehvya *had* invited me to come along. More or less. It was hard for me to believe she was open to what she'd suggested, but I could pretend I didn't know that. Then, when she called me a homely mongrel and shooed me away, I might be free to snoop around her house.

"Any dumbass with two IQ points could pass the written test," Amber added.

"I think parents lobby to keep the tests easy so their kids can start driving themselves to after-school events as soon as possible." Unless I could figure out how to enchant my translation charm to decode *written* words and not only the spoken, me snooping in Slehvya's house might not be that enlightening. Everything would be in Elven, if it was written down at all. Did people send *letters* about assassinations?

I shook my head bleakly, feeling daunted.

"Probably," Amber said. "I'm trying to get my dad to let me drive to a concert at the Gorge."

"That's a big leap from a parking lot."

"It's not until spring." Amber handed me the earrings. "What do you think? Can you tell what they're supposed to be?"

I eyed the twisted strands of silver wire. They didn't match, though maybe she'd intended that, and I couldn't pick out anything in the design. If not for the backings, I would have been hard-pressed to identify them as earrings.

"Geometric designs?" I guessed.

Amber snatched them back. "Stars and moons. I'll keep working on them." She squinted at me. "*You* can drive, can't you?"

"Yes."

"Any adult with a license can ride along with me."

"I only have a motorcycle, and it's as nervous about student drivers as your father's BMW."

Her eyes lit up. "I'd *love* to drive a motorcycle."

"I'd love for your mother to keep talking to me." *Varlesh*, I reached out telepathically, wanting to run my thoughts by him. *I have an idea.*

Only when he didn't respond did I realize that I didn't sense him. That wasn't that unusual since he often camouflaged himself with his magic, but there weren't any threats around that I could detect. He shouldn't need to do that while he was on my property.

Varlesh?

I groaned and sank into a crouch. Had he left on his mission for The Wrench? The mission I didn't want him to go on?

Damn it. I groaned again.

"Are you okay?" Amber asked. "You look like you're squatting in a field to have a baby."

"If you think that little groan is the noise moms in labor make, you've never been in a delivery room."

"Ew, gross."

"I need to talk to my mother." Now more than ever I needed to, and not only about the organization. Maybe she could enchant something to help me be a better snooper. Assuming Sarrlevi didn't get himself killed on his mission and thought my idea had merit.

"About your delivery?" Amber asked.

"No, though I'm sure it wasn't gross."

Amber looked skeptically at me. "They're *all* gross, Matti. Haven't you watched TV?"

"Not lately." I texted Zadie to tell her we'd have to delay dinner until tomorrow. "Can you stay here alone, Amber?" I'd already taken three steps toward the fence, but realized nobody else was home in Val's house.

"Oh em gee, Matti. I'm not seven."

I bit my lip, not sure that answered my question, but I vaguely remembered that my sister had only been thirteen when our grandparents had started letting her babysit me. I had a lot to learn, I decided, before I had kids of my own.

"Go, go." Amber waved me toward the gate. "But don't forget about our deal." She held up the earrings.

"I keep teaching you jewelry crafting, and you'll carry stuff around my worksite when it's safe?"

"Yup, but we could still alter the arrangement and make me your personal shopper."

"I'm sure I'll be in need of a lot of carrying once Abbas and I take on our next gig."

That earned me an eye roll. “Can’t wait.”

I jogged toward my house to grab the portal generator my mother and grandfather had given me.

Sarrlevi? I tried calling again as I ran, projecting my telepathy as far as I could.

Again, he didn’t answer.

I vowed to hurry, not wanting to be gone long in case something happened and he needed me. Once before, he’d needed me, and I hadn’t been able to reach him. I dreaded the idea of that happening again.

AS USUAL, THE PORTAL GENERATOR DROPPED ME OFF OUTSIDE THE BARRIER IN front of the steps that led into the subterranean dwarven capital. By now, the guards knew me, and they nodded for me to enter, though one did detach from the group and follow me to the closest open-air trolley stop.

How long until you guys trust that I'm not going to do anything nefarious in your city and don't need a babysitter? I asked the armored dwarf, her beard almost as thick as those of her male counterparts. Thankfully, Mom was bare-chinned, though I didn't know if that was genetic or if she visited wax salons as often as I did to keep my unruly areas tamed.

General Grantik has instructed that you are to be accompanied and protected when you arrive.

So, you're more of a bodyguard than a babysitter? I wasn't sure I believed that. None of the dwarves ever threatened me or gave me a cross eye. It seemed more likely that General Grantik, who had watched Sarrlevi kill Princess Barothla, didn't trust me fully. Sarrlevi wasn't the only one who had to prove himself to his people.

I have trained for sixty years to be a warrior and gain rank in the city guard. I am most certainly not a babysitter.

Sorry. As I'd been taught, I magically instructed the trolley to head toward the royal quarters, but I sensed Mom's aura along the way and hopped off. She was working in the industrial part of the city, which was dominated by the great forges, with clangs perpetually emanating from within. A number of squat factories also occupied the area, but the dwarves put their pride in hand-crafted items and dedicated more space to their construction.

The guard leaped off after me with a curse and a rattling of armor. She was definitely not supposed to let me out of her sight, at least not until I was with Mom and she could keep an eye on me.

Good morning, Nika, she spoke into my mind before I reached out to her.

Hey, Mom.

You've come for another lesson? Good timing. Your father is here, and I'm sure he would enjoy seeing you use your magic. After a pause, she added, *He enjoys seeing me use my magic.*

I slowed my approach. *Please tell me you're not getting busy in there with him.*

I was still a little shocked that the mother I'd only known until I was four had a ribald streak.

Not right now, no. She smirked into my mind, and I translated that to, "But if you'd come earlier..." *We're rarely alone,* Mom added. *My father is grooming me to start handling duties related to the rule of Dun Kroth. Before I fled home for Earth, he was content to let my sister and me pursue our passions, but her death seems to have put his mortality at the top of his mind.*

Hopefully, he doesn't need to worry about dying for a long time. As I headed through the wide streets of the industrial area, passing towering bins of ore, the clangs grew louder, joined by thumps and grinding noises. Hundreds of dwarves worked back there, industriously crafting. *He hasn't been extorting any elf assassins,* I added.

Not that I'm aware of, no. But things happen, as he reminds me. Some of what our people are crafting right now are weapons and defensive devices to add to the various cities on Dun Kroth. He's concerned that the escaped half-dragon will be a problem. Apparently, he's freed others of his kind that were also frozen in stasis chambers.

I grimaced, reminded that I'd been responsible for the centuries-old dragon-elf Starblade escaping. He'd helped me free my mother, her dwarf friends, and Sarrlevi's mother, so it was hard for me to imagine him as a vicious killer, but he'd also felt indebted to me. It was possible the next time we met, he would try to behead me.

Two armored bodyguards stood outside the wide entrance to the smithy where Mom was working, but they didn't stop me, and the female who'd accompanied me didn't follow me through the doorway. Inside, I found not my mother but my father clanging away at an anvil. His sleeves were rolled up to his elbows, his collar open, and he was fit for a man in his sixties. If not

for the gray hair, I might have thought him younger.

Mom stood nearby, her hands on a cannon barrel that she'd been enchanting. Though she stopped when I came in—and seemed distracted as she sneaked peeks at Dad—I could sense numerous layers of her magic enrobing it. Defenses, indeed.

“Matti!” Dad waved his hammer at me. “Your mother is teaching me to be useful.”

Not only in bed, Mom told me telepathically with a wink.

Mom, you really don't need to share such things with me.

No? You are an adult now. Surely, you don't wish to discuss crayons and juice boxes with me anymore? And I trust you've stopped eating paste.

Yeah, that's an urge I'm now able to resist. I walked up and hugged her. *Adults on Earth talk about other things besides sex though. Business, politics, economics, what cheese goes best with what wine...*

“I'm getting enough on those first three topics from my father and his advisors.” She returned the hug. “But cheese and wine are of interest. Here, we also have *uglarth*. Have you tried it?”

“That's the fermented mushroom-spore drink that puts hair on your chest, right? I'd rather talk about politics than drink that again.”

“In truth? Your human blood must be giving you some strange tendencies.” She smirked at Dad as she released me so I could give him a hug too.

“I drank that willingly enough,” Dad said, though his lips twisted at the memory.

“You said it tasted like the inside of a bowling shoe,” she told him.

“Yes.” He nodded. “Isn't that the desired flavor?”

“More or less.” Mom patted the cannon barrel. “Did you come for a lesson, *Nika*?”

“I would love one, but I also have a problem I'm hoping you can help me with.”

“Is it that your sister is being difficult and refusing to spend time with her father or let him go to his grandchildren's sporting events?” Mom pursed her lips in disapproval.

“That's a problem that I hope time will resolve. I'm here about the assassins the organization hired to go after me. We may have killed their dragon ally, stolen you two back, and taken out their luxury bomb shelter, but they haven't seen fit to remove the bounty on my head.”

Mom frowned. “I thought you said the one responsible for that had been killed by *your* assassin.”

“Hart? He’s definitely dead, but I don’t think he acted alone. Even if he did, his death hasn’t done anything about the bounty because he paid a chest of gold up front to the Assassins’ Guild leader.”

“Yes. I was out of my frozen coffin—” her frown deepened, “—when the Caretaker was assembling that gold and wanted to include one of my trinkets. I’d hoped you would make the connection between it and Sorka—” she waved at my hammer, “—and realize I was trying to help you find me.”

“It took me longer than it should have to realize that, but we did appreciate that Sorka was the key to opening the back door to their lair and sneaking in.”

Somewhat sneaking in. Had Val and Zavryd not been assailing the front door, the Caretaker and a lot more allies would have shown up to deal with our intrusion.

I am key to many things, Sorka informed me.

I gave her a pat. *Of course*.

“It was hard for me to follow along with their plans when I was there,” Mom said. “Sometimes, they kept me in the stasis chamber for months or even years at a time. It is not an experience I would ever wish to relive. I missed so much, and it was so strange to see that you’d grown older each time I was released to do their work.” She looked toward Dad, sadness having replaced the humor in her green eyes. “Both of you.”

“I wish *my* prison had been a stasis chamber so that I hadn’t lost so many years in there.” Dad’s own dark eyes were full of emotion, and he dashed away more than sweat from them. “I was starting to wonder if I would die in there. The Army never came and asked anything of me, never gave me a chance to earn my freedom. They just wanted the world to forget about me.” He wiped his eyes again before nodding to me, his voice growing tight. “I’m glad you never did, my girl.”

Mom left her project to wrap an arm around his waist.

“Grandma and Grandpa didn’t either.” I hoped they were treating him more warmly than Penina. “They just didn’t know how to help you. We all tried to get permission to visit, and the military never allowed it.”

“I’ve wondered sometimes if they were aligned with the civilian organization,” Mom said, “or was it that the wealthy members in it paid off the right people to ensure you were kept in prison?”

“I don’t know,” Dad said, “and we may never know, but I do wish there was a way for me to clear my name so I could visit my parents, daughters, and grandchildren without worrying about being found and imprisoned again.”

“Maybe there is. I’ll look into it.” I didn’t know what I could do, as I’d already asked Colonel Willard, and she wasn’t in the know when it came to the Army higher-ups that had kept Dad imprisoned. Still, the slump to his shoulders made me want to try. “After I figure out how to get these assassins off my back.”

“How can I help with that?” Mom asked. “Do you wish me to visit the Assassin’s Guild leader and convince her to make the reward money disappear? Would that solve the problem on Earth?”

“I’m not sure. Can princesses coerce Assassins’ Guild leaders?” I imagined all of the people in Nesheeva’s guild operated outside of the laws of the various worlds and didn’t answer to their leaders.

“Certainly. *Dwarven* princesses are very diplomatic.” Mom reached over and patted Sorka.

Sorka beamed warmth and pleasure, probably imagining diplomatically knocking someone’s head off.

“Bribery might be more effective with an assassin.” I remembered that Sarrlevi had spoken to Nesheeva not that long ago and mentioned she was looking for someone powerful to improve the magical defenses of a vault for her. “Are you willing to make enchanting house calls?”

“To get assassins out of your beard? Yes, of course.”

“If you could visit Nesheeva and see if she’s amenable to being bribed that way, I would appreciate it. Uhm, I also have another problem I’m trying to solve.”

“It sounds like you have a whole list of problems,” Dad said.

“I do.” I took out my phone and showed him my Notes app where *to-do list* was in bold and caps. Under it, along with numerous other things, I’d added *Help Sarrlevi* and *Stop King Eireth’s assassination*.

Mom’s and Dad’s eyebrows rose at that last item.

“*He’s* going to be assassinated too?” Mom asked.

“Maybe.” I shared what Slehvya had said. “I already told someone who should pass along the word. Eireth’s half-elven daughter Val, the one who was riding a dragon at that battle.”

“Yes, she was memorable,” Mom said.

“Because of how bravely she fought in battle?” I’d been too distracted by everything going on to notice much about Val’s role in the fight.

“Because she was lip-wrestling with a dragon in human form afterward.” Mom smirked.

“I didn’t see that, but Zavryd is her mate, so all manner of lip play is allowed.”

“I see.”

“Even though Val and Zavryd went to warn Eireth, they both said more proof—some evidence they could pass along—would be helpful. I intend to sneak into Slehyra’s house and get it. Well, not exactly sneak. She invited Sarrlevi for sex, and I thought he could distract her while I snoop around.”

“Sarrlevi for sex?” Mom mouthed. “Aren’t you two... Well, I suppose elves aren’t as known as dwarves for being monogamous. And what can one expect from an assassin?”

“No, he is. He told me he wants to be monogamous.” My cheeks heated at the topic and also because Mom and Dad exchanged frowns, as if they didn’t believe Sarrlevi and thought I was being naive. I hadn’t even meant to talk about our relationship with them. “I wouldn’t ask him to *have* sex with Slehyra. Just distract her, hopefully with witty repartee, while I camouflage myself and poke around. She wouldn’t know that’s all he planned to do though. She and he used to hook up before he knew me—” and admittedly once *after* he’d met me, “—and she still thinks he’s available any time she wants because she’s a beautiful snotty ex-princess who probably thinks *every* man is available for her. But we can use it to our advantage.”

Assuming Sarrlevi was willing to go through with this. I wish he hadn’t disappeared so I could have asked him. He might find it dishonorable to lead someone on while an accomplice rooted through her underwear drawer. But Slehyra wasn’t honorable with *him*, and she’d done him wrong with the dragons. It didn’t seem that big an ask of his honor.

Mom scratched her chin. “What do you want *me* to do to help?”

“Can you enchant something better than my translation charm? Something that would let me wander around her house and read Elven, not only understand the spoken version? And if you have anything that could help one unearth hidden things and get magical communication devices to spit their condemning contents out to strangers too, that would be great.”

“That’s a lot to ask from one device,” she said.

“Well, you could make me *multiple* devices.” I showed her the numerous

charms now dangling on my Harley keychain. “I don’t mind. Maybe a whole investigations kit.”

“Hm.”

I tried to decide if that *hm* sounded more thoughtful than skeptical or daunted. Probably not daunted. Mom could make the magical equivalent of fusion reactors, after all.

“I could use it for more than investigating the elf,” I said, hoping to sell her on the idea. “Maybe it would help me poke around some general’s office and figure out how to get Dad’s arrest warrant removed.”

His face turned wistful, though he said, “I shouldn’t encourage your mother to make you tools to facilitate breaking and entering.”

“You should if it’s to help other people who don’t deserve to die or be labeled criminals,” I said.

“I could make such tools.” Mom turned to Dad. “She already *has* a camouflaging charm, after all.”

“Meaning she can already break and enter at will?” he asked.

“The charm doesn’t help with *breaking*,” I muttered.

“No, you have my hammer for that,” Mom said.

Sorka pulsed silver-blue as if in agreement or simply because she was happy to be included in the conversation.

You don’t like being used to break down doors, I reminded her.

Cabinet doors. As we’ve discussed, I’m amenable to breaking down the barriers obstructing the entrances to enemy strongholds.

I thought about asking if a snotty elf female’s bedroom door counted as such but decided it was a silly question. Of *course* it did.

Three dwarves entered the smithy, the robed High Priest Lankobar leading them. The two flanking him carried clipboards and scrolls. They beelined for Mom, and she sighed.

“Before you go,” I said, certain they would drag her away, “I’m going to have a barbecue at the house in a few days. A little gathering so I can show off the renovations I’ve done. Will you come?”

“Of course,” Mom said.

Dad hesitated. Because of whatever Penina had said the last time he saw her? I hadn’t invited her yet, but I could. A barbecue would be a perfect low-key place for them to meet. No pressure.

“Dad?” I asked hopefully.

“Of course,” Mom said, thumping Dad on the arm.

“Yes.” He smiled at us.

“Great. You can invite Hennehok and Artie too if you see them. Are they doing okay these days?” I’d heard that the axe-throwing establishment in Port Townsend was now out of business with the building up for lease. It made sense that Artie hadn’t wanted to continue hanging out on Earth once Mom returned to Dun Kroth, but I was a little disappointed that I hadn’t gotten a chance to say goodbye to them before they’d disappeared.

“I’ll let them know, and yes. They’re back at work for my father.”

Lankobar waved to catch Mom’s eye. She sighed again but nodded to him.

“I’ll see what I can make to assist your mission, *Nika*.” Mom gripped my shoulder before releasing me and heading toward them. *When I’m done, I’ll either bring it to you on Earth or, if I can’t escape, give it to your father to bring.*

Thank you.

“I appreciate you being willing to help me, Matti,” Dad said as the dwarves swarmed around Mom and drew her away. Two more dwarves carrying magical devices peeked into the smithy. Did they want her to enchant or repair them? Who knew? “But please don’t endanger yourself for me,” he added. “You still have a lot of life left to live, and I... Well, I hope I do too, but I’m not as young as I used to be. I’m delighted to have gotten to see my parents again. And the grandchildren. And Penina too even if she wants nothing to do with me.”

“She’ll come around.” I hoped that was true. “She’s only recently accepted that magical beings exist, and I think she’s kind of getting that you weren’t at fault back when you and Mom were captured. She *should* get that. I’ve told her. But she has some feelings about Mom leftover from childhood, being mad that she lost her mother and that you and her broke up and all that stuff.” I shrugged.

“I understand. I’m glad you didn’t give up on me.”

“I couldn’t. I’m told loyalty is in my DNA. The dwarf DNA.”

“As a parent, it’s not recommended to admit to having favorites, but...” He nodded and patted me on the shoulder.

It was part joke, I knew, but after a lifetime of feeling secondary to the perfect Penina, the words and the nod filled me with emotion. Before, I’d managed to avoid the tears, but now I was the one to dash my eyes.

“Thanks, Dad.”

As we exchanged hugs, I vowed to find a way to clear his name, one way or another. What was one more item on the to-do list?

DARKNESS AND CHILLY RAIN HAD DESCENDED UPON GREEN LAKE BY THE TIME I returned. Surprisingly, Zadie and Abbas waited on the covered front porch of my house.

My senses told me that Zavryd and Val weren't home, and I hoped they'd been able to get in to see King Eireth and were having some luck convincing him that he needed to protect himself. Amber was also gone, and I trusted she'd found a way home. Hopefully, she wasn't too upset that her driving lesson had been put on hold.

"Hey, you two." I headed up the walkway, the windmill blades turning in a gentle breeze. "Didn't you get my message about needing to delay dinner?"

"I did," Zadie said, "but then you didn't respond to the three texts afterward, and I got worried. We came to check up on you."

"With pizza." Abbas sat on the porch swing I'd recently installed, my towering half-troll business partner testing its ability to support a good amount of weight. He lifted multiple boxes from Olympic Pizza and Pasta, having, since I moved to Green Lake, discovered the joys of a pizza with gyro meat as a topping. "We even brought some for you and your, uhm, boyfriend."

"Sarrlevi."

"Yeah. Uh, he's not here, right?" Abbas sounded hopeful.

Even though Sarrlevi had helped them both out in the past, they hadn't warmed to him that much. Maybe it was the swords. Maybe it was his elven haughtiness and the fact that he'd once referred to them as my servants. Maybe it was a combination of everything.

“He’s not.” I wished he were. “And neither is my dragon neighbor. You don’t have to worry about anyone stealing the gyro meat off your pizza.”

“I wasn’t worried about *that*.” Abbas looked toward Val’s house. “Or at least, I wasn’t until you mentioned it.”

“We got a vegetarian pizza in case any pointy-eared types showed up,” Zadie said. “And because I like mushrooms.”

“I should have brought you some of the dwarven booze.” I opened the door for them, though it wasn’t locked. Since I’d installed the wards and defenses, I didn’t worry about mundane home security. “It’s made out of fungi.”

“I don’t like mushrooms *that* much.” Zadie lifted a laptop. “In addition to bringing news, I have some new properties to show you two while we’re eating.”

“So this is a business dinner?”

That explained why Zadie hadn’t wanted to do a raincheck. She probably had a time-sensitive property to show us.

“For the purposes of my taxes, it is.” She winked as she followed me in.

“But you wouldn’t put the pizzas on your business card,” Abbas said, “for the purposes of your taxes.”

“I don’t want to explain four gyro pizzas to the IRS if I get audited. You could have bought them on *your* business card.”

“I tried that one year,” Abbas said, “and my accountant clubbed me with a mace.”

Zadie blinked at him. “That’s a little harsher than a slap on the wrist.”

“She’s a troll accountant.”

“So clubbing services are included with the bookkeeping?”

“Yup.” Abbas nodded.

Zadie waved his comments away, then gripped my arm before I could step into the house. “Let me tell you the news now. I can’t wait anymore. Are you free next week?”

“Uh, hopefully. If my life doesn’t get crazier.”

“Make sure it doesn’t. A journalist from *Luxury Home Magazine* wants to interview you and Abbas about your renovation of the original home on the five-acre lot. *Especially* you. They love the door carving and all the custom touches you put in. They said you’d masterfully blended modern upgrades with rustic whimsy. The new owners are delighted and have already agreed to staging and a photo shoot.”

“This is for a *luxury* magazine?” I scratched my jaw. “It’s a 1950s twelve-hundred-square-foot Rambler.”

“Not anymore, it isn’t,” Zadie said. “According to the journalist, it’s rural chic.”

“*Rural chic?*” I mouthed, shaking my head.

I would have expected a magazine for upscale homes and clientele to turn up their noses at the kinds of renovations Abbas and I did. Oh, it was good solid work, and I was proud of it, but it wasn’t as if we were installing steam showers with dual heads, heated marble floors, and Viking appliances.

“They liked your squirrel shower hooks and all the carvings you put in the kitchen to customize the cabinets,” Abbas said.

“I sent them the pictures.” Zadie took her hand from my arm to rest on her chest. “I sent them to a number of places. Your work is good, Matti, and nobody puts those kinds of details into homes anymore. It’s all mass-produced this and that out of a box.” She lowered her arm. “This is the part in the relaying of the news where you’re supposed to look ecstatic and honored at the recognition.”

“Oh. Sorry. It is kind of cool. Thanks.”

“Kind of cool.” Zadie lifted her gaze toward the porch ceiling. “Someday, when you’re known far and wide for your work, and you’ve won countless awards, you can thank me more sincerely for helping you get this recognition.”

“Okay. What does more sincere thanks look like?”

“For starters, it involves you thrusting bottles of champagne into my arms. *Good* champagne.”

I should have snatched the Dom Pérignon from The Wrench’s parlor.

“I’ve got some good cheese and crackers we can have before dinner,” I offered.

“I guess that’ll do. Your taste in cheese is better than in wine anyway.”

“Yup.” I waved for them to follow me inside. “I do appreciate you making the effort to send out photos. Thanks.”

If I did end up in *Luxury Home Magazine*, I would casually leave a copy on Penina’s coffee table. And I would show Grandpa, though he would also be bemused—or maybe bewildered—at the concept of *rustic chic*. Grandma, who’d always been delighted by anything I did that didn’t involve getting in trouble, would put the article on the fridge.

“You’re welcome,” Zadie said.

No sooner had I turned on the lights and cranked up the heat in the house than an SUV drove up, tires spraying puddle water on the way to parking at my curb. The driver didn't have magical blood, so it wasn't until she walked past the landscaping lights that I recognized her. Colonel Willard.

"Did you invite my boss to the pizza party?" I had a feeling they hadn't.

"Your boss?" Zadie asked. "You're a business owner, Matti."

"But I work for the military on the side."

"I'm sure that's healthy."

"Even less so than inflicting pounds of gyro meat on your arteries. It's Colonel Willard. Make yourself comfortable. Help yourself to anything in the kitchen." After waving them in the right direction, I headed for the front door.

"Is this peanut brittle?" Abbas called. "I love peanut brittle."

"My grandmother made it," I called back.

After a hesitation, he said, "Never mind."

Grandma had sent cookies to our worksite before, so Abbas was familiar with her attempts at making American desserts.

Willard had raised her fist but didn't get her knock in before I opened the door. "I appreciate your promptness, Puletasi."

"And that I call you, ma'am. I know. What's up?"

She glanced past me toward the sounds of plates and glasses clinking. "Your assassin has either grown noisier or you have guests."

Since Zadie's electric vehicle was parked out front, that couldn't have surprised her.

"Yeah. Do you want to come in?"

"Actually, I want to speak with you in private."

"Oh." Having a feeling this wasn't about a new assignment, I stepped out on the porch with her and closed the door. "Problem?"

"The news is currently reporting on multiple networks and social-media sites about a wealthy businessman who lives—*lived*—in Bellingham. He was decapitated." Willard lifted her phone to show me. "Decapitated by a sword, the news says. Victor Woodward. He happens to be on the list I gave you." Willard lowered her phone to give me a frank—and disappointed?—stare. "You might recall promising me that you wouldn't send your assassin after each person on the list."

"I didn't send him. A rich goblin possibly affiliated with the mafia did."

Willard kept staring, and I expected her to call me a loon, but she finally

asked, “Mikki the Wrench?”

“Yes. Woodward pissed off more people than me. He had some rural goblins that were living on his timberland hunted down and killed.”

“So The Wrench hired your assassin to kill him?”

“He did. I didn’t encourage it. I try to *discourage* assassinations. But Sarrlevi saw the list, so he had an extra reason to take the job.”

“You shouldn’t have shared that list with him. Gondo said he put a watermark on it so it couldn’t be easily copied.”

“Uh, Gondo’s definition of a watermark may be different from yours. And Sarrlevi has a good memory. A glance was all it took.”

“That’s an eidetic memory, not a *good* memory.”

“He is special.”

“Of that I have no doubt.” Willard paced around the porch. “Damn it, Puletasi. Is he going to find an excuse to kill everyone on that list? Even if each of them was guilty of a crime, which I’m *not* certain is the case, people that rich and powerful have equally rich and powerful friends. And probably instructions in their wills to institute revenge if they don’t die of natural causes. If any of these deaths get linked back to you, you’ll never be able to walk freely.” She paused and sniffed. “Why does your porch smell like gyros?”

“It’s a mystery. And Sarrlevi isn’t going to take them all out.” I tried not to let bleakness at her prediction sink into me. Even though I was fortunate to have the option to live on another world, I didn’t *want* to leave Earth. My friends, my family, my business, and The Cheese Box in Pike Place Market were all here. “I’m working on a way to fix this. To fix everything.”

The amount of *everything* needing fixing daunted me. It took all I had not to crawl over and hide under the porch swing.

“You’d better,” Willard said. “I don’t want to see anyone else on that list turn up dead. I didn’t dig up those names for your hitman to take care of.”

“I know. But while you’re here, is there any way you can get my father’s arrest warrant removed? He’s free, but he can’t hang out on Earth without risking being caught and taken back to jail.”

“I’m just a colonel in the Army, Puletasi. You need someone with more connections than I have to make that happen.”

“So like... a general?”

I’d never seen Willard roll her eyes before, but when she did it, it carried vestiges of Amber’s frequent expressions. And conveyed a similar amount of

disdain.

“More like the types of people your assassin is beheading.” Willard headed down the steps toward her SUV.

“Does this mean you don’t want to stay for pizza? Or come to my barbecue this weekend?”

She shot me a scathing look over her shoulder before getting in her car and driving off.

“Why did I think my life would be so much easier after I found my parents?” I asked to the drizzly dark night.

The young are frequently naive and idealistic, Sorka told me from her spot propped against the wall inside.

I didn’t realize you could hear me through walls. For that matter, I hadn’t realized a magical hammer could hear at all, but she had responded to my words before.

Perhaps you should ask your mother for a list of my capabilities.

I should. I don’t suppose one of them is getting elven assassins to refrain from accepting gigs. The parable of The Scorpion and the Frog came to mind.

I believe that is one of your capabilities rather than mine.

“We’ll see,” I murmured and headed back inside.

AS ZADIE AND ABBAS WERE LEAVING, THE PIZZA LEFTOVERS PUT AWAY AND new fixer-uppers shown, I sensed a portal forming nearby. It exuded elven magic, and I groaned and snatched Sorka, thinking Slehvya had returned, but the silver disc glowed near the fairy ring in Val's yard. An enemy wouldn't be able to open a portal on her property.

I stepped onto my porch as Val and Freysha appeared, landing with squishes in the soggy grass. It had been raining hard for hours, so everything was soggy.

Hoping for good news about Eireth, I headed over to greet them. I also needed a distraction. Sarrlevi hadn't returned yet, and that had me worried. It had been more than two hours since Willard told me about the decapitation, and it had presumably been some time between the man's death and it appearing on the news. The portal-traveling Sarrlevi should have had plenty of time to make it back from Bellingham. Even if he'd hitchhiked on the freeway, he could have returned by now.

Maybe he'd gone to see The Wrench first. An hour after Willard had left, presumably after she'd had time to consult with Gondo, she'd texted me a warning about him: *He's as rich and well-connected as some of those organization members. Don't underestimate him because he's a goblin. Gondo says you absolutely do not want to cross him or you'll be iced and thrown in the Sound with a lead weight. That's a direct quote.*

Freysha and Val sensed me coming and waited under Val's covered porch.

"How'd it go?" I decided to lead with that rather than news that my

boyfriend was off assassinating people.

“With Freysha’s help,” Val said, “I was able to get in to see Eireth. The queen had apparently ordered his guards to keep me from visiting. Zav was about to go aggro on them when Freysha hurried out and smoothed things over.”

“Go aggro?”

“Ask Dimitri.” Val opened the door and led us to the kitchen. “Though I guess he’s not here right now. He said he and Zoltan were going out.”

“Out on a date?” My mind boggled at the idea of them as a couple, or at *anyone* making a couple with Zoltan.

“To shop for alchemical ingredients only available at night on a full moon and to see what Seattle holds for a couple of bachelors.” Val telepathically shared an image of Zoltan in the passenger seat of Dimitri’s old van, his special light-blocking goggles on and a hood pulled over his head.

“I’m not sure if that answered my question or not.”

Val shrugged. “I’m not sure either. Dimitri had a crush on my dwarven sword instructor last year, but I don’t know if that was purely about smithing and enchanting or romantic. It’s hard to date someone on another world if you can’t make portals—and can’t convince them to move in with you on Earth.” She waved in the direction of her turret bedroom.

“I’ve heard that. Did Zoltan find out anything about that substance I gave him?”

“He verified it’s poison,” Val said. “You’re lucky our baristas aren’t bribable.”

“No kidding.” I would have to tip them twenty dollars *every* time I went to the Coffee Dragon. Or maybe start making all my drinks at home.

“Our father,” Freysha said, moving around the kitchen to touch each of the numerous plants growing from pots on the counters, behind the sink, and from the floor beside the pantry, “listened to Val share the warning and said he would be careful.”

“But he said it like he *always* has to worry about assassins and wasn’t going to stress overmuch.” Val grimaced.

“So, being a king is the equivalent of being the Ruin Bringer?” I thought of the orc drive-by shooting at the coffee shop and Val saying it had happened often to her in the past.

“Worse. He’s just doing his job. He’s not even killing people.” Val looked at Freysha. “You know him a lot better than I do. Do you think he’ll

increase his security and stay in the capital for a while? And look into Slehvya?”

“He has a trip scheduled soon to an undisclosed location for a meeting between the rulers in the Cosmic Realms. I will ask, but I worry he will not alter his plans. He also did not sound like he would send his guards to Slehvya’s door to question her. Even though her family no longer rules on Veleshna Var, they are still quite powerful. If it turns out she is *not* scheming against him, and he had Slehvya questioned and her domicile searched... there would be political backlash. And our father was...” Freysha glanced at me, invigorating magic trickling from her fingers and into the plants as she spoke. “I do not mean to be rude, Matti, or belittle you, but he questioned the source of this rumor.”

Val made a disgusted noise. “I knew we’d need some proof.”

“I have an idea for getting it,” I said. “If it exists. I just need Sarrlevi to come home.”

“Where is he?” Val pulled out her phone and looked at texts that must have come in while she was on Veleshna Var. “Never mind.”

I had little doubt that one was from Willard.

“Yeah,” was all I said.

Freysha leaned toward Val with curiosity, and Val tilted the screen toward her.

I almost lunged over and tried to stop the sharing since I didn’t want the elves to have *more* reason not to want Sarrlevi to be welcomed back to Veleshna Var, but Val would probably tell Freysha anyway.

“Mikki the Wrench?” was all Freysha asked, not sounding surprised in the least that Sarrlevi had assassinated someone.

And it wasn’t surprising, I supposed. The only thing that made it different for me was that it was on Earth, in the state I lived in. He also hadn’t taken any missions to kill people in the time I’d been seeing him. This made his career all the more real. I still loved him, of course, and I wanted a future with him and to have his children, but I did wonder if I was crazy to be considering that.

I snorted at myself. As if I hadn’t already known I was crazy. Did it come from the human or the dwarf genes? Who knew?

“He’s a goblin and underworld crime leader,” Val said. “I’ve heard of him but not had any run-ins with him.”

“Lucky you,” I said. “I’ve now been to his penthouse.”

“Was it horrible?” Val fished cans of grapefruit La Croix out of the fridge and offered them to us.

“No. If he’s going to be horrible to me or Sarrlevi, he’s holding back for now.” I didn’t mention the *freezer* that Vintok had been willing to give us a tour of, one presumably decorated with meat hooks with dead bodies hanging from them.

“Well,” Val said, “he should be pleased that Sarrlevi did what he wanted.”

I couldn’t tell if she was as irritated as Willard. I didn’t think so. As an independent contractor, Val’s relationship with the law had always seemed more fluid than Willard’s.

“Matti.” Freysha walked over and clasped my hands, looking earnestly into my eyes. “You do not owe me any favors, so I am hesitant to make requests of you, but...”

“Uh, I owe you a number of favors. You helped us with figuring out that formula for Sarrlevi’s mom, among other things.”

Freysha smiled and shook her head, as if that had not been a favor or an inconvenience at all, never mind that it had, at the least, earned her a lecture from her uptight mother.

“You do not owe me anything,” she reiterated, “but if you have a way to find out more details about this possible threat to my father, I would appreciate it. He is... Well, he is not only my father but a good ruler for our people. He understands how to maintain a relationship with the dragons that is not antagonistic but is beneficial and retains most of our freedoms for us. Were he replaced by another ruler who wants to start a *war* with the dragons... This would not be good for our people. The entire Cosmic Realms might suffer.”

“I understand,” I said, though I suspected the fact that her father was in danger mattered more to her than the political ramifications for her people. “I’ll see what I can manage. I have a plan.” One I still needed to tell Sarrlevi about...

Freysha released my hands and looked uncertainly at Val.

Val pulled the tab on her carbonated water and shrugged.

“It’s not a plan that involves assassinations,” I clarified.

“Perhaps I will not ask for details,” Freysha said.

Val raised her drink. “Wise.”

Mataalii, Sarrlevi spoke into my mind.

I hadn't sensed him and still didn't, but I could tell from his telepathic voice that he was across the street. A frisson of nerves swept through me. *I'll be right there.*

I didn't know whether I was nervous to talk to him because he'd just killed a human being or because he might not like my plan. Maybe both. Either way, my palms were damp as I crossed the street to my house, and it had nothing to do with the rain.

IT WASN'T UNTIL I STEPPED INTO THE HOUSE THAT I SENSED SARRLEVI IN MY bedroom. My nerves continued to torment me as I climbed the stairs, wondering if completing a mission made him feel randy. Not that it took much to bestir his sexual desires. For a three-hundred-year-old guy, Sarrlevi had a very healthy libido.

When I walked in, I found him barefoot, bare-chested, and propped on one elbow on my bed. All of his clothes, save for his trousers, were neatly stacked on my dresser, and his sword scabbards and magical backpack dangled from a bed knob. With his short hair damp and tousled and his muscled torso as taut and appealing as always, he could have put thoughts of sex into any woman with a pulse. Even with all the doubts swimming through my mind, my libido kicked into gear like a thrumming Harley.

I snorted at myself. And here I'd been thinking *his* libido was overly enthusiastic.

"I thought you might be in this position and waiting for me when I arrived," Sarrlevi murmured, watching me through his lashes. "In your robe. Or in less."

Though we weren't yet touching, he used his magic to send an arousing caress through me. My nerves, with something else to dwell upon, forgot to be uneasy.

"Well, if you'd given me a time, I could have made arrangements." Without taking anything off, I sat on the edge of the bed. "Can we talk for a minute before..." I waved at his naked chest.

"Of course. Or we could talk *while*." He also waved at his naked chest,

then shared an image of me in my robe but with the flaps hanging open as I straddled him and ran my nails down his flesh. Another tendril of his magic wafted through me, a gentle caress that promised more stimulating ones to follow.

My cheeks flushed—no, my whole *body* flushed. Maybe the chat could wait until after we enjoyed each other's company.

No, better to get everything out of the way. If he was still in the mood afterward, good. His sensual magical touches ensured that *I* now was, my earlier doubts about making a family with an assassin drifting off into the land of unconcern.

“Did you deliver the guy's head to the goblin?” I looked out the dark window instead of at him.

A pause suggested Sarrlevi hadn't expected to speak about his work. Maybe he wasn't reading my mind at that moment.

I was thinking about my desire to enjoy your companionship, he told me silently, letting me know he was reading my mind now. *You are angry at the elimination of an odious human being?*

“Not angry. Just... concerned you're going to go down the list. Willard was here, telling me that the decapitation was in the news already. She's not happy.”

“The opinion of your military leader does not matter to me.” Sarrlevi pushed himself up, shifting his legs off the bed to sit on the edge beside me. “*Your* opinion, however, matters.”

“Thank you for that. I'm glad.” I leaned against him.

“I questioned him before killing him.”

I didn't want to picture that and tried not to. A part of me didn't want any details, but my curiosity prompted a response. “About me?”

Sarrlevi nodded. “It was a challenge to get past the magical defenses installed all around his abode, but *he* was a mundane human and no threat to me. Reading his mind was also a simple matter. I learned that he knew little. He'd put substantial funds into the creation of the underground base and others like it around your world, and he knew who you were and that they'd been using your mother as a part of their plans. He was not, however, close to the human Hart and didn't realize assassins had been hired to kill you.”

“So, he couldn't have removed the bounty even if he'd been coerced instead of killed.”

“Likely not.” Sarrlevi considered me for a moment. “I also questioned

him about the goblins.”

“The Wrench and his associates?”

“The goblins reputedly squatting on his land. As I told you, I am doing more research into my potential targets before fulfilling assignments. I do not wish to find myself in another situation where I’m obligated to hunt down the equivalent of a dwarven princess beloved by her people.”

“That’s good. Though weren’t you more disappointed by having to hunt my mother because she’s a crafter and you prefer to pit yourself against dangerous mages and warriors?”

“That might have been a part of my *initial* disappointment, long before I met you, but I now know that she can defend herself.”

Yes, she’d pounced on him with her power the moment she’d been unfrozen from that stasis chamber.

“Enchanting magic is useful,” I said.

“Indeed.”

“Did The Wrench tell the truth about the goblins? Or was that a story to make you feel good about assassinating his enemy?”

“You may know better, but I doubt my reputation suggests to potential employers that I need to *feel good* about my targets. I did, however, wish to know the truth. So I asked. Woodward not only encouraged people to hunt the goblins on this land, but he went out in a helicopter and participated, firing at them from the comfort of his seat with the door open.”

“Damn, why? It’s not like goblins do anything beyond making a mess. Humans squatting in the woods would do the same—or worse.”

“I gathered this man wouldn’t have had many qualms about shooting humans trespassing on his land either.” Sarrlevi turned his palm up. “I thought you would wish to know.”

“Yeah.” I clasped his hand. Maybe I would never be that comfortable with his career, but if he only took out truly odious people, it didn’t seem quite as awful. “It sounds like The Wrench is well-informed and connected in the underworld. Willard and Gondo think I should steer clear of him, but I wonder if he has the contacts and resources to learn more about the organization—and who could get that bounty rescinded.”

The idea of making a deal with a goblin crime lord wasn’t appealing—especially since he might ask again about Tinja and want me to introduce him or talk her into dating him—but... this could be a matter of life or death.

“Perhaps,” Sarrlevi said. “People study their enemies more closely than

their friends. I must turn the head in to the goblin in the morning. If you wish, you can come along again and ask him your questions.”

“You haven’t turned in the head yet?” I grimaced and looked toward the bag dangling from the bed knob.

“I attempted to do so, but only his subordinate Vintok was present. He said he could arrange payment, but I only deal directly with those who hire me. He told me The Wrench will return in the morning.” Sarrlevi extracted his hand from mine and brushed a lock of my hair behind my ear, then lowered his voice to murmur, “Many hours from now.”

I pointed at the bag instead of responding to his touch. “Would you mind putting that somewhere else for the night?”

He followed my gaze. “The head is wrapped and secured within another moisture-proof bag within my magical travel pack. It will not leak or smell.”

“Ew.” I couldn’t keep from curling my lip and drawing back. “That wasn’t my reason for objecting to having it at the foot of my bed, but *ew*.”

“Where is the proper location in an Earth domicile for such an item?”

“*Nowhere*.” I slid off the bed and took three large steps away from him—and it. “Here on Earth, we don’t keep severed heads in our houses.”

His gaze was bland, as if I were being unreasonable.

“Outside. On the porch.” I pointed in the direction of the back door. “Or *under* the porch.”

Sarrlevi rubbed his chin and shifted his now-thoughtful gaze toward the pack.

“Don’t tell me it has to remain at room temperature for some reason.” I shuddered, tempted to open the window and chuck the bag into the backyard myself.

“It does not. I was debating the odds of someone with sufficient magical power breaking through your wards and stealing my pack if it were left outside.”

“Trust me, the odds of someone *wanting* a severed head are minuscule.”

“The pack itself has value.”

“If you’re worried about it being stolen, you could remove the head, and then bring the pack back inside.” Not that I wanted a bag that *had* contained a head in my bedroom either. “This isn’t the conversation I expected us to have tonight.”

Sarrlevi rose and picked up the pack and his weapons. “*I* expected us to be engaged in sex by now.”

“Next time, bring roses and scented candles to my bedroom instead of a severed head.”

He gave me a flat look, then walked out. I pushed my hands through my hair and wrenched my gaze from the spot where the pack had been hanging.

For some reason, I remembered Zadio freaking out about the severed orc ear that had been left on the carpet in her condo. Her shrieks of dismay had seemed unreasonable to me. Maybe Sarrlevi felt *my* distress was unreasonable?

“*She* was able to flush the ear down the toilet to solve her problem,” I muttered. “I can’t do that with a head.”

A surge of magic in the backyard indicated a portal forming.

Startled, I ran to the window. I was in time to see Sarrlevi, still barefoot and bare-chested, spring through with his weapons and pack.

I slumped. Had I *angered* him? Was he leaving for the night? I hadn’t gotten to share my plan with him yet.

I texted the one person who might understand and tell me if I was being unreasonable—it wasn’t as if I could post this on Reddit under *Am I the Asshole?*

Would you be upset if Zavryd brought a bag with a severed head in it into your bedroom?

Belatedly, I worried it was late enough that Val and Zavryd might be busy enjoying each other’s company. But I soon received an answer.

Yes. We also have a no-uncooked-food-in-the-bedroom policy, to include but not be limited to flanks, loins, and whole haunches.

Reasonable.

You have to set boundaries in a relationship. My therapist has confirmed this. I’ve taken Zav to see her a couple of times. If you want to take Sarrlevi, I can give you her number.

Oh, sure, that would go well. I imagined Sarrlevi staring stonily at a therapist with his swords on his back and his arms folded over his chest while she tried to convince him to lie on a couch. What would *she* say if he hung his bag full of heads in her office?

I’ll remember that, I replied. *Thanks.*

A telepathic voice spoke into my mind. *My mate will speak no further with you tonight on the human communication device.*

Uh, okay.

I am seducing her in the nest. Zavryd’s telepathic tone turned smug. *With*

a feather.

Sorry, Lord Zavryd. I won't bother her again. I winced in anticipation of further details, which I did not want, especially since my own night of nest activities had ended before it began.

I'd no sooner had the thought than another portal formed in the backyard. Sarrlevi hopped out, much as he'd left, still wearing the backpack.

He met my gaze through the window. *I have removed the head and placed it in a storage vault in one of my homes. I will return in the morning to retrieve it before meeting with the goblin.*

I slumped against the windowsill, relieved he'd gotten rid of it and that he'd come back. *I love you, Varlesh. You're a good boyfriend.*

Yes. He strode toward the back door but paused mid-step, his head tilting, as if he was listening to someone. After a moment, he shook his head and continued inside. *The dragon has commanded me to have vigorous sex with you and keep you too distracted to communicate with his mate further tonight.*

I rolled my eyes. *I barely texted her two lines.*

Apparently, they are in the nest. With a feather.

I know. I wonder if Val knows how many people he explains their bedroom exploits to.

Sarrlevi trotted upstairs, removed his weapons and the pack again, and stepped toward me with his arms spread.

Rain glistened on his bare chest, making me want to spring into his embrace, but I lifted a hand. "There's one more thing."

"It cannot wait until morning?"

I hesitated. Could it? He might not like my plan. At the least, it would bring Slehvya to his mind, and I wanted to be the only one in his thoughts tonight. But if my mother showed up in the middle of the night with charms to help with the incursion of Slehvya's home, Sarrlevi would find out about my plan in a less than ideal manner.

He must have been following my thoughts because he sighed and sat on the edge of the bed again. "Tell me."

"Val and Freysha warned Eireth that someone might be after him, but he implied he would need more details if he was going to interrupt his travel plans and take more precautions than he already does against assassins. So I thought... what if we took Slehvya up on her invitation?"

"We?"

“She did invite me. I’m positive she doesn’t really want anything to do with me, but it would be a reason for me to show up with you, and then you can distract her while I snoop around in her home and try to find some evidence. Or do you think she made up that threat?”

“I deem that unlikely. She follows through on her threats.” His lips pressed together with displeasure.

I was sure he was remembering his home that she’d manipulated dragons into destroying.

“So snooping might turn up something?” I asked.

“It might.” He scrutinized me.

“You don’t like the plan?”

“I would not care to *distract* her by having sex with her. I assume that is what you mean. I especially would not care to distract her with sex while you’re wandering around nearby.”

I shook my head vigorously. “No, I don’t want that either. I was hoping you could just talk to her in the living room or something.”

“I’m not so scintillating of a conversationalist that she wouldn’t notice you roaming her premises. If you camouflaged yourself, she would then notice that she doesn’t sense you.”

“Well, maybe you could take her for a moonlit walk first. Or out to a romantic dinner. You know, while accidentally leaving me behind.”

He didn’t say that was a dumb idea, but his face conveyed it. “She would be suspicious if I asked her to go someplace. I have never done so before.”

“Always straight to the sex, huh?”

“Yes. Unless she required me to be seen in public with her to irritate her husband.” Distaste twisted his lips. “You wishing to be left behind in her home would also be suspicious to her.”

Maybe if I was camouflaged from the beginning, so Slehvya didn’t know I was with Sarrlevi, it could work. But she might have some security measures, like that doorway device at Hart’s house, that would keep a magically cloaked person from getting into her home.

What if the only way for this to work was for Sarrlevi to have sex with her? He’d already said he didn’t want to do that. And I hated Slehvya and would hate it if he were intimate with her again. He was right that being able to *hear* her enjoying being with him would make it worse. The first time I’d been at his house for that, it had been horrible, and that had been before we’d been anything to each other.

“You do not like this plan,” Sarrlevi said softly.

“Not if it needs you to have sex with her to work, no. But we can think of something else.”

“I do believe that her magical defenses would preclude someone from sneaking onto her property camouflaged.”

“I need to be invited in then. And *then* I could camouflage, right?”

“Yes, but—”

“I know, I know, she’d notice me disappearing. Look, we just have to be creative. If we don’t do anything, and King Eireth dies, I would feel horrible. And isn’t it possible that if we saved his life, he would feel kindly toward you and reconsider your exile? Maybe you could be allowed back on Veleshna Var without being involved with Slehvya’s plan.”

“If I wanted only to be permitted back, it would be wiser for me *not* to interfere and to allow Slehvya’s allies to remove Eireth from power.”

“We *can’t* do that, Varlesh.”

Sarrlevi sighed and gazed at the floor. A thoughtful moment passed, and he turned to me.

“Idea?” I prompted when he didn’t say what was on his mind.

“I am considering suggesting you get one of your truth elixirs from the vampire, so we could bluntly *ask* Slehvya what she knows, but I would find it difficult to force that down her throat, as I did with Barothla.”

“Because Barothla was threatening your mother, and Slehvya was only responsible for the destruction of your home?”

He twitched a shoulder. “Mothers are more precious than homes.”

I couldn’t argue with that. “What if I said *I* would have no trouble forcing a potion down her throat?”

He smiled faintly. “A part of me would enjoy watching you battle Slehvya and win, but... she is a powerful mage. She might underestimate you, allowing you to prevail, but you might also be hurt.” He lifted a hand toward me. “I would not like to see that.”

“Me either.” I stepped closer to Sarrlevi so he could touch me. Though I was tempted to say I could handle a little pain, Slehvya seemed like someone who wouldn’t mind killing me outright. And in her own home, she would have all the advantages.

“Let us consider our options further later.” Sarrlevi brushed his knuckles along my jaw, a zing of magic going through me. “Tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow is good. Oh, except wait. If we’re going to take along the

truth drug, I need to put in an order.” I pulled out my phone but paused, realizing I didn’t know Zoltan’s number. Did he even have a phone? Would I have to send an order through Val?

Sarrlevi dropped his hand to my wrist, gently pushing the phone down. “You will not disturb Thorvald again tonight and prompt her mate to telepathically give me *more* suggestions about how to keep you from interrupting them. I already have an image in my mind that includes a large feather and that odious dragon—*naked*.”

I had a feeling Zavryd’s nudity disturbed Sarrlevi far more than the idea of feathers in the bedroom. “Zavryd didn’t share imagery with me.”

“Consider yourself fortunate.”

“I guess he and I don’t have the special relationship that you two do.” I grinned at him.

Sarrlevi gently removed my phone from my fingers and levitated it to the bedside table. It only came to rest there for a couple of seconds before he squinted at me, then floated it out the door.

“Please tell me you’re not putting my phone out on the back porch. It doesn’t go where packs of distressing items go.”

“I will place it next to something of great value.” He shared an image with me of the phone settling on top of the cheese grotto that Val had given me for a housewarming gift.

I grinned again and let Sarrlevi pull me down into his lap. “That’s acceptable.”

Vowing to send Zoltan a message in the morning before he went to bed, I wrapped my arms around Sarrlevi’s bare shoulders and kissed him.

Excellent, he said into my mind.

I agreed.

AN HOUR AFTER DAWN, MIKKI THE WRENCH'S COG-COVERED LIMOUSINE parked in front of my house. Since I wasn't yet dressed, I was tempted to send Sarrlevi to see the goblin alone, but I was the one who wanted to find a way to entice him to dig up what I needed on the organization.

Sarrlevi, who was no more dressed than I when it arrived, must have telepathically told the driver to wait because nobody attempted to come up the walkway. Not that I'd expected that. The full-blooded magical beings, orcs and goblins alike, would have no trouble sensing the property's defenses. But they could have lined up on the sidewalk and loomed threateningly.

After throwing on jeans and a sweatshirt, I hurried downstairs with Sarrlevi but paused when the back door opened. Tinja entered the kitchen, her white hair mussed, her sleep clothes rumpled, and her nose twitching in the air. At some point during the night, she'd returned to her tiny home, but I'd been too busy to notice.

"There is no coffee prepared?" Tinja sounded confused, and one of her pointed ears drooped.

"Sorry, I just got up." With my stomach growling, I held up a finger to Sarrlevi and headed into the kitchen to grab some protein bars. "Do you think you can operate the coffee maker without improving it?"

"Why would you not want it improved?" Tinja asked.

"Never mind. There are beans in the pantry. Knock yourself out."

"Perhaps I will have coffee delivered. More tiny-house-plan orders came in overnight. Ever since the video went viral, my business is booming. I will

order coffee and scones. Is that not what wealthy human entrepreneurs eat for breakfast?"

"I think eggs Benedict, smoked salmon, and caviar are on their menus."

Tinja's nose wrinkled. "But scones are delicious."

"I agree. Order some extras if you're feeling generous. We're going to see Mikki the Wrench."

Her eyebrows flew up. "Matti, The Wrench is a most powerful and dangerous goblin. Those who cross him do not live to see another day."

"I know. They sleep with the fishes. Uh, has he reached out to you?"

"Why would he? I do not wish to associate with a criminal. I am an upright goblin." Her forehead creased. "Why are *you* seeing him?"

"He hired Sarrlevi for a mission."

"*Mission?*" Tinja mouthed.

I was suddenly glad the head hadn't spent the night on the back porch where she might have stumbled across it.

"Yeah. He also asked about you, so you might want to maintain a low profile for a while. I need to go. Sarrlevi is waiting for me."

Her eyes grew wide as she, maybe for the first time, sensed our visitors out front. "That is not The Wrench, is it?"

"No, his cousin Vintok, I believe. And a bunch of orc bodyguards. But they'll be giving us a ride to see him."

She shook her head. "You should not have anything to do with him, Matti. Or with any of his servants."

"I know." I handed her a bag of coffee beans and wished I could stick around to have a cup, but I sensed Sarrlevi standing by the limo and didn't know how long Vintok would wait, considering I hadn't been invited. "Don't forget. Low profile. I'm trying to dissuade him from being interested in you, but he has mentioned your name."

"That is most distressing, but I *am* a very interesting goblin. I cannot be surprised that my new fame as a successful entrepreneur has become known to him."

"Just don't get into any limos that come looking for you." Too bad I couldn't heed that advice myself.

"Wait, Matti!" Her alarmed tone stopped me before I made it out of the kitchen. "You should take weapons."

"I'll have Sorka." I waved toward my hammer leaning against the wall by the front door. There was no way I *wouldn't* take her.

“You should take *more* weapons.” Tinja peered around the kitchen, as if I’d decorated it like one of Sarrlevi’s houses, with antique swords, armor, and torture devices mounted on the walls. The knives in the butcher-block holder were the most dangerous weapons in the room. Tinja lunged for the tray of peanut brittle. “Here.”

I arched my eyebrows. Even though I’d jokingly been thinking of using the pieces as throwing stars, I hadn’t shared that thought with Tinja.

“If I give him a gift that breaks one of his teeth,” I said, “he won’t think that fondly of me.”

“If you need to get away in a hurry, you can throw up the tray to fling these deadly projectiles in all directions. I am certain the pointy pieces would embed themselves in walls and possibly the arteries of villainous foes.”

“That’s possibly true, but there could be trouble while I’m gone. I’ll leave the peanut-brittle projectiles for you. In case the goblinator isn’t sufficient.”

“Oh, good idea.”

Mataalii? Sarrlevi spoke into my mind.

I’m coming. I snatched up my hammer and ran out the front door, certain The Wrench objected to being kept waiting.

Sarrlevi stood by the open limo door, Vintok and two orcs visible sitting in the back and a half-orc in the driver’s seat. *I do not have the head with me. The Wrench will expect it.*

Oh, yeah. I refused to feel guilty that I’d made Sarrlevi remove it from the house. He *could* have left it on the porch, as I’d suggested. I hadn’t required that he take it all the way to another world, though I *had* approved of that choice. *We don’t need to ride in the limo, right? You could take us there in a portal after picking up the head.*

“Is there a problem?” Vintok looked at a gold watch on his wrist while the orcs gazed coolly out at us and fingered their weapons.

They looked like they *wanted* there to be a problem so they could rectify it, but I trusted they wouldn’t pick a fight with Sarrlevi.

“I need to retrieve the severed head of the deceased,” Sarrlevi said. “It is not on my person.”

“We can stop along the way,” Vintok said. “There’s a breakfast spread inside for you to enjoy.”

“It is on the world of Jiaga.”

Vintok blinked. I couldn’t tell if he hadn’t heard of it because he was an Earth-born goblin rather than an immigrant, or if he had and thought it odd

that Sarrlevi stored things there.

“We can make a portal, retrieve it, and meet your employer at his warehouse,” Sarrlevi said.

“The Wrench insisted that you are honored guests and that I put together breakfast and coffee for you.” Vintok waved to the far side of the limo. “It would be most inconsiderate of you not to enjoy his hospitality.”

I peeked inside, my coffee-deprived brain perking up. Not only were bagels, lox, and cream cheese spread on a side table beside a basket of pastries and a covered cloche, but there was a toaster and a portable espresso maker, the unit powered up and humming, ready to prepare custom coffee beverages.

“I have done the work he hired me to do,” Sarrlevi said in a flat tone. “I neither need nor want hospitality beyond payment.”

“Now, now.” I patted Sarrlevi’s arm. “We don’t want to be rude.” Telepathically, I added, *Especially when I’m hoping to get some information from him.* “Maybe I could go along in the limo, and you could meet us at his warehouse.”

Sarrlevi gazed knowingly at me. *Is there cheese inside?*

Well, technically, yes. I didn’t consider cream cheese on the same level as a fine Camembert or brie, but it suited my palate just fine when smothered on a bagel with lox. *There’s also coffee, which I find nearly as important at this time of day.*

Sarrlevi looked toward the front window of my house. Tinja was peering at us between the curtains, and, when our eyes met, she raised the tray of peanut brittle, as if offering to pelt people.

I shook my head at her. “Will that do, Vintok? Sarrlevi isn’t a huge fan of Earth food, but I adore it and would love to enjoy your boss’s hospitality.”

Would you wish to enjoy it as much if the conveyance hadn’t come with coffee and cheese? Sarrlevi asked.

No, I’d be going with you to Jiaga, possibly by way of the Coffee Dragon for caffeine.

“One moment.” Vintok withdrew to make a phone call.

Maybe he’d remembered that I hadn’t been a part of this deal and The Wrench might not care about *me* enjoying his hospitality.

As Vintok murmured into the phone, I thought about rubbing my translation charm, but he was speaking quietly enough that I would have struggled to hear.

Shortly, he turned back to us with a smile and gestured for me to join him. “This arrangement is acceptable to The Wrench, and I look forward to satisfying your needs on the way to his home.” The smile he gave me was smarmy, reminding me that he’d tried to arrange a peepshow for himself and his kitchen staff the day before. When Sarrlevi’s eyes turned icy, Vintok added, “I refer, of course, to your *culinary* needs.”

“Of course,” I murmured.

Sarrlevi hesitated before stepping away from me.

It’ll be fine. I hefted Sorka to remind him that I could take care of myself. *You’ll probably get there before I do, anyway. No traffic jams in portals that I’ve noticed.*

True. Sarrlevi gazed at Vintok for a moment—trying to read his mind?—then touched the small of my back before stepping away and forming a portal. *Try not to find trouble on the way,* he told me.

Already clambering into the limo and beelining for the espresso maker, I replied, *Trouble? What kind of trouble could I possibly find in the company of a slightly lecherous goblin?*

My stomach rumbled at the scent of the lox, reminding me that Sarrlevi and I had burned a lot of calories during the night and I hadn’t eaten anything yet.

Sometimes, your dwarven blood causes strange words to come out of your mouth.

I’m not sure we can blame my dwarven blood for a cheese or coffee addiction. I dropped an already-sliced bagel into the toaster, amused when it turned on, the cord plugged into an outlet under the window. Oh, I’d seen cars with electrical outlets before, but I’d never seen anyone use them for toasters or espresso makers.

I will return shortly. Sarrlevi leaped through the portal, disappearing from my senses.

Not willing to wait for the bagel to toast, I stuffed lox in my mouth. And, oh, a variety of sliced cheeses and salamis waited under the cloche.

“Please help yourself to the food,” Vintok said dryly, settling back on the seat between his bodyguards, everyone watching me.

“You didn’t want to say grace first, did you?” I wiped my mouth.

“I did not. Goblins pray to the maker gods and satisfy their religious requirements by building things. There is no need to issue verbal platitudes.”

“Right.” A browned bagel popped up, and I slathered butter and cheese

on it before taking a bite.

Vintok leaned back, his feet dangling above the floor. “Since you have a goblin roommate, you probably know much about our people.”

The bite of bagel I was swallowing almost caught in my throat. Why were these people so interested in Tinja? And why didn’t they talk to *her* about their interest? As a full-blooded magical being, Vintok must have sensed her inside the house. Of course, the property’s defenses would have kept him from ambling up to introduce himself. That and what was likely a healthy fear of being pelted by shards of peanut brittle.

“She’s told me a little,” was all I said.

“Good.” Vintok gazed out the window as the limo drove us out of the neighborhood. “How long did it take you to build the wheeled home in which she now resides on your property?”

Did he care, or was he letting me know he was aware of our living arrangement? Because he and his boss were big snoops?

“A few weeks,” I said.

“That’s all? Including the enchantments?”

“Yes.”

“Impressive.”

“Yeah, I am.” I groped for a way to put an end to our chat, but Vintok subsided on his own.

Though the discussion about Tinja had turned me wary, it didn’t keep me from making an Americano and finishing breakfast. While Vintok made another call and the orcs shifted to gazing out the windows in boredom, I grabbed a napkin and tucked some of the cheese and salami into it. The offerings were high-quality, with a sharp cheddar that had an exquisite tang that nipped at my taste buds. If The Wrench had intended two people to enjoy his food, he wouldn’t mind if I took more than I could eat. After all, a polite girlfriend picked up snacks to share with her boyfriend, right?

Thanks to heavy traffic, I was on my second Americano by the time the limo turned toward Harbor Island. Sarrlevi ought to have beaten us there. I didn’t sense him as we drove into the perpetual mist surrounding the hidden warehouse, but that wasn’t surprising since he often camouflaged himself.

One of the big roll-up garage doors was open, two ogres standing guard to either side, and the half-orc drove the limo inside. The arrangement and contents of the warehouse were similar to last time, but no workers were riding around on forklifts this morning.

Before the limo parked, the garage door clanked down behind us. That hadn't happened last time, and I eyed it through a window. The driver and the bodyguards climbed out of the limo, and I was about to follow, but Vintok, still seated, held up a hand.

"How much do you charge Work Leader Tinja for the enchantments you place on the tiny homes you build her?"

Uh, were we still on that subject?

"I've only built her one demo tiny home," I said. "She sells the plans for them, not tiny homes themselves."

"How much do you charge?" Vintok repeated as if he hadn't heard me. "And what exactly do all your enchantments do?"

"I'm not for hire. I have my own business."

"I admit, we were a little disappointed at how easy it was to find the tiny house," Vintok said. "My boss thought you might be capable of camouflaging magic. Perhaps that is too much power to expect from a half-blood."

I bristled, tempted to tell him that I had *plenty* of power, thank you very much, but he was watching me intently. Uncomfortably so. I had a feeling he wanted to goad me into revealing something. But what? Why would Vintok or The Wrench *care* about tiny homes? They had to be fishing for more information about Tinja for whatever reason they were interested in her. I didn't want to inadvertently give them that information.

"The point of the demo home is for people to be able to come and look at it," I said. "If it was *camouflaged*, it wouldn't be an effective sales tool."

"Perhaps not." Vintok slid off the seat and stepped toward the open limo door. "Wait here, please, Ms. Puleyasi. I believe The Wrench will come down here to see you."

"He wants to meet in his limo, not his huge rooftop house?" It occurred to me to be suspicious that The Wrench wanted to see me at all. Sarrlevi was the one who'd accepted his assignment. I *wanted* to speak with The Wrench though, so I didn't object, suspicious or not.

When Vintok got out and shut the door, leaving me alone in the limo, I rested my hand on Sorka's haft. If this turned into something fishy, I could escape without trouble. Even though the limo had a touch of magic about it, I had little doubt that my hammer could bash through the doors. In such a situation, Sorka might not even complain about it.

To assist my handler in escaping, I would enjoy knocking down a door,

she spoke into my mind. *To assist in the renovation of a home, I am less enthused.*

Yes, I know all about your preferences now that you're speaking with me.

The orcs and Vintok headed for the elevator. If there was anyone else inside the warehouse, they were either camouflaged or didn't have magical blood which would have registered to my senses.

It's possible I should have made the choice to do so earlier, Sorka said.

I think so. Then I would have known not to bash things with you.

Long minutes passed, and I grew restless.

"I don't think The Wrench is coming to chat with me." I set my mug on the table and reached for the door to make sure they hadn't somehow locked me in. There were worse prisons, but I didn't want to be trapped, regardless.

The door handle didn't budge.

I stared. They *had* locked me in.

Using my senses, I prodded at the faint magic I'd detected around the limo. It felt like a security enchantment meant to defend the limo from hoodlums attempting to break in.

"Not innocent passengers trying to get out," I muttered, a surge of anger heating my cheeks.

In the warehouse, the lights went out.

USING MORE FORCE DIDN'T CAUSE THE LIMO DOOR TO BUDGE.

The urge to swing Sorka at the window swept through me. I sublimated it. Barely. The magic keeping me locked in was simple enough for me to thwart with my own, but why were these guys messing with me? And would some further trap spring once I escaped the limo?

Sarrlevi? Are you here? I projected the words outward while envisioning his face in my mind, wanting him but not anyone in The Wrench's penthouse to hear. My senses told me the orcs, Vintok, and more goblins were up there, including The Wrench. The two ogre guards outside the warehouse were the only magical beings on the ground nearby. *He should have gotten here by now*, I mused to Sorka.

Unless he was distracted by a need for cheese and coffee, she replied. With a hint of judgment?

He wouldn't be. He's not as easily lured into traps by his tastebuds as I am. Disgusted with myself, I rested a hand on the door, using my senses to examine the locking mechanism. Compared to the gnomish magic that had created barriers across the stasis chambers on Dun Kroth, the security was simple. With a few trickles of my power, I unlocked the door.

Expecting more traps, I eased it open. The warehouse lights remained out. On my previous visit, I'd noticed all the magical artifacts about the place but had assumed they existed for general security and assistance in the operations. Now, everything seemed more ominous.

Shall we break down the garage door and leave? I wondered to Sorka. *Or see if the elevator will let us take it up?*

Though I had a predilection for breaking things, it was usually only when I lost my temper. So far, I was irked but not furious.

“So far.” I eyed the walls malevolently and headed toward the elevator in the back.

Tiny red lights blinked at various spots on walls near the ceiling. Indicating security cameras? I gave one the middle finger.

A faint hiss sounded, and I tensed. Sorka couldn't protect me from poisonous gases. I did, however, still have the charm Sarrlevi had given me before we'd gone to the volcano base on Dun Kroth, and I activated it.

I also whispered, “*Eravekt*,” and Sorka glowed silver-blue, highlighting nearby crates and metal cabinets while leaving most of the warehouse in eerie shadows.

Mist gathering above the floor, with wisps flowing between my legs, was also eerie. It smelled like almonds. Didn't cyanide smell like almonds?

Clanks came from behind a stack of shipping crates reaching to the rafters. Unsettlingly, the noise reminded me of the furnace guardians I'd battled. This time, I didn't have an elven assassin or a half-dragon prisoner to help me against such foes.

Ignoring the mist curling about my legs, I continued toward the elevator on the off chance I could escape without facing whatever was making the clanks.

“Fat chance,” I muttered.

I am always prepared to do battle, Sorka informed me.

When you're in my hands, that's wise.

Thuds started up in the same direction as the clanks. They sounded like footsteps, something heading toward me. No, to cut me off at the elevator.

I broke into a run. The shadows stirred, something glinting with the reflection of Sorka's light. The metal elevator doors also reflected her light as I approached, but the call buttons were dark and didn't respond when I pressed them.

“Imagine my surprise.”

The contraption making the thuds and clanks strode closer, Sorka's light illuminating more of the details. It was two-legged instead of four, a blocky metal robot that towered almost as high as the stacks of crates. White eyes glowed in a square semblance of a head.

I hefted my hammer, thinking of bashing down the elevator doors, but the car wasn't likely on the other side. Even if I could force them open, what

would I do? Climb the cable up to the top? That would be a lot of work just to talk to The Wrench.

“Should have called him on the phone,” I grumbled, turning to face the robot.

At least it didn’t have canons or laser rifles or some other sci-fi crap. It *was* magical, so I wouldn’t be surprised if it could do more than stomp around.

It was doing *that* quite well, lifting its blocky feet higher than my head with each step. Like it *wanted* to stomp me.

Its eyes glowed brighter, reminding me of the dragons when they got pissed. They flared with magic, and my instincts warned me to move out of the way.

Calling upon Sorka to raise a barrier, I darted to the side as the robot stomped close. White lights—no, *beams*—shot out of its eyes, striking the floor in the spot where I’d stood.

“Should have known there’d be laser beams.” If the robot had a magical barrier, I couldn’t sense it, so I hurled Sorka at its box of a head.

That head swiveled toward me, eyes flaring again. More beams shot out, striking my hammer as it hurtled through the air. Though I didn’t think some security drudge’s magic could match my mother’s enchantments, I froze and stared, worried for Sorka.

The beams ricocheted off her haft without interfering with her flight. One hit a crate and another reached the ceiling, lancing through a light fixture. It clattered to the floor, glass shards flying everywhere.

Good. The Wrench deserved to have his warehouse chewed up.

As Sorka smashed into the head of the robot, I ran behind a crate for cover while using my senses to examine the enchantments on it. Movement. A command to defend. And there was the ability to shoot lasers.

Sorka clanked to the ground. She’d crushed in the side of the robot’s huge head but hadn’t hit hard enough to knock it off its body. Too bad.

The construct didn’t register the blow in the least. Whirring faintly, it turned from the elevator and clomped toward my hiding spot.

After calling Sorka back to my hand, I mulled over the enchantments. I’d seen many like the movement one and thought I could break it but would need some time. Since I had to run behind another crate to avoid being stomped, that made it hard to focus.

The laser beams shot out again. With Sorka’s barrier around me, they

didn't reach me, instead deflecting off and blowing up a crate.

That crate turned out to have something flammable inside. A chain of explosions blew, the noise deafening as it echoed from the walls of the cavernous warehouse. Flames burst from the crate, temporarily lighting the warehouse in an orange glow.

The carnage didn't keep the robot from continuing after me. When I ran for another hiding spot, its beams fired at the floor in front of me, throwing up chunks of cement. I veered to avoid the potholes.

"Maybe I'll deal with the beams first," I murmured.

Unlike with the movement enchantment, I hadn't examined anything with beam-hurling magic before, and I didn't know how to remove the spell. But, as my first instructor Santiago had taught me, altering the base material could sometimes break the enchantment.

Hunkering behind a shipping container, I used my power to send tendrils of magic into the robot's square face, corroding the area around its eyes, softening the metal. It stomped closer, not slowing.

I leaned out and threw Sorka toward its head. When she slammed into the weakened metal, the hammer smashed everything, the laser-beam eyes included. That didn't keep the robot from continuing toward my hiding spot.

After calling Sorka back to my grip, I worked on the movement enchantment. That one I knew how to break. Before it reached me, the robot halted mid-step, with one foot hanging in the air.

Feeling petulant, I ran up and smashed Sorka into its other leg.

The huge robot was heavy, and with raw strength alone, I wouldn't have succeeded in knocking it over, but I willed my power into the blow, making it stronger. The thick metal crumpled inward, and the construct tipped over. It smashed against a crate as it fell, and I scurried away, worried that one might also hold flammable items. Not far away, the remains of the other destroyed crate burned heartily.

Ceramic shattered inside the wooden crate as it broke under the weight of the fallen robot. Viscous green liquid oozed between the cracks, the substance magical. Acrid smoke wafted up from the wood as the stuff burned it—no, completely ate it away.

Scurrying back had been the right choice. When the acidic compound dribbled to the floor, the cement also started smoking.

"What is this, some mad scientist's storehouse?" I asked.

A red light high on one of the walls winked at me. I gave the camera

another middle finger and eyed the limousine. It was parked about twenty feet from where I'd ended up, and I thought about trying to magic the nasty acid over to eat the tires. Maybe the whole thing.

But a ding came from the back of the warehouse. I almost laughed when the elevator doors opened, as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

Deciding to be mature and not vindictive, I left the acid and the limo alone. But my muscles were tense, irritation knotting them.

Instead of heading straight to the elevator, I paused to bash the robot a couple more times with Sorka. It wasn't so much because I thought it might stir again and threaten me but because it felt good. I was annoyed with myself for having walked into a trap. A trap baited with coffee and breakfast.

"Action heroes in movies never get lured to their demise by cheese," I muttered, then headed to the elevator, not because I thought it was wise but because I still needed to talk to The Wrench. Though it was questionable whether he would give me any information after I'd smashed up his warehouse. "Like that's *my* fault."

The battle was short, Sorka said as I stepped into the elevator, but it felt good to destroy a nemesis.

We're really not that dissimilar, you know. I thought she would object to the comparison and find a haughty way to call me a savage mongrel.

In a manner of speaking, we did have the same maker, so perhaps similarities are to be expected. Sorka shared a memory of smashing into the robot—a close-up view as she blasted into its metal face—and a sense of smugness.

Definitely.

There weren't any buttons inside the elevator, only a camera blinking its red light down at me from the ceiling. I smashed it with the hammer.

"Oops."

Of its own accord, the elevator rose.

On the rooftop, the doors opened, revealing two ogre guards to either side. I gripped Sorka, ready to defend myself.

Without speaking, one pointed me to the walkway leading past the fountains and to the front door of The Wrench's mansion.

Keep your eye out for other security measures we might have to deal with, I told Sorka as I scanned the area with my senses. It seemed strange that I was being invited in the front door after a security robot had tried to kill me.

It appears similar to your last visit.

So I'll be shut in a room off the foyer and propositioned by the goblin dish boy?

The magic feels similar. I am uncertain if proffers of sexual encounters await.

The Wrench was the one waiting for me in the foyer, with Vintok and his bodyguards at his side. At least I wouldn't have to twiddle my thumbs for an hour before he deigned to see me.

I braced myself for him to be angry about the destruction to his property. Vintok held a small metal chest, keeping it tight against his stomach as if its weight made gripping it only with his hands difficult. It reminded me of the chest of gold The Wrench had offered Sarrlevi.

"Wonderful, wonderful." The Wrench clasped his hands together and gazed avidly at me, as if I were a particularly fine collectable his antiques dealer had picked up at an auction. "I had my doubts about your power after hearing Vintok describe the very minor enchantments on the tiny home, but I can see that you were holding back. You're *wonderful*."

What, had that all been a *test*?

"Uh huh," I said. "What do you want from me?"

And where the hell was Sarrlevi?

"For you to work for me, of course," The Wrench said.

"I'm in business for myself. I don't need a job." Even if I'd been unemployed and on food stamps, I wouldn't have wanted to join his legion of armed minions wearing three-piece suits as they carried out his whims.

"Oh, certainly not, not with your talents, but you would accept a temporary gig, would you not? I will compensate you well, of course, and—" The Wrench snapped his green fingers as if he'd thought up an offer too good for me to refuse. "I'll also buy home plans from your goblin friend, Tinja. Many sets. Perhaps she would even like to make custom plans for me. That would earn her more money."

"She doesn't need your charity. Or mine."

"You defend her? That's also wonderful. Few goblins can claim beings from other species, especially *tall* species that think themselves superior to goblins, as friends and protectors."

"I don't think I'm superior to anyone, but, look, I'm not interested in working for anyone who traps me in his warehouse and tries to kill me."

"Oh, don't be foolish." The Wrench waved a dismissive hand. "You would not have been hurt. Even if I loathed you and wished you the same fate

as many of my enemies, I would not have dared harm you with your assassin lover on his way.”

“Where *is* Sarrlevi, anyway? He should have gotten here by now.”

“He’ll be here soon, I’m certain. My magic only protects this small island from incoming portals. One must properly defend one’s home. I *know* you understand. Your enchanted firearm-windmill is most delightful, if oddly nature-themed for one of dwarven blood. The fern-leaf design, I assume, was to appeal to your elven lover.”

“Something like that.” I tried to keep my bristling to a minimum, again reminding myself that I wanted information that he might have. Given how much he’d snooped around and learned about Tinja and me, gathering information seemed to be a specialty for him.

“I wish you to build twenty tiny homes for me,” The Wrench said. “They will be for the goblins living in the forest of my dead enemy. Now that he is sleeping with the fishes, I will find a way to acquire the land, and I will allow them to live in peace. Their lives will be much more comfortable if they have roofs over their heads. *Good* roofs. As long as they live like squatters in temporary huts, they may be preyed upon by hunters, but in a legitimate village, perhaps one that can be enchanted and camouflaged from outsiders, they will be unmolested.”

I stared at him, some of my irritation fading. I didn’t trust him and was prepared for this all to be a ruse to get something else from me, but... if he *did* care about his people and want homes for them, for their comfort and safety, that might not be a gig I could refuse.

“Please say yes. I simply *must* have you do this job for me. I knew as soon as you started annihilating the defenses that you had the power to do wonderful work.” The Wrench waved toward a nook filled with monitors, various camera feeds on the displays. They had indeed been watching me in the garage.

“Me crushing a security robot convinced you I’d be good at building tiny homes?”

“Enchanting tiny homes, yes. Self-camouflaging cedar siding should be a simple matter for one capable of turning a sophisticated metal robot into scrap metal.” The Wrench rubbed his hands together again, not appearing bothered in the least by the loss of his security construct. “Will you take on the work? As I said, I will pay well.”

I sensed Sarrlevi’s aura outside the warehouse—he was walking in from

the street—and my ire melted further. *You're okay?* I asked him, wanting to double-check the story of portal-denial.

I am. I sensed the copious amounts of magic embedded in this place on my previous visits but had not realized there was a way for the goblin to keep portals from forming in the area. Last night, when I stopped by, I opened a portal on a roof, so it's an intermittently applied power.

I think he might have wanted some time alone with me for a chat.

To what end? Have you been harmed?

No, but his warehouse has been.

“Ms. Puleasi?” The Wrench prompted.

“Building *twenty* tiny homes would be a huge undertaking, even if I can talk my partner into helping.” I also preferred one-off projects, each one unique, and wilted at the thought of mass-producing twenty identical houses. Tinja had spoken of drawing up additional floor plans, but even so... This guy had better be paying extremely well. And—

Wait. I almost bounced as an idea popped into my head. Maybe The Wrench could pay in something more valuable to me than money.

“I understand,” he said, “especially if you are going to enchant them. A person must be willing to pay well for a skilled craftswoman.” He nodded for Vintok to step closer, then reached for the lid of the chest.

“That’s right. And as a successful businesswoman, money is only a partial motivator for me.” I eyed the chest, admitting it could be a more profound motivator if the amount was substantial enough, especially if he was also willing to purchase from Tinja, paying enough to help her along the path of finally achieving her dream of owning an urban goblin sanctuary. “Have you learned anything about the organization that kidnapped my mother? And held her for decades while scheming to start a war that would have been devastating to all the humans—to everyone living on Earth?”

I didn’t know how much digging The Wrench had done on his nemesis Woodward before hiring Sarrlevi, but he certainly knew a lot about me and my roommate.

“I have learned more about the organization since you mentioned Woodward was a part.” The Wrench opened the lid, revealing stacks of gold coins in the chest.

From my position, I couldn’t count how many were inside, but the heft of the chest suggested a lot—and that they were solid gold.

“I have a problem with the remaining members of the organization,” I

said.

“You wish them eliminated?” The Wrench asked.

“No. My boss has assured me that I *don't* wish them eliminated.”

He blinked in confusion.

“I want them to leave me and my family alone. One of them who's now dead, Kurt Hart, sent minions to the Assassins' Guild headquarters on Zokthoran.” I watched The Wrench's face to see if he knew what I was talking about—how much familiarity did he have with the Cosmic Realms? When he nodded, I continued, “The minions left a chest of gold to ensure I was declared this year's prestige hunt and that assassins would keep coming after me until they got me. Sarrlevi has tried to talk the Assassins' Guild leader into removing the bounty, but unless the particular minion or his employer returns to revoke it, she feels honor bound to leave it in place. The *employer* is dead, but I would guess someone else in the organization might know enough to be able to handle things, to take back the gold and call off the prestige hunt.”

“What do you wish of me?” The Wrench asked.

“Well, you seem well-connected and like you might know how to help me.” Though the chest of gold was tempting, not having to worry about assassins going forward would be a much more practical payment. “I'd accept that in lieu of the gold, providing you do pay for the cost of the materials for the tiny homes.”

“You wish me to do a favor for you.”

“Yes.” I had a feeling Willard wouldn't approve of me wheeling and dealing with a goblin crime lord, but this had to be better than Sarrlevi going down that list—with a sword. “If you're in a position to do so. This is quite a *favor* you're asking from me.”

“I see.”

I sensed Sarrlevi levitating up to the rooftop—a far better way to reach this place than the route I'd had to take—and heading for the front door. He was walking quickly, probably irked on my behalf, even though I hadn't filled him in yet.

The Wrench eyed the open front door a little warily, as if considering for the first time that repercussions might result from ensnaring an assassin's girlfriend and siccing a security robot on her.

“I cannot make promises,” he said, “but I will see what I can do in regard to your situation.”

“Okay. If you can get the assassins off my back, I’ll build your tiny homes.”

Sarrlevi strode in, looking pissed. I must have shared more about the attack than I’d realized, with imagery if not words.

“We have a deal,” The Wrench said loudly, and thrust his hand out, clasping mine for a firm shake that he made sure Sarrlevi witnessed.

Sarrlevi squinted at our hands and looked at me. *What deal have you made with this shifty goblin?*

One that might turn out well for me and won’t inconvenience you. I smiled at him. Unless you decide to retire from being an assassin and assist me in my business. I’m sure a tiny-home village in a forest would look fabulous with elven vines sprouting from everything.

Sarrlevi stopped beside me, eyeing The Wrench suspiciously. *You believe he can do what your military leader cannot?*

Willard has to obey the law. Like you, this guy isn’t bound by that condition. I wasn’t sure how exactly The Wrench could get the assassins to leave me alone, but I hoped he could—and that I’d conveyed I didn’t simply want everyone murdered.

The ogre bodyguards pointed their Tommy guns at Sarrlevi, but The Wrench released my hand and waved for them to stand down.

“You have brought proof of my enemy’s demise?” The Wrench asked Sarrlevi.

“I have.” He slung his pack off his shoulders but looked at me before opening it.

“You are right to pause,” The Wrench said. “It is not appropriate to show the proof of business completed in the presence of a lady.”

“Or to bring it into her bedroom,” I murmured.

“Come.” The Wrench nodded to Sarrlevi. “We will conclude our arrangement in my office.”

As they walked off together, my phone buzzed with a text. A message from Val.

You might want to come home. A legion of dwarves came through a portal in the street and is standing on the sidewalk in front of your house. Some of them have powerful enough auras that I think they’ll be able to tear down your defenses if they want. Have you pissed off any of your kin lately?

Not that I know of. I thought of the half-dragon prisoner that King Ironhelm had been worried would show up and make trouble for Dun Kroth.

But it's always possible.

SARRLEVI KINDLY MADE A PORTAL TO TAKE US, BY WAY OF JIAGA, BACK TO my house in Green Lake. Even though I hadn't been wounded or otherwise traumatized by The Wrench's test, I wasn't eager to get back into a limo anytime soon. No matter how many cream-cheese-slathered bagels waited inside.

True to Val's text, we found twelve dwarves lined up on the sidewalk in front of my house, most armored and bearing swords or axes. But I recognized my mother in the middle, wearing a leather smithing apron and carrying tools and a satchel containing magical items. General Grantik stood at her side, his arms crossed over his chest as he scowled around the neighborhood, his gaze lingering on the dragon-shaped topiaries across the street.

I sensed Val but not Zavryd in their home, so I didn't know what had Grantik on edge, though maybe he was permanently disgruntled now when forced to visit Earth. He hadn't had the best experiences here.

When Grantik noticed Sarrlevi, the suspicious glower shifted to him.

"Hi, Mom." I waved heartily, skirting the armored dwarves—her bodyguards?—to reach her.

Sarrlevi stood back, maybe because several of the dwarves grumbled and pointed their weapons at him or, more likely, because *Mom* looked at him.

King Ironhelm had said Sarrlevi could come to Dun Kroth and even visit me in the city to watch me craft, but we hadn't thus far attempted to find out if that was true. It was possible the offer had been made more to be polite to me than out of a sincere wish to have an elven assassin strolling through the

capital.

“Have you been waiting long?” I asked Mom after we hugged. “When my neighbor mentioned that a legion of dwarves was camped out in front of my house, I came as soon as I could.”

“A legion?” Her bushy red eyebrows rose. “Legions are thousands of dwarves. This is a contingent of ten soldiers, plus a surly general.”

She spoke in English, which I didn’t think Grantik understood, but maybe he’d brought a translation charm for he scowled at her. With surliness.

I rubbed my own translation charm in case any of them spoke in Dwarven.

Mom lowered her voice to add, “When I told my father that I was going to bring you a few tools, he was concerned about me returning to the dangers of this particular wild world. He thought I might be kidnapped again. Though I explained to him that *most* humans are indifferent to strangers in their midst, he insisted that I bring company.”

“*Bodyguards*,” Grantik said. “And an experienced war veteran and senior military officer who is here to advise, not guard.”

“Bodyguarding is beneath a general,” Mom informed me.

“Not *beneath*,” Grantik objected, “not when it is the princess, but I was in the middle of running important military exercises for the king’s legions. Our people must prepare in the event of war or other problems.”

“War?” I asked. “You’re not talking about what the half-dragon Starblade might do, are you?” I’d thought they were worried he would turn into an assassin, not raise an army.

“We *are* concerned about him and those he’s freeing,” Grantik said. “Relations are tense now between the dwarves and the elves. We believe they may be harboring the criminals.”

“Oh, wonderful,” I muttered.

Mom glanced at Sarrlevi. “I’ll tell you more about it inside. There are numerous spies in this neighborhood.”

“Spies?” I asked.

Did that mean anyone with pointy ears? Or even a half-elf? My senses told me Val was in her backyard, but I didn’t see her peering over the fence.

Mom nodded, looking not toward Val’s house but down the street toward the Craftsman with the for-sale sign. Two goblins stood beside it, one pointing at various parts of the home with a wrench and the other drawing in a sketchpad.

“Goblins. There’s another in the enchanted trailer in your backyard.” Mom cocked her head. “Trailer is the Earth word, isn’t it?”

“Essentially, as long as it’s on wheels, but we call them tiny homes now. Especially when they’re magnificently enchanted with cedar-shingle siding. But that’s my roommate, Tinja. And those—” I waved toward the for-sale house but didn’t recognize either goblin. “Well, I don’t know them, but, for some reason, a lot of goblins are interested in that home. Maybe there are piles of unique junk in the backyard that they want to get their hands on.”

“Goblins are known snoops and sellers of information,” Grantik grumbled.

I thought about objecting, but goblins always *did* seem amazingly informed about goings on, not only among their own kind but in the magical community at large. Willard hadn’t hired Gondo only for his secretarial skills, after all. In fact, I was fairly certain she’d hired him *despite* his secretarial skills.

“True.” I decided not to mention that I’d spent the morning making a deal with a goblin. Instead, I waved at the house. “The dwarves are all welcome, of course. I can adjust the wards so your bodyguards can come inside.”

I didn’t necessarily *want* ten-plus-one armored dwarves trampling through my newly remodeled house, but the sun had come out, and numerous neighbors were outside enjoying the crisp fall weather. Even as we spoke, a woman walking two dogs crossed the street to avoid the group on the sidewalk, which caused the topiary eyes to glow in warning.

The dogs growled and raised their hackles at the short armored beings in their neighborhood. One lifted its leg to pee on a topiary.

I winced, hoping Zavryd didn’t know such things happened to his prize security shrubs.

“Thank you,” Mom said. “We would appreciate that. I was contemplating doing it myself, but I thought you might consider that rude.”

“If you were able to flick a finger and disable the security system I’ve put hours into enchanting? Maybe more depressing than rude.”

“Not disable but adjust who’s allowed access. Your work is improving. General Grantik and I were commenting on it.” Mom waved toward the windmill. “Though some of it has elf-inspired whimsy that our people find puzzling.”

“Windmill blades styled after fern fronds hide tranquilizer guns well.”

“Artisans from *many* cultures enjoy implementing elven whimsy into

their works,” Sarrlevi said.

Mom glanced at him before looking back to me. “Wouldn’t a few cannons be more effective at keeping out trespassers than tranquilizer guns? Are they loaded with a sufficient dosage to deter an ogre or wyvern or dragon?”

“Doubtful, but if a dragon wants in, my defenses won’t stop it.” I eyed her satchel curiously. “What did you bring me?” I also looked at Sarrlevi, who stood unwavering and indifferent to the hard gazes of the armored warriors.

“What you requested.” Mom winked and nodded toward the house.

“Right. Give me a second.” I scrutinized the dwarves’ faces so I could imprint them on my magical defenses. Mom already had access to the home, but the rest hadn’t been here before.

I touched Sarrlevi’s hand before stepping onto the walkway. *I enjoy elven whimsy.*

I am aware. As I’ve told you, watching you craft animals and trees into a staircase was what first piqued my interest in you.

I thought you said seeing me naked and swinging my hammer at your laundry device piqued you.

That aroused me. Interest in you as a person came later.

Huh. I guess I could really get you going by crafting naked.

I would find that appealing. Perhaps you’ll be moved to enchant a soap dispenser in the bedchamber tonight.

I’ve already made you one of those for a gift. You said you liked it.

I did, but you didn’t make it with me watching. Sarrlevi smiled at me, his eyelids drooping in suggestion. *That would also be a gift.*

I do enjoy giving you presents. I glanced back at Mom, hoping she couldn’t hear the conversation. I’d gotten better at pinpoint telepathic communication, but when standing next to people with a lot of power, I was never confident they couldn’t butt in.

There was a smirk on her face as she watched me.

Oh, well. She’d proven she didn’t mind a little sex talk.

From the walkway, I used my magic to reach out to the various wards and defenses. Mom watched, not with judgment or impatience, but I was aware of her gaze—of *all* their gazes—and felt nervous. It took more tries than usual to get their faces to stick, and I almost missed a couple of the rooftop defenses. Feeling klutzy, I looked back at Mom.

She nodded with encouragement, then came over and clapped an arm around my shoulders. *You're doing well and progressing quickly. Don't be nervous about me watching. I'm delighted that you're interested in my field and want to spend time learning from me.* She waved toward the yard. *You may wish to make access temporary for Grantik's people. I'll show you how to do that.*

Magic flowed out of her as she lightly touched the various defenses, making slight adjustments. Nobody except me *should* have been able to alter anything, but I wasn't surprised that she could.

Thanks, I replied, paying close attention.

Your father may come by later. I see he's already permitted.

Yes, everyone in the family is. Did he come back to Earth with you?

Yes. He was going to stick around until you showed up, but Grantik got even surlier when your father and I were—what is the Earth term?—getting handsy. And kissy. She smirked again. *Grantik thought it was unseemly for the heir to the dwarven throne to publicly engage in bedroom activities, as he called them. We were only holding hands, and it was a short kiss. But he is a prude.*

Maybe Mom's smirk had been because she was remembering being handsy with Dad rather than because she'd overheard my conversation with Sarrlevi.

I think Earth makes him grumpy in general, was all I said.

Yes. Your father went to visit his parents and said to tell you he'll stop in to see you later.

Thanks.

Once all the defenses had been adjusted, I said, "Come on in," to the contingent, as Mom had called them.

Sarrlevi stood off to the side and let the dwarves pass. Not wanting to come inside with them?

An aluminum-foil wrapped tray resting on the doormat made the dwarves pause on the porch. An attached sticky note held a short message inked by a tidy hand. I recognized Penina's perfect penmanship.

"A weapon?" Grantik lifted a hand to keep Mom from getting close.

"It might be, in a manner of speaking." I crouched to pluck the note off the covered tray.

Josh chipped one of his baby teeth on these. You have the jaw of a prizefighter. Maybe you'll enjoy them.

“Thanks so much, Penina.” I stuffed the note in my pocket.

Before peeling back the aluminum foil, I knew what I would find. My words must have set Grantik further on edge because he stepped fully in front of Mom and warned her to raise her defenses.

“It’s peanut brittle.” I showed them the toffee-colored shards. “*More* peanut brittle.” What was I going to do with it all? Panel the den?

“This is an Earth weapon?” Grantik asked.

“It’s a dessert that my grandma made, but she’s...” I groped for a polite way to describe her ability to render almost any American dessert inedible. “She’s a wonderful cook of her native Samoan dishes.”

“It is food?” Grantik sniffed.

“Yeah.” Tray in hand, I pushed open the front door without offering any. I had cheese they could try, *good* cheese. “Make yourselves at home.”

The dragon is returning, Sarrlevi told me from the yard.

Zavryd? I replied as dwarves tramped into the house, bringing in mud and dried leaves on the treads of their plate boots.

Since I’d put a protective enchantment on the refinished wood floors, I wasn’t worried about damage, but I hadn’t yet learned how to make magical cleaning devices, such as Sarrlevi had in his various homes. They were high on my project wish list.

Yes.

That’s okay. He’s my neighbor. He returns a lot.

You do not believe he may object to the contingent of dwarves that has invaded the neighborhood? He was vocal about the goblins.

He shouldn’t object to my mother and her guards visiting me. If he does, you can challenge him to a duel. Tinja probably needs more videos to go viral to keep business flowing in.

Some of the dwarves stirred with unease and glanced out the windows toward the sky. They must have also sensed Zavryd’s approach.

Not worried about him, I took Mom aside, wanting to know if she’d brought me items that could help with the incursion of Slehvira’s place. Grantik tried to follow, but as soon as we stepped into the den, she closed the door firmly, leaving him scowling in the other room.

“Are your people really worried about the elves?” I asked as Mom set her satchel on my desk. The portal generator the king had given me already rested in a prominent spot on a shelf above it.

“*Wary* of them. Less of King Eireth and the armies he commands, and

more of the half-dragons. Even though their numbers are modest, it's possible they could raise armies that would represent a genuine threat. I hope the concerns are overblown and that no trouble will find Dun Kroth. I would rather make tools than weapons." Mom opened her satchel and pulled out a globe and a square case. "Given what you spoke to me about, you should be careful if you're going to travel to Veleshna Var. My father's spy network has unearthed a few rumors suggesting there may indeed be plots afoot."

My mouth went dry. "Plots? Including one that involves an assassination attempt on the king?"

"It could. An elven diplomat stationed on the gnomish home world hinted that there may be a regime change coming to Veleshna Var. She has been feeling out rulers, trying to see which peoples might be interested in rising up against the dragons if the elves were to do so."

"Isn't it dangerous to talk openly about such things?"

"Oh, it would be, but I gather there wasn't anything open about it. A spy was reporting on a hush-hush chat in a closed room."

I rubbed my face, feeling more than ever that Sarrlevi and I had to get some real information to give King Eireth. How could he act effectively if he didn't know when or from where the danger would come?

My senses picked up a portal forming in Val's front yard. Since she and Zavryd were both home, I trusted they could handle whoever came through and wouldn't need me for anything.

"Here you are, *Nika*."

Mom had opened the case, which held four trinkets. Three of them would fit on my keychain and one was larger, a pair of attached rings that couldn't be meant to fit even an ogre finger. The dirty part of my mind wanted to call it a cock ring, but I couldn't imagine such a thing being included in a spy kit. Or it being anything a mother would give a daughter. Though Mom *had* proven that she had a salacious side.

"You already have a camouflaging charm," Mom said, "so I didn't bring another of those, but this ring will allow you to see through physical and magical devices that hide things, whether they be illusions or secret doors. This device will allow you to read documents in other languages, this one will allow you to sense who has recently been in an area, and *this...*" She smirked, her eyes glinting with humor as she handed me the larger trinket. "You probably won't want it for the spy mission you described to me, but, if you ever need to elicit information from males who are open to being

seduced, it vibrates and pulses exquisite magical energy. The sensations of pleasure can make a male lower his mental defenses so you can more easily read his mind.”

I pressed my hand to my face as I stared at it. “You *are* giving me a cock ring.”

Mom tilted her head. “Is that the Earth term?”

“What’s the *dwarven* term?”

“It’s actually based on an elven invention. Many elves are on the hedonistic side when it comes to bedroom adventures, as I’m certain you now know. Their term is *zesh shaylesh*, which has a nice rhyme in their language. The translation is roughly penis pleasurer.”

“That’s not any better than our term.”

“No?” Mom set it on the desk on some receipts I’d gathered to give my bookkeeper.

“It’s new and not previously used, right?” I wondered if I would have to use gloves to collect those papers.

“Of *course* it’s new. I made all these items to assist you with your new mission. I even researched what commonly goes into the kit of a female spy.”

“And *zesh shaylesh* was on the list?” Why were my cheeks flaming? It wasn’t as if I’d never seen sex toys before. It was just that one’s *mother* wasn’t supposed to provide them.

“*High* on the list for female spies.”

“What do male spies get?”

“Something similar that is applied to—”

“Don’t say it.” I flung my hand up. “I get the gist.”

“Goodness, Grantik might not be the only prude around.”

“I guess not.”

“I had limited time, since it sounded like *you* have limited time before your mission, so I could only make so many items, but if you wish a *vesthi shaylesh* later, please let me know. I’ll be happy to make you one.”

That had to be the term for the female version. I pointedly did not ask for the translation. “Thanks, Mom.”

“For yourself, of course, though I suppose there are some females who might find you alluring and could be seduced with such an item.” She put an image of the female version in my mind, alongside a schematic that listed the enchantments that went into it.

Wonderful. If I wanted, now I could make one of my own.

“That wouldn’t work on Slehyra,” I said firmly. “Despite her awkward attempt to flirt and include me, I’m positive she’s only interested in Sarrlevi.”

“You never know. Dwarven women are known for their stamina.” Mom winked, but then—thankfully—shifted to another topic. “I hope you’ll be careful on the mission and also inform me if you learn anything that could affect the stability of the Cosmic Realms as a whole. If you feel you’ll be in danger, I could send my bodyguards with you.” Her eyes narrowed. “If you feel you’ll be in a *lot* of danger, I could arrange a larger contingent.”

“A legion?”

“Perhaps not that large. Showing up with legions tends to upset even ally nations, which, despite more tension between us currently, we still are to the elves.”

“I’ll stick to my original plan of snooping.” I waved at the case. “Thank you for the tools to assist with that.”

“You are welcome.”

My phone buzzed.

Can you come over? Val’s text read. Freysha is back with some concerning news.

I grimaced. Were Sarrlevi and I too late to suss out the plot?

It may have to do with Sarrlevi, she added.

Hell.

I’ll be right there.

I'D INTENDED TO GRAB MY HAMMER AND RUN STRAIGHT OVER TO VAL'S house, but I stumbled, almost tripping, when I saw that all my guests had congregated in the kitchen. They'd pulled out two of the dining room chairs and set the trays of peanut brittle on them. The table must have been on the high side for them. That wasn't the startling part; it was that the trays were almost empty, and every dwarf had a piece of brittle in hand and tiny shards sticking to their beards.

"This dessert is excellent." Grantik waved a piece at me. "Crunchy."

"I'm not the one with a prizefighter's jaw," I mumbled under my breath, only waving at them before heading for the front door. *Your bodyguards are distracted from their duty*, I told Mom telepathically as I trotted outside.

That's your fault for luring them to the kitchen with fine food.

That peanut brittle broke my nephew's tooth.

Human teeth aren't as sturdy as dwarven teeth.

I guess not. I imagined dwarven mothers across Dun Kroth praising instead of cursing their children for using their teeth to remove bottle caps.

Sarrlevi had moved from my yard to the sidewalk near the topiaries and was eyeing Val's front door.

"Freysha has some news that might involve you," I told him.

"I gathered from the long wary look she gave me as soon as she came out of her portal."

"Doesn't she always look at you that way?"

"Usually, the looks are *short* and wary. This was more considering."

I stepped onto Val's walkway but paused. "Are you denied access this

week?”

Whether or not Sarrlevi was allowed on Val’s property changed depending on the whims of Zavryd. Considering that the dragon wasn’t on the deed for the house, it seemed presumptuous of him, married to Val or not, to decide who could come and go on her property.

“Since the incident with the meat smoker, yes.”

I rolled my eyes and telepathically asked Val, *Can you adjust the wards so Sarrlevi can join us?*

She hesitated before answering. One of the living-room curtains stirred as she and Freysha peered out. *Freysha says it might not be a good idea.*

Well, can you come out here then? Trying to sound polite rather than frustrated, I added, *Please? If this concerns him, he should get to hear it.*

It doesn’t concern him so much as he’s being accused of something.

Again? And how would an accusation not concern him?

I’m trying to be diplomatic, Val replied.

You know I’ll just tell him everything anyway, right?

“I can wait here,” Sarrlevi said, either overhearing the telepathic conversation or guessing at the contents.

I know, Val replied. *I don’t object to him coming in.*

Your sister does?

Due to the accusation.

The front door opened, and Val stepped out on the porch. Alone.

She nodded to me, gave Sarrlevi a more guarded nod, and joined us at the edge of the property. Zavryd was inside, probably adding further reasons to deny Sarrlevi entrance.

“Freysha came from the elven capital where a known assassin was captured today,” Val said. “She was armed with magical weapons as well as a number of deadly poisons. It’s believed she may have been there to assassinate the king or queen.”

“Was she questioned? How’d she get inside the city’s protective barrier?” I glanced at Sarrlevi. As far as I knew, *he* couldn’t get through that barrier.

“She’s an elven citizen.”

“They didn’t exile her and revoke her citizenship when she became an assassin?” I asked. “I thought everyday elves frowned upon such a career.”

“They do, but I don’t think they consider it truly heinous if an elf doesn’t ply their trade on their own world. Targeting trolls and orcs is less frowned upon.”

“Lovely.”

“As to the rest, Freysha left before it had been decided if there would be a forcible questioning.” Val waved at her temple. “Like their version of a dragon mind scour. The assassin volunteered some information but without a telepathic questioning, it’s possible everything is a lie. She’s powerful enough that people can’t casually read her thoughts, not unless the elves get talented mages and apply force. There’s a legal process to determine if that’ll be done or not, and it takes them time to figure it out.”

“What information did she voluntarily give?” Again, I looked at Sarrlevi, certain his name would come up soon.

“The assassin said she was hired by Sarrlevi.”

“*Hired?*” Sarrlevi spat the word like a curse.

“Because she could get through the barrier and into the city and you can’t,” Val told him.

I couldn’t tell if she believed this herself. I *hoped* not. Sarrlevi had worked with us to free my parents and stop the organization from a scheme that would have threatened all of humanity. Val couldn’t still believe he was anything but an honorable elf.

“Supposedly,” she continued, “you got the gig to kill King Eireth, and you’re cutting her in.”

“That’s preposterous,” Sarrlevi said.

“That you would kill my father?” Val looked steadily at him.

“I would not take that assignment, as King Eireth is not, despite his unwillingness to grant me access to Veleshna Var, a despicable person deserving of an assassin’s blade. What is preposterous, however, is the idea that I would subcontract a job to another. I can believe that someone aware of my reputation might think I would target the king, but never have I foisted work off on a lesser assassin.”

“How do you know she’s lesser?” Val asked. “Freysha didn’t give me her name.”

Sarrlevi gave her a baleful look.

“I believe he considers *most* assassins lesser than he,” I said.

“Ah, of course,” Val said. “I should have known.”

The magic of a portal forming put a pause to our conversation. It radiated dragon magic.

“Expecting someone?” I asked warily, hoping Zavryd could handle whoever showed up.

“Nope.” Val reached into the house and grabbed her sword and gun.

A familiar lilac-scaled dragon flew out of the portal. Zondia.

She took a couple of laps around the neighborhood before settling on the roof of Val’s house, her tail dangling down to the flower beds beside the fence.

We looked expectantly up at her, but she ignored us.

After a minute, Val spoke. “Zav says she’s delivering a message from his mother. He’s going to have to officiate at some meeting, it sounds like.”

“And here I thought she might have come because she heard I’m going to have a killer barbecue gathering,” I said.

For the first time, Zondia’s head appeared over the edge of the roof, and she gazed down at us. A coincidence? Or did talk of barbecue meat excite her as much as it did her brother?

“You’re welcome to come, of course,” I told her.

The head disappeared again without comment.

“Walk with me, Mataalii?” Sarrlevi nodded toward the sidewalk.

He was either indifferent to dragon meetings or wanted to get away from Zondia. Even though the queen had called her off, and she wasn’t hunting him anymore, he probably didn’t want to spend time around her. Understandable. I wasn’t sure where I stood with Zavryd’s sister either.

Val didn’t object to us leaving, but she did press something into my hand before I followed Sarrlevi. A vial of the truth drug. I nodded to her and slipped it into my pocket, then hurried to catch up to him.

He strode down the sidewalk at my side, his shoulders tense. No, his whole *body* tense.

A message from Val popped up on my phone before we’d gone far.

I’m going to go back with Freysha to see if there’s anything I can do to help. Zav said he’ll go too and volunteer his services for mind scouring the assassin.

Okay, I texted back.

Val might have decided telepathy was easier for she switched to that for the rest. *If we can clear Sarrlevi’s name, we will, but it may be hard. I gather Eireth and many others believe that Sarrlevi may have taken the assignment out of spite because Eireth refused to revoke his exile.*

He didn’t. I know he didn’t. I almost but didn’t add that he’d been busy assassinating people here on Earth. We’ll go see Slehyra and find a way to get information out of her. She knows something about all this. It’s possible

they caught the only assassin and there won't be more problems, but I kind of doubt it. I can say from personal experience that the assassins keep coming until you take care of the person sending them.

So I've heard. Thanks.

Sarrlevi stopped and looked down at the phone I still held.

Afraid he was annoyed I wasn't giving him my undivided attention, I stuffed it in my pocket. "Val, Freysha, and Zavryd are going to Veleshna Var to see if they can help."

Sarrlevi nodded curtly. "Good. An assassin will think twice about attacking with a dragon nearby."

Before I could respond, I sensed another dragon in the area, this one flying instead of coming through a portal. Xilneth. He sailed into the neighborhood and landed on the house kitty-corner from Val's. Whatever he said, he didn't share it telepathically with the neighborhood.

"I know you don't have anything to do with it, Varlesh," I said, "but why would another assassin try to draw you in? To put the blame on you?"

"I do not know, unless Slehvya is irritated with me again." His mouth twisted with displeasure.

"Because you didn't leap to join her in bed?"

"Perhaps. It may also be another, someone believing they can easily make a scapegoat of me since I'm not there to defend myself." His jaw clenched, the tendons in his neck tightening under his skin. "I believe my mother made the request for my exile to be lifted in the king's court, so there would have been witnesses."

"We need to go see Slehvya tonight. I've got some of the truth drug now. And my mom brought me a spy kit to assist me with snooping." I didn't mention *seduction* since I had no intention of trying that. "One way or another, we'll find out what she knows." I showed him the vial Val had given me.

Sarrlevi sighed and studied the sidewalk. "Though it's possible she's plotting against me again, I am, as I said, reluctant to use force on her and make her drink the vampire's potion."

"Didn't we decide that *I* would use force on her?"

"I still do not wish you to be hurt," he said softly. "She is powerful."

"Well... there's the distraction option then."

"I have told you that would not work unless..."

"You have sex with her?" I grimaced, though I acknowledged that

probably *would* work. I sure wouldn't notice someone snooping around in my house while Sarrlevi was distracting me with his bedroom talents. I probably wouldn't even notice a home invasion.

He didn't look any more pleased about the idea than I did. "I admit I have employed similar plans before, using sex to distract so I can steal information from people. But I do not wish you to be hurt *emotionally* either, which I believe would happen if I seduced someone you loathe."

Yeah. It would be hard.

"For the record, I wouldn't like watching you be with someone who's lovely either." I smiled and elbowed him, wanting to ease his tension if possible.

"I understand." He gazed at me without humor. "Nor would I wish to see you with another."

Emotion crept into my throat, tightening it, and I squeezed his hand.

"I wish you to nakedly craft soap dispensers *only* for me," he added.

"I can promise you're the only one I'll do that for. But I must insist that you also won't watch anyone else nakedly craft things."

"You may be surprised, but no one I've had sex with ever did that while I was with them."

"None of them? No wonder you came looking for me."

"Yes." Sarrlevi threaded his fingers through mine and bent to lean his forehead against mine. "I watched you chisel the bathing basin from the giant stone I brought you."

"I remember you peeking into my workshop." I also remembered it had been unseasonably warm that weekend, and I'd been dripping sweat. I doubted it had been that sexy, but maybe I was wrong because I remembered both evenings had ended with lovemaking. We'd also used the tub for more than bathing as soon as I'd finished and installed it.

"Sadly, you were never naked."

"Yeah, chiseling stone isn't something you should do with your clothes off. A soap dispenser would be less problematic though. I would—" I rocked back, the talk of crafting putting an idea in my mind. One that was immediately more appealing to me than Sarrlevi having sex with Slehyra. With a smile creeping onto my face, I looked him in the eye. "I probably wouldn't be physically or emotionally hurt if you were simply standing in the room while Slehyra enjoyed herself with the help of an enchanted, uhm, *accessory* that you gave her."

His eyebrows rose.

I explained the contents of the spy kit my mother had brought me, abruptly wishing I had told her to make me the *vesthi shaylesh* to go along with the male sex toy. But she'd shared the schematics with me, including instructions on the enchantments. It was as if she'd *known* I would want one.

"I think I could make a *vesthi shaylesh* in a couple of hours," I said to finish.

"It is likely Slehyra *has* such devices already," Sarrlevi said, but he appeared thoughtful rather than dismissive.

"Exotic ones enchanted by dwarves?"

He snorted. "Perhaps not. She... might be intrigued. And it would be less out of character for me to share something like that with a lover than ask her to take a walk on the beach."

"You take walks with *me*."

"Yes, but we are not simple sex partners; we are fused."

"Aw, you sweet-talker." I grinned.

"Very well. Make it, and make it *very* distracting."

"I'll do my best."

"Then we will go to Tramondor and acquire the information. It is now more imperative to me that Eireth not be assassinated."

"Because you'll now be implicated? Whether you're the one to do it or not?"

"Yes. And if I were blamed, I do not believe my mother would be permitted to continue to live on Veleshna Var." Sarrlevi hesitated. "She might be in danger of more than exile. To murder an elf is a great crime. To murder a king... For such an act, an elf's entire family might be put to death."

"We're not going to let that happen."

"As always, your loyalty and support please me." He bent and kissed me.

I wrapped my arms around his shoulders and returned the kiss, hoping we could find the evidence we needed, not only to prevent the assassination but to clear his name.

Scratching noises came from the house we were standing in front of, and we broke the kiss, looking toward the porch in time to see three goblins crawl out from underneath it. They waved wrenches and trowels at me, with no hint of embarrassment at having been caught peeping. They crawled around the corner of the house, under a bush, and disappeared into the backyard.

“Should have known better than to stop in front of *that* house,” I muttered.

It was the home for sale that every goblin in the area was interested in. Or maybe they were collectively interested in it. Zavryd would think Sarrlevi an extremely benign visitor compared to twenty goblins moving in and forming a commune. They might find a way to get past his wards and take his meat smoker and every other contraption off his property to repurpose.

“You should start your crafting project.” If the spies had disturbed Sarrlevi, he didn’t show it. “We will need to leave soon if we’re going to arrive before Slehvya’s invitation expires.”

“It’s not an open invitation, huh?”

“I do not know, but she may not be on Tramondor if we come later.”

A horrible caterwauling erupted from the corner, making us both cringe. Was that... Xilneth? Singing?

Zondia sprang into the air and flew off toward Lake Washington. Fast. I couldn’t blame her. Xilneth caterwauled more loudly, until Zavryd boomed, *Leave my sister be, you tone-deaf hippie of a dragon, or I will tear out your vocal cords with my talons, and you will not be invited to the meat party across the street.*

The threat prompted Xilneth to fly off in a hurry.

The meat party across the street? Was Zavryd talking about my house? And my barbecue?

I’d invited Zondia, sort of, but not Xilneth. Momentarily derailed from my mission, I wondered how many people—and dragons—would show up at my little gathering.

“I’ve moved into a strange neighborhood,” I said.

“As I warned you before you made the choice,” Sarrlevi said blandly.

“Is that how elves say *I told you so*?”

He merely gazed at me.

TRAMONDOR REMINDED ME OF THE DRAGON HOME WORLD, THE AIR WARM AND humid and smelling of loamy earth and dense foliage, but it also held the tang of saltwater. Though Sarrlevi’s portal brought us out in a clearing surrounded by lush jungle vegetation with leaves the size of cars, I could hear the roar of an ocean. Also the screeching of large birds competing with the eager calls of vendors speaking in multiple languages.

Trolls, goblins, gnomes, and half-bloods sold wares from carts or wagons surrounding what I realized might be more of a meeting square than a clearing. Numerous dirt and gravel paths led away from a fountain in the center, and an ogre with no need for a ladder was lighting streetlamps as twilight approached.

“Dango Outpost.” Sarrlevi held a palm toward two goblins scurrying our way, their arms laden with seashell necklaces.

They either recognized him or simply grasped that he was dangerous because they backed away, the jewelry clattering in their rush to bow apologetically. While bowing, one goblin managed to eye my hammer with curiosity—and maybe speculation.

Vowing not to let it out of my sight here, I also dropped a hand protectively over the hip bag I’d brought to carry a change of clothes wrapped around my portal generator, Mom’s spy kit, and my recently crafted *vesthi shaylesh*.

“We are on a wild world where many of the races come for recreation. The sea gets very stormy, so most settle inland, but those with the power to magically protect their homes from the elements prefer a water view.”

Sarrlevi pointed toward the widest of the paths, one made from blue and white glass pebbles rather than simple gravel. It looked like something out of a landscaping magazine.

“I’m guessing that applies to Slehyra’s place.”

“Indeed.” Sarrlevi whistled loudly three times, the shrill noise startling me.

“Did you lose a dog?”

Cocking his head, he gave me a what-odd-thing-are-you-speaking-of look.

“Never mind.”

A moment later, what I would call a furry surfboard levitating two feet off the ground weaved through the trees toward us. A pair of serrated circular saws stuck out from the front like antennae. As the enchanted board approached, the saws whirred and sliced through what was probably fast-growing foliage.

“We’re not in danger, are we?” Instinctively, I raised my hammer.

“Only if we don’t pay.” Sarrlevi pointed to a gnome running up from a cart painted with pictures of many of the flying surfboards.

After glancing at Sarrlevi’s swords, the gnome bowed nervously. That didn’t keep him from sticking out his hand as the levitating board came to a stop in front of us, the circular saws winding down.

Sarrlevi pressed a silver coin into the gnome’s grasp and leaped onto the board. He offered me a hand and, when I clasped it, swung me up behind him.

The board tilted and wobbled, far less stable than I would have preferred, but Sarrlevi was unconcerned, only nodding to something the gnome said in his tongue. Instructions?

“Does this take us over the ocean? I should warn you that, despite living in a city by the water, I’ve never surfed, wind-sailed, or wake-boarded.” I rested my hand on Sarrlevi’s back when the board wobbled again. It wasn’t even moving yet.

My martial-arts training had helped me develop decent balance, but I wasn’t a natural in the water—or on boards meant for recreation on it. My grandparents had insisted that Penina and I learn to swim as children, but I’d been on the sturdy and muscular side even as a kid, which gave me a propensity to sink rather than float.

“I did let Zadie talk me into paddle-boarding once,” I added, “but I lost

the paddle and had to pay a fine.”

“We do not need to travel over the ocean, and the magic will do all the work. You need only maintain your balance behind me. It is also not a long ride. I would have taken a portal directly to Slehyra’s home, but hers and the other homes along the beach have protections to prevent the arrival of strangers.”

“I’m not surprised.” Another reason that I couldn’t have sneaked in and snooped without an invitation.

Sarrlevi must have given the board a telepathic command for it turned around and zipped up the path of blue and white pebbles. Here and there, cut branches had fallen across the path, and larger branches had been severed so as not to grow over it. Even so, the saws had to kick into gear to clear grasping thorny brambles that seemed to grow longer as we approached, threatening to impede us. Or to rip us from the board, drag us into the jungle, and feed us to their young?

I snorted at myself, but Sarrlevi pointed at the whirring saws and said, “There’s a lot of magic in the ground here, and it helps the foliage grow very quickly.”

“Nothing like fast-growing thorny brambles to make life in a resort town more appealing.”

“The wealthy who keep homes here *like* that the magical brambles keep the riffraff off the beaches.”

“They sound like haughty snobs.”

“Yes.”

“How come you don’t have a home here?” I smirked when he leveled a cool look back at me.

He didn’t appear seriously peeved, but he did say, “Have we not discussed how inappropriate it is for you to tease a powerful assassin?”

“*Many* times. But you know I’m a slow learner and have that stubborn dwarven blood.”

“You are not a slow learner.” Sarrlevi reached back, warmth replacing the coolness, and touched my hand. “Your mother is pleased with your progress.”

“I think she’s just happy I want to learn about her passion.”

“That is not what she told me. She said you are advancing very quickly and that it was good of me to have helped you find a tutor on Earth.”

“She spoke to you?” I beamed a smile at him, delighted that they had

communicated. Given that he'd once been hunting down my mother with the goal to assassinate her, I hadn't expected them to ever have much of a relationship.

"She did." Sarrlevi waved to his head to indicate telepathy. "She also said I should ask you to share one of the items in the kit that she made for you. Now that you've detailed the contents, I assume she meant the *zesh shaylesh*."

"Uh, yeah, probably." Even though we'd already discussed the items, I couldn't keep from blushing. Earlier, we'd been talking about them in context to our mission. "I will."

"Excellent. As to your question, I have never contemplated owning a home here. It is far too populous for the tastes of an assassin."

The trees thinned, and the path led us into waist-high grass and toward a ridge. Once we left the jungle behind, the roar of the ocean grew louder. The sun was setting, painting the sky a beautiful pink and orange, and I could see why people would want a view.

Houses of various styles, including one built in the shape of a giant mushroom, perched along the ridge. Powerful protections surrounded them, translucent barriers that almost overlapped.

I sensed Sarrlevi wrap his camouflaging magic around us.

"We are close." He slowed the board to a stop and pointed to a sole tree growing from the ridge in the distance, multiple levels of decks built into its branches to look toward the beach.

Its trunk was as wide as those in the capital city on the elven home world. With night approaching, it was easy to see lights glowing through the windows of hollowed-out rooms.

The board hovering underneath us, Sarrlevi turned to face me. "I know my role, but what is your plan for convincing Slehyra to release you from her invitation while not evicting you from the premises so that you may snoop?"

"I'm assuming her invitation wasn't real and that it won't be hard to get out of it once she's intrigued by this." I fished in my bag and gave him the appropriate device. "As to not being evicted, well, I don't think she sees me as a threat. Will she really care of I'm hanging around?"

Sarrlevi gazed at me, not replying right away. Did he expect something craftier? I hated to break it to him, but he wasn't dating a genius.

"I believe her invitation was in earnest," he said, "that she made it

because it appeared to be the only way she could convince me to join her tonight.”

“It *wasn't* in earnest. She hates me.”

“She may hate *me* as well. That doesn't dull her interest in sex.”

“Yeah, but I'm not a gorgeous elf of her preferred gender.” I supposed I didn't know if Slehvyra *had* a preferred gender. She hadn't minded that threesome with Sarrlevi and her female friend, after all.

“I believe she wants me tonight badly enough that she's willing to make concessions to her usual preferences.”

“She's been aching undyingly for you since your last meeting and can't go without another night, huh?”

He considered my sarcasm for a moment before clarifying. “I believe she wants me tonight because my presence will play into some plan of hers, much as the last time we had sex. She was baiting a trap that she wants me to walk into.”

I stared at him. “A trap for what?”

“I do not know, but someone must have hired the female assassin caught on Veleshna Var and instructed her to imply that I had.”

“You think Slehvyra is responsible for that?”

“She or one of her allies may be.”

“If you believe that, why'd you agree to this? Why are we here?”

Sarrlevi spread his palm toward the darkening sky. “Do we not need details on the possible assassination of King Eireth? Unless an opportunity comes up to slip the truth drug into her drink, your plan to snoop has the most merit.”

“You're still not open to forcing it down her throat, huh?” I dug the vial out of my pocket and tilted it back and forth enticingly.

He looked a little wistfully at it but shook his head. “No.”

“Even though you think she's luring you into a trap?”

He hesitated. “It would not be honorable to attack her for a crime she hasn't yet committed.”

“Dude, she had dragons torch your house.”

“As we've discussed—”

“I know, houses aren't as important as mothers.” I huffed out a frustrated breath. There was more to his reluctance than honor and not wanting to be like his father. Maybe they'd known each other long enough—and been together often enough—that he had some residual feelings for her. “You're

still okay with *me* using it on her if I get a chance, right?”

A smile ghosted across his lips. “If the opportunity presents itself, I will not interfere. Just remember—”

“That’s she’s powerful and likes mind magic. I know.” I also remembered that he’d once implied I might have a couple of seconds to take her by surprise if my dwarven blood came through strongly enough that I could resist her mind magic. She had other powers she could bring out, but I might be able to thump her with my hammer before she figured out she needed to switch tactics.

Sarrlevi nodded, his palm still turned upward. Inviting me to refine my plan?

I sighed. “I guess I’ll have to insult her enough that she wants nothing to do with me.”

Of course, Slehvya might then kick me out of her home before they got to the point where Sarrlevi could distract her. I wouldn’t be able to snoop from the beach. Mom hadn’t given me anything that could destroy a barrier around a home. It was *possible* Sorka would be powerful enough to break through, but I wouldn’t bet on it. Besides, Slehvya would sense her home’s barrier failing.

“I believe she will be prepared for that from you.” His slight smile returned. “You tend to insult her even when you *don’t* have a plan.”

“You act like it’s my fault she’s a bitch.”

“No, it is not your fault. I like that you stand up for yourself with her.” He touched my shoulder.

“Well, I’ll insult her a *lot*. I’m not going into her bedroom to *demonstrate* the sex toy for her.” I bent forward and grabbed my knees as the thought of having to join the two of them in some charade of a sexual encounter threatened to give me a panic attack. What if I ended up in a legitimate threesome? With *her*? Shaking my head, I straightened. No, that was *not* going to happen. I wasn’t having sex tonight, and neither was Sarrlevi. “Do you have any ideas, Varlesh?”

“I suppose we will have to play with the ear.”

“Uhm, what?”

“That is not your saying?”

“Oh, you mean play it *by* ear. Like a song on an instrument when you don’t have the sheet music.”

“I thought the saying might refer to rubbing a lover’s ears. As you’ve

noticed, they're sensitive for elves."

"I have noticed, and I'm not touching her ears tonight." I looked toward the ocean and chewed on my lip. "What if we pretend to pick a fight over this situation? In front of her. And then you get mad and tell me to wait on one of her decks like a good mongrel camp follower." I sneered. That had been Slehyra's term for me. Why was it that one always remembered insults and rarely compliments?

"I can tell from your expression that you do not like your own plan."

"No, but that's typical. I'm not the best at plotting and scheming. Maybe we should have asked Tinja for advice. Goblins are practiced schemers."

"That's a certainty."

"Still, you don't think it would work? Us fighting in front of her? She might be petty and *want* me to stick close so I can hear you and her—" I waved my hand, "—you know. What she *thinks* is going to happen tonight."

His lip didn't curl, but he shook his head, not appearing enthused. "I am not a thespian, Mataalii."

I started to nod in agreement, thinking it might be hard to convince Slehyra we were earnestly angry with each other, but then I remembered that Sarrlevi had fooled me before.

"The hell you aren't." I pointed my finger at his nose. "Back on the Olympic Peninsula, you had me convinced the Caretaker had you under his sway, and you were his glazy-eyed minion as you proceeded to kick my ass. I thought I was screwed."

Sarrlevi hesitated again before sighing. "Perhaps it is that I do not *wish* to act like I am fighting with you, even as a ruse, rather than that I am incapable of feigning irritation."

"I don't want to mock-fight with you either, but it's better than a threesome, right?"

"You would be unable to snoop if we were engaged in that," he said as if that was the *only* reason we shouldn't do it. Though I supposed the thought of a guy with two chicks might not be as horrifying and panic-attack-inducing for him as for me. I knew for a fact that he'd had at least one threesome before.

Sarrlevi had to be keeping an eye on my thoughts, but he didn't reply to affirm or deny that. I didn't press him on it.

"An argument between lovers," I said. "In front of her. If that doesn't work, then we'll play with her ears." I managed a smile for his mangled Earth

idiom.

“It is *my* ears that I would prefer you play with.” He brushed my cheek with his fingers and looked glum as he turned back around and the board started moving again.

“Trust me,” I murmured. “I’d rather we were going to do that tonight too.”

The tropical beach with a pale blue moon starting to rise over the sea would have been a romantic spot for an interlude with him. Unfortunately, we had an elven king to save.

SARRLEVI DIDN'T DROP HIS CAMOUFLAGE UNTIL OUR LEVITATING BOARD floated a few feet away from the magical barrier protecting the entire tree in which Slehvya's multi-story home was built. The lowest of several decks was more than fifty feet up. My senses told me Slehvya was home, lounging in what the doors and windows suggested was the fourth of five levels hollowed-out of the massive trunk.

If the elven alchemist Broadleaf's tree home was a model, I could expect one room on each level with stairs that followed the curve of the trunk leading between them. So it wouldn't be a huge home to search.

I touched my hip bag and hoped Slehvya wouldn't think anything odd about a burgeoning enchanter carrying magical trinkets. With luck, she would be more interested in the trinket that *Sarrlevi* carried.

My belly quivered with nerves at the idea of pretending I was into her proposal. Picking a fight with Sarrlevi seemed far more within the realm of my expertise. I hadn't lost my temper with him often, but I was quite practiced in general at losing my temper. Such acting ought to come easily for me.

When I sensed Slehvya walking onto one of the decks, I stepped farther back from Sarrlevi on the board and crossed my arms over my chest. If I arrived looking peeved, a blowup ought to be more believable.

Sarrlevi gazed over his shoulder at me but didn't object, only adopting a sad expression. He didn't like this part of the plan, and I knew it.

I touched my pocket with the truth drug in it and raised my eyebrows, inviting him to change his mind about forcing it down Slehvya's gullet. His

expression grew glummer, and he turned around to look up at the deck.

Slehvyra came into view, resting her hands on a slender railing made from wood. It was the only thing protecting one from a fifty-foot fall to the ground. A vine meandered along the railing, and a few of its large leaves rustled at her presence.

In the moonlight, Slehyra was as beautiful as ever, wearing nothing but slippers and a sheer nightgown that would get any man's motor humming. When she met Sarrlevi's gaze, a flash of triumph glinted in her eyes before she nodded to him and gestured in invitation. With a whisper of her magic, the barrier on that side of the home lowered.

Maybe the triumphant look had been my imagination—it wasn't as if I could see her eyes that well from far below—but either way, I grew certain that Sarrlevi's instincts were right. That Slehyra *had* set a trap for him.

Well, we had a trap of our own planned. I lifted my chin.

Leaves rustled on vines winding around other deck railings. Was there one large plant growing all over the exterior of her home, or multiple, planted to add decoration? Or maybe to add to the defenses?

Slehvyra looked from Sarrlevi to me. She didn't roll her eyes—from what I'd seen, that wasn't a typical elven expression—but she rubbed her fingers and made a flicking motion. Either she'd been saving a booger to throw at me, or that was an elven gesture of disdain. Possibly both.

Under Sarrlevi's guidance, the board rose toward our host. I rubbed the translation charm in my pocket as we levitated over the railing. The board floated to a stop above the deck, Slehyra watching casually, leaning her hand against the railing. Her barrier returned with a buzz of magical energy.

She looked smugly at me. Why, because she thought she had me trapped now? Keeping my mind blank, I hoped she didn't investigate my bag with her senses.

"I assume your invitation remains in place," Sarrlevi told her, eyeing her nightgown, his gaze lingering on her chest.

Since he didn't usually ogle women, at least not in front of me, I knew the play had begun. We were on stage and had to act.

"Of course, Varlesh. You know how much I crave you inside me, enough that I'm willing to share you with your pudgy mongrel fling."

"Better to have curves than be a stick," I snapped before I could control my temper and remind myself that we'd dismissed my plan of insulting her to make her want to ditch me. But I wasn't *pudgy*, damn it.

“A stick?” Slehvya must have had a translation charm of her own activated. “More males than have ever noticed you exist have written poetry filled with longing about my great beauty.”

I hated that her claim was probably true.

“If you wish my participation in this,” Sarrlevi said, gazing coolly at Slehvya, “you will not insult my female.”

“Your *female* insults me every time we meet, with her disdainful eyes as well as her sharp tongue.”

“Tonight, you will not insult her.”

“If she’s respectful of me,” Slehvya said, “I shall attempt to do as you wish. As unappealing as she is, I am curious, I will admit, about what she can do with her magic.”

“As an enchanter, she has many talents.” His hand strayed to the pocket where he had tucked the *vesthi shaylesh*, but he didn’t yet take it out.

“No doubt. I am certain it is not her wit or beauty that has won such loyalty from you, Varlesh.”

“Lady,” I said, “if this is how you *don’t* insult people, you suck at it.”

“You see how she speaks to me,” Slehvya told Varlesh. “A commoner and a mongrel from a wild world should know her place. I am of noble blood, even if I am no longer in line to inherit the elven throne.” Her eyes narrowed, and she whispered, as if to herself instead of him, “For now.”

That reminded me of the importance of our mission. I maintained my stiff I-don’t-want-to-be-here pose while using my senses to investigate her home.

All manner of magical artifacts lay inside on every level, and I worried it would take more time than I’d imagined to search everything. Would the condemning stuff be in an office? Or her bedroom? I realized I should have told Sarrlevi to entice her to use the *vesthi shaylesh* in the living room or the elven equivalent. As distracting as I hoped I’d made it, it would be hard to snoop in the room she was using.

“You can keep yourself in line tonight?” Sarrlevi asked over his shoulder, his face masked.

“In line?”

“Respectful.” He nodded toward Slehvya.

I crossed my arms over my chest again. “I don’t think this is going to work, Sarrlevi.” I used his surname on purpose, hoping to make Slehvya think we weren’t as inseparable—as *fused*—as we were. “I can’t be with her, and I don’t want to see *you* be with her either. She’s a heinous bitch.”

His spine stiffened. “You agreed that you would be willing to do this, that it would be worth it if she could arrange for my exile to be lifted.”

“I agreed that your exile sucks and it would be better for you to be a noble again rather than hated by your people.”

Sarrlevi turned slowly, his face still a mask, a *cold* mask. “You have said that before, that you wish I were a noble rather than an assassin.” His voice grew soft, almost dangerous, and a little chill went through me. He was *definitely* not a bad actor. “Does my title matter that much to you?”

“Your career bites. If the elves took you back, maybe you could do something honorable with your life. My mom doesn’t want me hanging around with the assassin who tried to kill her once.” I didn’t look at Slehvya, not wanting to make it obvious that we were putting on a show and cared about her reaction, but I could feel her watching us.

“I did not think the opinion of the mother you barely know mattered to you.” Sarrlevi stepped closer to me, his face still cold, and lifted a hand. The lack of the usual warmth in his eyes almost made me want to skitter back, but I made myself stay put and meet his gaze. “You know I do not care that you are a mongrel, because you are so gifted with your magic, but do not forget that I could have any female I wish.”

I swallowed, emotions heating my cheeks and flustering me so that I groped for a response. Even though this had been my idea, and I knew he didn’t mean what he said, my body insisted on reacting as if it were real. Maybe because this was playing too close to all my insecurities, and with his face cold like that, it seemed real.

Switching to telepathy, Sarrlevi added, *I brought you tonight so your feelings would not be hurt, but you embarrass me by not respecting me in front of Slehvya.*

At first, the switch confused me, since we needed her to *hear* our argument, but when I glanced at her, I caught a smug smirk on her face. As a powerful mage, she was able to catch our every word, telepathic or not, and maybe Sarrlevi wasn’t as intentionally pinpoint as usual.

“You’re not respecting *me*, dude. You said you want me, not *any female you wish*. And you said you cared about me, not just that my magic makes you hot. I’m sure *she* has plenty of magic she can use to get you hard.”

His lips pressed together, only for an instant before his mask returned. I doubted Slehvya worried much about using her magic for her partner’s pleasure.

She chuckled, watching me and hopefully missing his quick reaction.

I allow you some latitude when we are alone, but you will show proper respect for me when we are in front of others, especially other elves, Sarrlevi continued, his narrowed eyes focused on me. *Especially those who gossip to the entire court.*

I thought you didn't care about what the elven court thinks anymore.

If I am to return to Veleshna Var, their opinions will matter again. I will not have them speak of how I can't control some mongrel female.

“Some mongrel female, dude? You're being an ass. I thought we were past that.”

I am simply realizing that I may have more options ahead of me if this works out.

“So, you've only been screwing me because you couldn't get any elves that weren't bitches?” I thrust a finger toward Slehvya.

Still smirking, she sauntered up to Sarrlevi. Our board settled to the deck so she could wrap an arm around him and rest a hand on his chest.

“See how tedious relationships are, Varlesh, dear?” Slehvya murmured. “So much emotion. And for what? Such a homely creature. Surely, you see that. Your time away from the beauty of our people must have made you forget, but once you're back on Veleshna Var and accepted again, you'll be able to choose from elves, many elves.” She rubbed his chest, nails digging through his shirt. “Or you can simply choose me. Even if relationships are tedious, they can have their uses. Once you regain your nobility, perhaps I'll set aside my husband for you. After all, he's insipid and uninspired compared to you.”

Sarrlevi looked at her. “Do not think I have forgotten that your scheme with the dragons resulted in the destruction of my home.”

Slehvya chuckled. “You will forgive that small grievance if I can arrange for you to have your ancestral lands and your good name back. Come. Leave your female out here and let me remind you why you don't need her magic. I'll even show you a bit of *my* magic.” She slid her hand down his chest to grab his cock.

I tensed, red rage filling me. I wanted nothing more than to spring at her and tear her head off. To strike her with my hammer and send her halfway across the ocean.

Sarrlevi lifted a hand toward me, a promise that he would stop me with his magic if I tried. He shifted his hips toward Slehvya, as if he enjoyed her

fondling.

I struggled to control my fury—and more pained emotions lurking right under it. My idea. This had been my idea.

“Come, Varlesh,” Slehvya repeated, and I sensed magical coercion in her voice as she tried to convince him with more than her touch. She nodded toward an open door framed by two potted plants, their leaves rustling, almost beckoning in invitation. “You do not need her in the future. And you certainly do not need her tonight. I am here for you. As many times as you want me.”

After a moment’s hesitation, Sarrlevi stepped off the board toward her. She shot me the smuggest most triumphant smile I’d ever seen.

“I’m not going to sit out here and *listen* to you two,” I said.

“If your temper cools,” he said, “and your arousal grows, you can still come in and join us.”

Irritation flashed in Slehvya’s eyes, and she opened her mouth, but she must have thought better of denying that possibility. After all, she had him walking into her trap.

“Listening to you two having sex isn’t going to get me excited,” I said, though maybe I shouldn’t have said anything else. He was providing an excuse, a reason for me to stick around rather than her demanding that he send me home.

“It has before.” He lifted his chin, *his* smug smile appearing for the first time. “This time, you needn’t run off to a hammock to pleasure yourself. You can come in and join us.”

I managed to keep my face from showing surprise or denial. Since he’d kept an eye on me that night, he knew very well that I’d fought some awful wild animal that had attacked me before crashing in his hammock. There hadn’t been any *pleasuring*. But I was sure Slehvya didn’t know that.

“Yes,” Slehvya said magnanimously. “She may join us later if she wishes.”

Sarrlevi nodded, as if he’d been waiting for that verification before ditching me, then walked through the open doorway with her. “There is something I wish to share with you.” He touched his pocket again.

This time, she noticed it. “Oh? I’m intrigued.”

Despite her invitation, that door thumped very solidly shut behind her.

I snorted. The windows were still open. Once she was distracted, I could get in that way.

After they disappeared inside, I stepped off the board, patting my hip bag to reassure myself that I had all my spy goodies. Something snagged my ankle, startling me. I hefted my hammer to push aside the board, thinking I'd tripped over it, but a thick green vine had snaked across the deck to ensnare me. A thick green *magical* vine.

It tightened like a boa constrictor, locking me to the deck.

THE VINE WRAPPED AROUND MY ANKLE DIDN'T WORRY ME TOO MUCH SINCE I believed Sorka could pulp it. I'd also successfully lit shrubs on fire with my magic before. Well, Zavryd's prize topiaries, at least. I did, however, wonder if I could escape without drawing Slehvya's attention. Since she had been the one to sic her plant on me, she might sense its death. I wanted her to forget about me, not curse my name for annihilating her botanical guard dogs.

The vine tightened around my ankle.

"You're asking for it now." I waved my hammer menacingly at the plant.

Do you have any ideas, Sorka?

About how to escape?

No, about whether the Mariners are going to make the playoffs this year.

I do not know what that is.

Never mind. I prodded the vine with a tendril of my magic, trying to heat it as I would to work metal. Not only did it not work, but the plant pulsed its elven robustness back at me while flicking a leaf in my direction. *If that was the botanical equivalent of giving me the middle finger, I'm definitely going to pulp it.*

I would not object to pummeling an elven plant.

I'm glad that's not beneath you.

At the moment, the plant is beneath me.

I snorted and lowered my hammer, then considered the door and the room beyond. My senses told me Sarrlevi and Slehvya hadn't gone far. They were just inside, probably on the elven equivalent of a couch. That would make it

easy to search the bedroom anyway.

“Just have to escape first.”

I told myself I ought to dawdle before taking action, wanting Slehvya to grow distracted and forget about me. I couldn't hear her and Sarrlevi, and my senses weren't refined enough to tell if he'd shown her the toy yet. Once he did, would she be intrigued? Or would she cast it aside, forcing *him* to distract her?

Scowling, I tightened my grip on the hammer.

As you know, I am capable of casting lightning magic, Sorka said.

Meaning you can torch this vine?

Electrocute it and likely kill it, yes. Green living foliage rarely goes up in flames.

The vine tightened further. My toes were going numb.

I'm cool with electrocution. I gritted my teeth. *But try to make it subtle.*

We have discussed that dwarven hammers are not known for their subtlety.

Can you at least be more subtle than I would be pounding the snot out of the vine and the deck underneath it?

Perhaps we could choose a moment when the elf female is gazing enraptured at your lover and not out the window.

If you can tell what she's looking at from out here, by all means. I hoped she gazed enraptured at the *vesthi shaylesh*, not Sarrlevi.

After a moment, Sorka said, *Now*, into my mind.

I whispered, “*Hyrek!*” and swung the hammer sideways, attempting to avoid the deck boards as I smashed it into the vine.

Though I connected solidly, the magical plant didn't break, nor did the hammer even take a chunk out of it. Fortunately, the promised lightning streaked out. Sorka wrapped a barrier around me as bolts of energy whipped all along the vine, following it along the railing and to the pot where the plant originated.

I winced, afraid the pot would explode, but the lightning was precise. Leaves blasted into the air, soil flew everywhere, and soon every vine on the deck had been struck. Sizzles rose over the roar of the ocean, and the scent of burning vegetation filled the air. Hopefully, Slehvya's *nose* wasn't pointed toward the window either.

Finally, the vine around my ankle loosened, its green flesh charring as it went limp. Smoke wafted upward.

Nice work. I drew my foot away from the mess.

Yes. Sorka didn't quite cackle with glee, but she sounded smug.

At least somebody was having a good night.

After rotating my foot and wiggling my toes a couple of times to restore circulation, I dug out my charm collection. I rubbed the translation one again, less because I wanted to understand whatever groans of pleasure Slehvya might make and more in case she said something useful regarding the king's assassination. I had my hand on the camouflaging charm when Sorka spoke again.

She will not find it suspicious if you disappear from her awareness?

Sarrlevi can tell her I have a portal generator and went home.

Would she not sense a portal forming?

A feminine moan of delight wafted out of the home.

I rolled my eyes. *Probably not now, no.*

He is not touching her, Sorka said. *She is on one end of the sofa, while he sits on the other end, looking toward a bookcase.*

Good. Maybe he's doing some snooping of his own.

After activating the camouflaging charm, I fished out the spy kit.

Showtime. I took a step toward the door but remembered the other decks. If I used another entrance, I could avoid walking past the writhing Slehvya.

There wasn't much overlap between the deck I was on and the one above, but I was a decent climber and thought I could find a way up to it.

Trying not to make noise, I tossed Sorka and my hip bag up to it before climbing onto a railing, a half-disintegrated vine crumbling at my touch. When I leaned a hand against the tree trunk, a warning buzz came from the bark. I jerked back, afraid it would zap me. If the tree was intelligent and had watched me destroy the plants, it would be pissed.

Perhaps you can climb without touching the tree, Sorka suggested. *Or learn levitation.*

Remind me to ask Mom to show me that.

It is not enchanting magic, but she might know how to do it.

I stretched upward but, even from the railing, was a few feet short of reaching the deck above. With a running jump, I might have been able to catch the edge, but sprinting along a railing fifty feet in the air was a game for elves, not half-dwarves.

I glanced around, seeking another option, and almost laughed when I spotted the magical board resting on the deck. If I could figure out how to fly

that, it would be a far easier way up.

Watch my stuff, I told Sorka as I hopped down and ran to the board.

Watch it do what?

I mean, don't let any vengeful vines fling my bag into the ocean.

Very well.

After stepping onto the board, I willed it to levitate me up to the next level. It didn't budge. Damn, was there a command word? I should have paid more attention to what the gnome had told Sarrlevi.

I don't suppose you know how to fly these, Sorka?

I have never seen one before. Dwarves don't frequent sun-drenched worlds full of towering foliage.

Must be my human blood making me wish we were at a Hilton beach resort and not on this mission. Again, I willed my power to lift the board into the air. When that didn't work, I wiggled my hips, as if it were a snowboard on a slope and only needed a nudge before gravity got it going.

It's gnomish magic, Sorka said.

Yeah, I'm not that familiar with it. Nonetheless, I examined the board with my senses, hoping I could figure out how to make it work.

Another moan came from the home.

Command it to rise with the word, yetendra, Sarrlevi spoke softly into my mind, *and then you can control it with your thoughts.*

Thanks. I blushed at having needed help, but that didn't keep me from whispering the word. *How'd you know what I'm doing? I'm camouflaged, right?* I reached for my pocket, afraid I'd messed up the charm's magic somehow.

You are. Your hammer is not.

I didn't know if that meant Sorka had spoken to him or he'd sensed her up there by herself and guessed at my problem. *Thanks for watching out for me.*

Always.

That warmed me even if little else about the situation did.

Another moan drifted out, Slehyvra too busy to notice our telepathy this time. I steered the board to the upper deck.

With a hint of amusement in his telepathic words, Sarrlevi added, *Your toy is apparently very intriguing and effective. How did you learn to craft such a thing?*

My mother shared the schematics.

*She is an unexpectedly versatile and worldly princess.
You don't know the half of it.*

Once I reached the upper deck, I hopped off the board and found a closed door. It was locked, but the window beside it was open, the shutters ajar.

After checking for magical defenses or booby traps that I might trigger, I thrust my bag and my hammer inside and shimmied through. It was a tight fit, and I had to turn sideways and suck everything in.

I landed on a desk, accidentally knocking papers to the floor as something jabbed me in the butt. An inkwell with a sturdy metal-feathered quill sticking out of it. At least no alarms went off. Maybe Slehvya assumed her magical barrier was deterrent enough.

Stairs led to the living room below, and I didn't think there was a door, so I did my best not to make more noise. As soon as I dropped to the floor, I rubbed the trinket that Mom had said would let me read other languages. My mind itched, and the words on the papers scrambled before my eyes and turned into English.

I grimaced at what looked like nothing more than date books, the Elven equivalent of crossword puzzles, and the same kinds of receipts that I thrust at my bookkeeper every month. I skimmed through the date book, hoping for a circled entry that read *meeting to plan king's assassination* but only found such inane notes as *dress fitting* and *lunch with Asthidor*. Her husband? Or some other lover?

Trying not to feel the pressure of time passing—once Slehvya finished with the toy, she might turn to Sarrlevi—I poked into the desk drawers, then skimmed titles on bookcases. A few magical doodads perched around the room, including on floating nightstands next to a large hanging bed, the feminine version of the one Sarrlevi had. It was made with a lavender-and-purple-colored quilt stretched under a fluffy white animal fur.

None of the magical devices looked like a communications device that could hold recorded messages. I peeked behind a divider but found only bathroom furniture similar to what Sarrlevi's old house had held.

Reminded that there were at least three other rooms in the home, I was on the verge of making myself descend through the living room to check them when I remembered the trinket that would allow me to find secret nooks. I pressed an indentation on it, felt a buzz of magic, and peered around. How it would indicate that something was hidden, I didn't know. I also didn't know if it could only find nooks that were *magically* hidden. Would clever

carpentry elude it?

This time, the scratchy feeling came to my eyes, as if the charm's magic was altering how I saw. Soon, a soft blue light pulsed around a landscape painting hanging from a wall by the stairs.

"There we go," I breathed.

A cry three times louder than the previous groans came from below, followed by a breathless, "Oh, Varlesh!"

I rolled my eyes so far back in my head that I almost pitched over, but that didn't keep me from hurrying to the painting.

"It's *wonderful*," Slehvya added.

"Yes," Sarrlevi said with calm indifference.

Their voices floated clearly up the stairs. There *definitely* wasn't a door between levels.

Shoving the frame aside revealed what had to be a vault door, though it looked more like the squashed top of a giant acorn. When I tried to shove *it* aside, it didn't move.

"Varlesh," Slehvya said again, "I did appreciate your gift, but you haven't even touched me. Come closer. I want to make sure you also enjoy tonight. I also wish you to do me a small favor first."

Favor? I squinted suspiciously toward the stairs. Sarrlevi's earlier words that this might be a trap thundered back into my mind.

"What?" he asked, his voice neutral.

"Kiss me. You never have before."

The alarm bells in my mind went off. Unless she made that request of him every time, it was suspicious. He would see that, right?

"I have not," he said.

"Do it this time. For us. For the future. For your return to Veleshna Var and the nobility."

Don't do it, Varlesh, I risked saying telepathically, though I worried she wasn't distracted enough to miss words whispering past her now. Doing my best to make them pinpoint so only he would hear, I added, *She could have something on her lips. Like Barothla and the fingernail paint.*

A long pause followed as Sarrlevi neither answered me nor Slehvya—at least not with words. What if he hadn't heard me? Or she'd succeeded in magically compelling him to obey?

I barely resisted the urge to heft Sorka and race down the stairs to halt any lip touching that might be going on.

“Have you kissed *her*?” Slehvya demanded, her tone twenty degrees colder.

I’d taken two steps toward the stairs without realizing it, but I froze. Sarrlevi had to be hesitating, and that was why she was getting pissed.

“I do not kiss those I engage in recreational sex with,” he said.

“What does *that* mean?” Slehvya demanded.

Oh, hell, he should have lied.

“Does your mongrel fall into that category or not?” she asked. “Your mongrel who threw a fit and didn’t acknowledge the *honor* that I was granting her to be with us.”

More like the honor of having my ankle crushed by her plant on the deck.

I willed Sarrlevi to get Slehvya thinking about something else so she wouldn’t think to check on me, but I dared not reach out to him again. She sounded like she was on high alert now.

The painting, Sorka reminded me.

Right. I scooted back to it, removed the frame from the wall, and tried to push, pull, and turn the acorn-door. Again, it didn’t budge.

“Where did she go?” Slehvya demanded.

Uh oh. *Any idea how to open this, Sorka?*

The hammer shared an image with me of her smashing into the acorn.

Let’s consider that Plan B, I said.

Though if Slehvya started hunting for me, we would have to throw Plan A out the window.

“She has a device to create portals now,” Sarrlevi said. “She was uninterested in waiting and left.”

Yes. Good. That was the story I’d wanted him to give. Would Slehvya buy it?

Trying to focus on the acorn, I probed it with my senses. It was made from a sturdy plant material, but I sensed metal on the other side. Hinges? I sent my power into them, trying to use my magic to corrode them, as I’d learned to do before.

“Varlesh Sarrlevi, you are lying to me.” Slehvya sounded like she’d stood up and moved from the couch.

“Have you not been lying to *me*? I know I have some talents in the bedroom but can’t believe they’re so great that you would have allowed yourself to include a female you dislike in your sex play.”

“Dislike? I loathe that rude mongrel bitch.”

“The feeling is mutual,” I muttered.

The acorn door shifted slightly as the hinges started to give way. I would have tried to wrench it off the wall but feared the noise.

Slehvyra didn't yet know where I was. I would like to keep it that way.

“I will take my leave of you, Slehvya,” Sarrlevi said stiffly.

“Actually, since you're unwilling to cooperate, you won't.” Slehvya raised her voice, “Get him!”

My mouth dropped. Who else was here?

A door banged open, and footsteps pounded into the room below, accompanied by the rasp of swords being drawn. Abruptly, I sensed six elves with strong auras, six elves who must have all been camouflaged and hiding while Slehvya had been enjoying herself on the sofa.

“Shit,” I whispered.

THE CLANG OF SWORDS MEETING RANG OUT IN THE ROOM BELOW. I ALMOST sprinted down the stairs to help Sarrlevi, but I hadn't *found* anything yet.

Hoping he could hold off the elves attacking him for a few minutes, I gripped the acorn door with both hands and tugged, willing the weakened hinges to give.

He faces strong opponents, Sorka told me.

I'm aware. I could sense them in the room—and Slehvya too. She'd moved toward the door. To look for me? Or was she thinking of fleeing?

The rapid-fire clangs moved around the living room, accompanied by grunts, thuds, and thumps. As I strained at the vault door, I imagined Sarrlevi leaping over furniture and swinging from chandeliers in a Hollywood version of a sword fight. A blast of magic surged below, and something slammed into a wall. A person? A table? I couldn't tell.

Finally, with the loud wrenching of metal I'd feared, the acorn door ripped free from the wall. I threw it across the room like a frisbee, hardly caring when it crashed into an artifact and knocked it to the floor. With all the noise below, I doubted anyone would hear me up here.

A single case rested inside the hidden vault, mother-of-pearl sides sheening in the light. It was magical but didn't otherwise appear that impressive.

"This better not be her jewelry collection." I grabbed the case, but it zapped me, sending a painful buzz up my arm.

The temper I'd barely restrained all evening surged, and I hurled it across the room. The case smashed into a wall and broke satisfyingly, pieces of

magical mother-of-pearl flying everywhere.

Grabbing my hammer, I almost smashed a few more things on my way over to investigate the contents, but a small golden plate had tumbled out. It looked like a small version of a communications device, and I rushed toward it.

A masculine bellow of pain came from below, only to be halted abruptly. It wasn't Sarrlevi's voice, so I didn't worry that much—until it crossed my mind that he might be slaying innocent elven citizens. What if Slehvya had been able to talk them into helping catch Sarrlevi, because they believed he was in the middle of masterminding an assassination of their king? If that was the case, and he killed the elves, things would get worse for him.

Dropping down and ignoring shards from the broken case grinding into my knees, I rubbed the dish and willed it to play whatever messages were stored inside.

“Please don't be password protected,” I whispered.

As the sounds of battle continued below, I swept out with my senses, checking to make sure Slehvya wasn't escaping. The auras of only four elven warriors remained with Sarrlevi. Because the other two were dead? Slehvya remained near the doorway.

A *twang* sounded, like a crossbow quarrel firing. Was that Slehvya? Trying to *shoot* Sarrlevi while he battled her allies?

I released the plate and surged to my feet, about to run down and strangle her with my bare hands, but when the device clattered to the floor, the image of a handsome silver-haired elven male appeared in the air above it. I snatched the plate back up. The elf started speaking, and I leaned close, barely able to hear over the cacophony from below.

Another *twang* rang out, but I gritted my teeth and focused on the speaker. I still sensed Sarrlevi's aura and had to trust that his barrier was up and he could defend himself from her.

“Slehvya,” the elf said coolly, “once you've rendered the assassin unconscious, bring him to the outskirts of the arena. We'll give him a headier draught to make sure he stays unconscious for longer, and then I will beat him—” a glint of enthusiasm entered his eyes at the words, “—so it looks like he received wounds while escaping after the assassination.”

Arena? What arena? Where?

“I will ensure it looks convincing,” the elf said, that glint still in his eyes. This guy definitely looked forward to beating up Sarrlevi. It had to be some

enemy of his. “And, as promised, you will not be blamed for anything. When you bid for power, there will be no taint on your hands.” He said it with a sneer and ended the communication.

Another *twang* came from below, followed by a grunt and a curse. That was Sarrlevi.

Had Slehvya struck him?

Furious, I jammed the device into my pocket so we could listen to the message again later and hopefully learn more. Now, Sarrlevi needed my help.

Before I’d taken two steps toward the stairs, I sensed Slehvya moving from the doorway and out onto the deck. To run?

I whirled and raced for the window, knocking papers flying as I scrambled out the way I’d come in. When I landed on the deck, I was in time to see our board float over the railing. Slehvya’s magic guided it toward the lower deck. She *was* trying to escape.

“The hell you are.” I ran, vaulted the railing, and jumped.

Slehvya’s eyes widened in surprise. She stood by the railing of the lower deck, the board almost to her. Recovering from her surprise, she wrapped a protective barrier around herself.

As soon as I landed, I charged at her, determined to tear that barrier—and maybe her—to shreds.

Without waiting for the command, Sorka raised her barrier around me. When I was three steps from Slehvya, my hammer raised to swing, sharp pain lanced into my mind.

I gasped, stumbling to a stop as my back went rigid. It was as if someone had driven a spear through my skull.

A determined roar came from inside—Sarrlevi—and someone screamed in pain.

After a quick glance in that direction, Slehvya leaped onto the board. The pain continued, but I roared myself and fought through it, taking one step and then another toward her. Though I couldn’t concentrate on drawing upon my own magic, I managed to swing Sorka with all my strength.

She flared silver-blue as she struck and pierced Slehvya’s barrier. The assault on my mind halted.

Slehvya didn’t have a weapon with which to parry, but she lifted her hands and blasted me with pure energy. The force knocked me back before I could connect with her.

Judging by her sneer, she wanted me to fly all the way to the ocean. The

power *did* throw me back a few steps, but I envisioned myself having the weight of an anvil, and the force lessened.

The board turned toward the railing and lifted high enough to fly over it.

“No, you don’t.” I hurled Sorka at Slehvya.

One way or another, I had to keep her from leaving. We had to question her. Even if Sarrlevi knew who’d sent that message, it hadn’t mentioned the king by name and might not be the proof we needed.

But Slehvya anticipated my blow. She’d not only repaired the hole in her barrier but reinforced it. My hammer bounced back, returning to my hands.

Despite my distractions, the board carried Slehvya over the railing. Her power blasted at me again, and I staggered back.

Though I focused and willed the wall of energy to part for me, Slehvya attacked my mind again too. The pain returned with so much force that it almost brought me to my knees.

Abruptly, as she sailed away from the house, I realized I might have better luck attacking—or manipulating—the board. Panting as the pain continued, I raked my senses over it, wishing I’d taken a closer look earlier.

Though the gnomish magic wasn’t familiar, it wasn’t as complex as what had operated the stasis chambers. It reminded me of the dwarven air bikes I’d once manipulated. One enchantment started and stopped its motion, another powered the saws, and another lifted it up and down.

There wasn’t time to figure out how to break things, but might I be able to override Slehvya’s commands? I tried but couldn’t manipulate anything through her barrier.

“One more time, Sorka. Everything you’ve got.” I hurled the hammer at Slehvya, willing her to have to focus on defending herself.

Sorka drew upon my power to add to hers and blasted through the barrier. Instinctively, Slehvya raised her hands and ducked. While she was busy doing that, I poured my enchanting magic into the board, trying to make it extra sensitive to my commands.

Come back, I whispered telepathically to it.

With a burst of her power, Slehvya did something to keep Sorka from reaching her. She even tried to grab the haft.

But the hammer flew out of her reach and back toward me. The board *also* flew toward me.

Yes, I crooned to it. *Come back up here. Sarrlevi paid for your use, not her.*

As the board carried Slehvya back over the railing, she snarled and blasted me with another magical attack, but not before Sorka returned to my grip. Slehvya's choice to attack instead of repairing her barrier left her vulnerable. While I willed a brick wall to form around my mind and protect it from pain, I hurled the hammer again.

This time, Sorka slammed into Slehvya's shoulder, knocking her off the board. She screeched in pain, her attack halting as she hit the deck and tumbled away without a hint of elven elegance.

I leaped over the board to charge after her. Sorka returned to my grip, and the angry urge to smash my hammer into Slehvya's head nearly overtook me. Instead, I threw myself on her like a sumo wrestler. Her head clunked against the deck, hair falling across her face.

Without relinquishing my grip on Sorka, I used my weight to pin Slehvya while fishing in my pocket for the vial that held the truth drug. She struggled to buck me off her, but she was gasping in pain and couldn't summon her magic. She didn't seem to have any experience getting out of holds, so I managed to keep her pinned while I thumbed the cap off the vial.

I had to set Sorka down to grip her mouth, so I flattened the hammer against Slehvya's chest and knelt on it. When she cursed my brutish mongrel heritage, I was tempted to flatten it against her *throat*, but then she wouldn't be able to swallow.

Gripping her mouth, I forced the liquid inside. Startled, she choked some down right away, but when she realized what I was doing, she fought me, trying to spit it out. I flattened my hand over her mouth.

"It's a truth drug," I told her. "Not poison."

Fewer people than one might expect found that comforting. Slehvya sank her teeth into my palm. Wincing, I kept my hand over her mouth and blocked her nostrils. This always made me feel like a bully, but if she'd been setting Sarrlevi up to be blamed for the king's death, she deserved this. What a bitch. What had he ever done to her? Except refuse her once.

"Drink the rest, and I'll let you breathe."

Sarrlevi walked out on the deck and toward us. I still sensed the auras of four of his attackers inside, but they weren't moving. The other two had to be dead. Once again, I hoped they hadn't been innocent elven citizens lured to this fate by lies.

Eyes enraged, Slehvya finally choked down the rest of the liquid as she struggled for air. I released her and backed away but not far. If she escaped,

we wouldn't learn anything.

Limping and with blood streaming from a cut on his jaw, Sarrlevi stepped up beside me. Had a sword caused that wound? Or one of the crossbow quarrels?

Slehvyra staggered to her feet while gripping the shoulder that Sorka had struck.

"Did you see her attack me, Varlesh?" Slehvyra demanded.

"No," he said flatly, "but I saw one of the quarrels you kept firing at me hit one of your own people and drop him. Was it poisoned?"

"No. I wouldn't do that to you. It's a tranquilizer. That's all." Slehvyra glanced toward the empty air beyond her tree home.

I looked but didn't see or sense anything in that direction.

"I felt threatened when you wouldn't kiss me," she added.

"When have I ever threatened you?" he asked coolly.

"*She* has." Slehvyra tried to point me out but her shoulder must have hurt too much for she jerked her hand back to it. "She wants me dead. She has no respect for her superiors."

"Who sent you a message and told you to knock out Sarrlevi?" I asked. "And where's the arena where you were supposed to dump his body after tranquilizing him?"

Slehvyra glanced toward the empty sky again and didn't answer.

When Sarrlevi looked at me, I tapped the communications device in my pocket and summarized the brief message.

"I may recognize the sender when I watch it," he said, "but the drug should take effect soon."

Slehvyra pressed her lips together, as if to deny his words.

A rare hint of impatience bunched Sarrlevi's muscles, and he strode toward her, hiding the limp. He pointed his sword at her throat. "Where is this arena, and who ordered you to take me there? Why are you so determined to see me destroyed, Slehvyra?" Irritation flashed in his eyes. "Have I not dealt honorably with you over the years? Why?"

Slehvyra sneered and glanced at me, but what she said was, "The powers are finally shifting back, and I want what I lost. Don't be so full of yourself, Varlesh. This isn't about you."

"You only wish to cast the blame on me because it's convenient?"

"So it won't be cast on *us*." Slehvyra waved at her chest before remembering her injured shoulder, and winced and cursed as she gripped it

again.

“Who sent the message?” I asked. “And who is the assassin’s target?”

“Asthidor,” Slehvya bit out.

Sarrlevi’s eyebrows flew up. “You’re taking orders from your husband? To kill Eireth?”

“To restore my family’s power and our rightful place as rulers of the elven people.”

“Where is the arena?” Sarrlevi repeated. “And when is the meeting? And the assassination? It must be soon if your allies were going to keep me unconscious until it.”

Belatedly realizing I should be recording this, I fished in my pocket for my phone. We still needed her to confess that they were targeting Eireth.

But before Slehvya answered, magic flared in the air, in the direction she’d kept glancing. A portal forming. It was inside the barrier, so it had to be an ally with permission to come here. An ally she’d been expecting.

Sarrlevi tensed, keeping one sword toward Slehvya but pointing the other at the glowing portal that soon hung in the air, emanating elven power.

“The people who are supposed to collect your unconscious body?” I guessed, eyeing Sarrlevi’s wounds and not wanting him to have to fight again, especially not if these were the elves who would end up in charge of his home world if their plot succeeded. What would happen to his mother if that happened?

Sarrlevi started to reply, but a second portal formed, this one outside the home’s barrier. It pulsed with dragon magic. Hell.

He swore and leaped on the board, waving for me to join him.

Though I hated to leave Slehvya, especially when we hadn’t gotten a real confession out of her, I jumped on after him. We were about to be outnumbered.

It crossed my mind to grab Slehvya and take her with us, but she’d recovered enough to use her magic. She backed away from us and wrapped a powerful barrier around herself.

As the board flew us over the railing, Sarrlevi camouflaged us. In case it helped, I also rubbed my camouflaging charm.

Numerous elves in magical armor and carrying swords and bows leaped out of the portal, levitating in the air. The auras of some of them were quite powerful, and one carried a staff and wore a robe instead of armor. A pure mage?

The other portal spat a silver dragon into the night, its powerful aura dwarfing those of the elves.

Our board halted a few yards from the barrier, and, with a sinking feeling, I realized we might be trapped. Could Sarrlevi form a portal from inside her barrier, or could only Slehvya's allies do that?

He wrapped an arm around me as we hovered in the air, several elves surging around Slehvya and asking her where Sarrlevi was and what had happened. I leaned against him, but my hand stayed tight on the haft of my hammer. We might yet have to fight to get out of here.

Ignoring the newcomer elves, Slehvya called to the dragon. "I must speak to my relatives and your clan queen, Lord Gamezlar."

The barrier around the house lowered. Instead of replying, the dragon levitated Slehvya toward him.

Sarrlevi used the opportunity to move our board farther from the tree house so we would be outside the barrier when it formed again. He could have whisked us off into the jungle, but he waited to see what else would happen.

Slehvya landed on the dragon's back. Unfortunately, she didn't say anything else, not aloud. The dragon created another portal.

Do you recognize him? I asked Sarrlevi.

He's a Silverclaw dragon.

That clan opposes the Stormforges, Zavryd's clan, right?

Yes. They've been trying for a long time to take power from the Stormforge queen. They may have made a deal with the elves planning this insurrection.

They help the elves, and when the elves take charge of their world, they help the dragons take charge of theirs?

Perhaps.

The dragon Gamezlar flew through the portal with Slehvya, and it winked out. The elves carried their dead and injured out of the house, and one created another portal. A few peered into the night while they gripped their weapons—someone must have told them about Sarrlevi. But maybe they assumed he'd gotten away or that they wouldn't find him, because they soon left through the portal, leaving us alone with the tree house and the rumble of the ocean.

Another minute, and we could have learned more. Sarrlevi sighed. I should have drugged her from the start instead of playing games.

We may have gotten enough. If we can figure out where the arena is and show up before anything happens, we might be able to stop the assassination. Freysha said the king had a meeting coming up, right? It must be near or in this arena. Too bad Freysha didn't know where it is. She said an undisclosed location. Unfortunately, as far as Sarrlevi and I were concerned, it was still undisclosed.

Yes, it's possible they'll target him when he's off-world and not as well protected as in his palace. Presumably Eireth will know where his meeting is.

Then maybe we just have to get a warning to him before he goes. I can show him the recording. I wished I'd gotten a recording of our questioning of Slehvyra, though I didn't know if the elves would have accepted that as proof. How much stock would they put in Earth technogadgetry? Maybe it'll be enough, I added.

Perhaps. Sarrlevi gazed down at me, his arm around my shoulders. I am still not certain our ruse was worth it. Are you all right?

I almost lodged an inkwell up my butt, and she stabbed my brain a few dozen times with her power. Other than that, I'm dandy.

It took me a moment to realize he was referring to our mock fight and maybe also his *distracting* of Slehvyra. Even if the toy had done most of the work, he'd probably had to flirt with her, and he'd sat on the couch while she pleased herself. He might think I'd been bothered by that. I hadn't *liked* it, but it had been my idea. It didn't bother me nearly as much as if they'd had sex.

Yeah, I'm okay. Are you okay? I touched his ripped sleeve and brushed my fingers along his jaw near the wound, though I didn't refer to his physical injuries. He'd been worried about hurting me, but how much did things like this hurt him?

Yes, he replied. As long as you'll forgive me for calling you a mongrel.

I thought about pointing out that he'd been calling me that since we met, but it had been a long time since he'd said it to be dismissive or aloof. He hadn't even teased me with it for quite some time.

Of course. It would be illogical if I told you to pick a fight with me and then got angry about it.

Emotions aren't always logical.

True, and it *had* been hard to completely set aside my emotions during that moment. He must have sensed that.

They're not, I agreed. Maybe in the future, we— I shouldn't suggest that

we use your masculine allure as a means to an end when it comes to enemies.

I do not blame you for thinking of that when I myself have done it, but I do believe we can use our other skills in the future to gather information.

Sarrlevi managed a smile. *Your enchanting skills are coming along nicely.*

I blushed. *I guess I'm my mother's daughter.*

Indeed.

I pulled out the communications device and held it up. *There may be more useful stuff on this. We better show it to Freysha and hope she can warn her father before he heads off to that meeting.*

Agreed.

Before leaving, we did a quick search of the house, but we didn't find anything else useful. Sarrlevi opened a portal of his own so we could return to Earth.

I hoped Freysha was still in Green Lake but worried she and Val wouldn't be back yet. And if Zavryd wasn't home either, how would we get a message to the king on the elven home world?

WHEN WE RETURNED TO GREEN LAKE, SARRLEVI'S PORTAL DROPPING US IN the front yard of my house, I didn't sense Val, Freysha, or Zavryd. Dimitri and Zoltan were in their house, as night had also fallen here, but neither could help us get a message to the elven home world. Mom and the dwarves were also gone, and if Dad had come by, I'd missed him.

A familiar but not expected SUV was parked out front.

"Penina?" I hadn't yet put timers on the outdoor lights, so she stood in the dark on my porch.

She must have seen the glow of the portal and our arrival, but witnessing magic—and people poofing into existence in the yard—wasn't a typical experience for her, so she was gaping at us. I sensed Tinja inside the house—in the kitchen, probably seeing if the dwarves had left anything to eat—so my sister must not have knocked yet.

"Let me see what Penina wants while you..." I held out my palm, not certain *what* Sarrlevi should do.

He could make a portal to Veleshna Var, but the elves would shoot him on sight. Especially now. Freysha couldn't be the only one who'd heard the details of the female assassin's accusations about him.

"Brainstorm," I finished and pointed to a driftwood log that Tinja had found and suggested I craft into a bench.

"That means... to plot and scheme?"

"To come up with a bunch of ideas that could solve one's problems. They can be schemy if you want."

We were probably going to need schemy if Val or Zavryd didn't return.

“Hm.”

“Hey, Penina.” I climbed the stairs to join her, pausing to open the door, lean inside, and flick on the porch light. “Do you want to come in, or...” I noticed a foil-wrapped pan in her hands. “You’re not delivering more desserts from Grandma, are you?”

“No. I made these for a school event and had some left over.” Penina lifted the pan. “Lemon bars.”

“Oh, those are good.” I’d had her recipe before.

“Yeah. I felt guilty about foisting the peanut brittle on you.”

“So you drove all the way down here to deliver those?” I studied her face, wondering if something was bothering her, especially since this was the second time this week she’d delivered desserts.

“Well, you weren’t here the *last* time I came by.”

“You should text to make an appointment. I’m a busy lady, you know.” I held up my phone.

“You hammer things for a living and have never been in an office or a meeting in your life. I doubt you have anything in your calendar.”

“Sure, I do.” I opened the app to show her. “Pick up new windows.” I eyed the entry. “Crap, is that tomorrow?”

“Here.” Penina thrust the pan at me. “I want you to have them. And your, uh, friend.” She looked toward Sarrlevi.

He hadn’t opted to sit on the log but waited at the base of the porch steps, gazing into the darkness around the neighborhood like a bodyguard on alert.

“Varlesh Sarrlevi.” I opened the door and put the lemon bars and my belongings in the living room, next to a few bags of candy I’d purchased for Halloween. “You’ve met him. Numerous times.”

“I know.” Penina didn’t step inside but moved to sit on the porch swing. With Halloween approaching, it wasn’t that warm at night, and I questioned the choice but joined her.

“Everything okay?”

“I actually came to ask you about our father.”

“I know he’d like to see you more. And Josh and Jessie.”

Penina winced.

“Are you mad at him?” I asked, then remembered Dad had already told me about her objections to him.

“No, but... he’s a wanted felon. I can’t let him hang out at the house.”

“Sarrlevi is wanted by the authorities too, but I let him hang out all the

time.” I smiled to let her know it was a joke. Oh, it was true, but Sarrlevi spent more time camouflaged than a chameleon. The police wouldn’t likely glimpse him at any point much less find him.

“That’s because you’re—” Penina cut herself off from saying *stupid* or something like that and switched to, “You don’t have kids to worry about. Matti, I can’t let him be caught at our house. He’s a *criminal*. The law would think I’m aiding and abetting him.”

“To do what? Eat lemon bars?”

She gave me an exasperated look.

“He’s not going to commit any crimes. He hasn’t *ever* committed any, as far as I’m concerned. He was defending Mom and protecting us that night. And the Army only arrested him because that organization leaned on them and insisted. I told you the whole story after we found him.” *Them*, I’d almost said, but my dwarven mother wasn’t Penina’s mom, and my half-sister wouldn’t care that much about her existence. But Dad... Penina should care about him. “You believed me, didn’t you?”

She’d listened when I relayed the story, sharing everything I’d learned, but she hadn’t given a lot of input, and I hadn’t pushed. It had only recently been that she’d come to accept that magic and magical beings existed. The thought that my mother could have been so important to that organization’s schemes that they’d kept her imprisoned and Dad in jail for all those years had to puzzle her.

“I can’t have him around the kids as long as he’s considered a criminal,” was all Penina said. “It’s not that I don’t want to see him and get to know him again. It’s just... hard.”

“Grandma and Grandpa aren’t worrying about it.”

“Grandma and Grandpa are eighty-five. Nobody’s going to arrest them for anything.”

“Except maybe weaponizing baked goods.”

Penina snorted at that, then pushed the swing into motion. “I guess I don’t get why he’s *still* considered a criminal if everything has been resolved.” She looked at me. “It has been, hasn’t it?”

“Well, the organization’s plan was thwarted, and Dad and my mother are out of their clutches, but some things are still up in the air.” Not wanting to give her more reasons to worry, I didn’t mention the assassins. “I’m working on resolving everything. I’m hoping it’ll be possible to get Dad’s name cleared.”

How, I still didn't know. Willard couldn't do anything. And I was already on a mission to get *Sarrlevi's* name cleared. Why did the world—the entire Cosmic Realms—insist on harassing everyone I cared about?

Penina sighed with longing. “I wish that would be possible. Right now, I can't risk my family by hanging around with him.”

“He hasn't been pressuring you about it, has he?” I'd thought Dad understood.

“No. He came by a couple of times to see us, but when I explained how I felt... I think he got it. But he looked hurt. And I felt like an ass. He's old now. I don't know how much time he'll have to... that we'll have to be together as a family.”

“He's not *that* old,” I said and almost mentioned that Mom still considered him her noble soldier if not her virile stud, but Penina wouldn't want to hear about Dad's sex life. “We've got time. We'll figure something out.”

We'd never been much for hugging, but I patted her on the shoulder.

Sensing that *Sarrlevi* had come closer, I looked at him.

He stood beside the porch, his hands clasped behind his back. “I must go to *Veleshna Var* and attempt to warn the king. I am certain he won't accept an audience from me, but perhaps if I relay the message through my mother, *she* would be able to reach him.”

“Wouldn't that put her at risk? If they think she's helping you and that you're intent on assassinating the king...”

“What are you talking about?” Penina asked. “King of where?”

“The elven home world,” I said.

That left her speechless.

“I must try, regardless,” *Sarrlevi* said. “Perhaps if I attempt to warn him, he will not put himself in a position where the assassination will be possible.”

“Why don't you send me, and I'll deliver the message?”

“Then I would be putting *you* at risk.”

“Nah.” I waved a dismissive hand. “The elves love me.”

“When we have traveled together to visit elves, I have not observed them directing adoration toward you.”

“That's only because you weren't paying attention. I fixed a leak for that alchemist *Broadleaf*. She felt so grateful that she didn't have me killed when I tried to protect you from the guards. She only ordered me kicked off your world.”

“I’m beginning to think our father isn’t the *only* one I shouldn’t be hanging around with,” Penina murmured.

“But you’re coming to my barbecue, right? Did I tell you about it? And I can still come to brunch next Sunday, right?”

“Grandma did, I will, and don’t bring any trouble with you if you come to my house.” Penina stood and headed for the steps, talk of assassinations apparently convincing her it was time to bail.

“How about my famous four-cheese frittata?”

“I’ll allow that.” Penina waved to me, gave Sarrlevi a wide berth, and headed for her SUV.

As she got in, the headlights of another vehicle appeared, a dark limousine driving slowly down the street.

“Now what?” I muttered, sensing two goblins inside among numerous orcs. Vintok and was that The Wrench himself? Making a house call?

“Matti,” came a whisper from the living-room window. The curtain shifted enough to reveal green goblin lips and a nose.

“Yes, Tinja?” I’d been about to go meet the limo but paused, reminded of The Wrench’s interest in my roommate. Had he reached out to her about house plans? Or... anything else?

“That’s Mikki the Wrench.”

“I know. He wants to buy some house plans from you. Did he get in touch?”

“One of his minions filled out my form, but I did not respond. One does not get involved with The Wrench. As I told you before, he has a reputation of making people disappear!”

“Goblin people too?”

“I am not certain even goblins are safe from him. *You* are not safe.”

“Oh, I know that, but I made a deal with him.”

Sarrlevi had camouflaged himself and was probably watching from the shadows as the orc bodyguards got out, then held the doors for Vintok and The Wrench.

“A *deal*?” Tinja’s voice went up an octave, which was impressive since it was already on the squeaky side.

“He wants me to build twenty tiny homes, using your plans. He said he’d buy some customized versions from you.”

“*Twenty*? You balked at building even one and only agreed because of our deep and lasting friendship.”

“And because you successfully manipulated me from your deathbed.”

“I am certain The Wrench is not dying. He is more likely to cause *others* to die.”

Unfortunately, I couldn't argue with that.

“He must be paying you very vast sums of money,” Tinja said.

“He offered me a chest of gold, but I said I'd do it for a favor instead. A big favor.” One I didn't know if he could pull off. Maybe he had come to let me know he couldn't and that I would have to settle for the gold.

“A favor? Whatever favor he would do would involve his underworld connections and *crime*, Matti.”

“Criminal methods may be the only way to make an impression on those who want me dead.”

The Wrench adjusted his suit as he stood on the sidewalk and faced the house, his gaze traveling from the enchanted booby traps to the magical wards. He lifted a hand to me, nodded toward the window where only Tinja's lips were visible, then looked at a particular point on the lawn near the bushes.

“Lord Elf.” The Wrench held up a folded piece of paper. “I have something for you.”

Sarrlevi let his camouflage drop—he stood exactly where our visitor had been looking—and strode toward the goblins. Did The Wrench have a magical trinket that allowed him to see hidden people?

The bodyguards twitched, some reaching for weapons. *They* must not have had a means to see through Sarrlevi's camouflage. He watched their movements but didn't appear that worried.

Without saying *what* he'd brought, The Wrench held the paper out toward Sarrlevi. He accepted it, unfolded it, skimmed the contents, and tucked it in his pocket.

He and The Wrench looked at each other, occasionally nodding, and I realized they were having a telepathic conversation.

“What are they talking about?” Tinja whispered.

“I don't know,” I said, “but I hope he isn't trying to hire Sarrlevi again.”

“Hire him? To do what?”

“DJ his next birthday party.”

“Matti, you are being sarcastic with me.”

I sighed. “I know. There's only one thing Sarrlevi can be hired to do.”

“*Kill* people?” There was that squeak to her voice again. “Matti, it is as I

said. It is *not* healthy to deal with such a person. I will not allow him to use my plans to build homes, even magnificent tiny homes that would be a benefit to the world.”

“What if they would benefit a clan of goblins outside of Arlington?” I kept my eyes on Sarrlevi and The Wrench as we traded whispers, trying to guess if they were indeed discussing assassinations.

Willard’s admonitions came to mind. If she hadn’t been happy about the death of one of those organization members, she would be even more irked if more of them were beheaded in their homes.

“How would tiny homes for The Wrench benefit goblins?” Tinja asked. “What does he want to do with them?”

“Give them to rural goblins living on a now-dead enemy’s forest lands up north so they’ll have real homes, not huts made from recycled junk. He wants me to enchant them to be camouflaged from bad guys.”

Tinja paused to consider that.

Sarrlevi bowed to The Wrench and stepped back onto the lawn.

“He truly wishes to do that?” Tinja asked skeptically. “What *price* will he charge the goblins to live in the tiny homes?”

“The guy offered me a chest of gold. I doubt he needs money.”

“Businesspeople *always* want to make money on deals. That is how they gain their wealth.”

“I’m not sure *deals* are the only way The Wrench makes money,” I muttered.

“I will speak with Gondo to see if he has information on these northern goblins. The Wrench could be lying to you.”

“I have no doubt.”

The Wrench nodded toward us, but he slid back into the limo with Vintok and his bodyguards without saying anything to me. It seemed he’d only come to see Sarrlevi.

When the limo drove away, I joined him in the yard.

“What was that about?” I tried to sound casual, not worried and distraught that he might have made another deal to kill people.

“Nothing that is important right now.”

“Uh.” I glanced at his pocket. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. The potential assassination attempt on the king must be dealt with first. If Slehyra’s colleagues have the assistance of a dragon, the threat to Eireth may be greater than we realized. Before, I was somewhat indifferent to

his fate, but now that I am being implicated...” Sarrlevi held his palm skyward. “I must stop the assassination from happening. For my mother’s sake and because I do not want the entire elven population hunting me down.”

“I don’t want that either, but I think we need to wait for Val or Zavryd to return. The elves might believe a warning coming from them. If *you* show up at the barrier to their city, I doubt they would listen to you.” More than that, they would attempt to shoot him full of arrows.

“I know, but I must warn them regardless. I also wish to get close enough to my mother to warn *her*. It may be best if she leaves the capital and stays in the safety of one of my homes.”

“I’ll warn her,” I blurted, images of Sarrlevi perforated with arrows filling my mind. He was still limping from his last battle with elves. “Your people shouldn’t have any reason to shoot me on sight. I’ll go without you and warn whoever will listen. I helped the elves get the formula that’s curing their people of the degenerative disease. They should *like* me.”

Sarrlevi gazed grimly at me. “They know you are associated with me.”

“Meaning they *won’t* like me?” I knew the queen disliked me, but I didn’t think Eireth distrusted me. Of course, I might have a hard time reaching him. “Wait, if Val and Zavryd are in the elven capital, all I’ll have to do is get close enough to reach out telepathically to them. *They* can pass along the warning, now with more details included.”

“They may not be there.”

“Where else would they have gone?” I waved toward their house, their auras still absent.

“Does not Thorvald engage in employment for the human military leader?”

“Willard, yes, but with her father in danger, I’m sure she’s not taking side gigs right now.” Okay, I wasn’t *that* sure, but it seemed a reasonable assumption. “Let me do this, Varlesh. As you said, we have to try.”

“I will go with you.”

“If I show up with you, it’ll be harder to convince them I’m there to help.”

“I will camouflage myself.”

“You don’t think someone will realize you’re at my side? Remember when we went to see Broadleaf? *She* knew you were with me. And it looked like The Wrench knew you were there. People have ways to see through your

magic.” I gripped his arm. “Let me go by myself. If I’m not back in an hour, you can come check on me.”

Not that he would be able to get into the elven city through their barrier. But I didn’t yet know if his people would let *me* in either.

Sarrlevi’s mulish expression promised he wanted to object, but his hand strayed to the pocket where he’d put the folded paper, and he seemed to change his mind.

“One hour,” he said.

“Yeah.” I didn’t like that he was being secretive about what The Wrench had given him, but he was right that we had to prioritize Eireth’s safety. That didn’t keep me from saying, “Do me a favor, will you? While you’re waiting, don’t kill anyone.”

Sarrlevi stepped back and camouflaged himself.

“One hour,” he said as he disappeared from my view and my senses.

AN HOUR WASN'T MUCH TIME, SO I SPUNTED INTO THE HOUSE TO DIG THE portal-creation artifact out of my bag.

"I am going to meet Gondo for coffee and information," Tinja called from the kitchen.

"Sounds good. Give him a kiss if he delivers." I took the magical sphere in my office, placed it on the desk, and rested my hand on it, willing the rune for the elven home world to pop up on the display.

"Gondo wishes kisses whether he *delivers* anything or not. He is a very lips-forward goblin."

"He's male and in love. Good luck."

When the rune appeared, I started to activate the device but paused. In the past, I'd let it take me wherever it wished, assuming my mother had programmed destinations when she crafted it. When I went to Dun Kroth, it always dropped me off in front of the city gates outside the barrier. When I returned to Earth, it dropped me off in front of my house. For Veleshna Var, I assumed it would take me to a place outside the elven capital's barrier, but what if it could deliver me somewhere else?

Val and Zavryd *might* be in the elven capital, but Sarrlevi's words that they might not came to mind. Freysha ought to be there, but would the elves let me reach her? With rumors of assassinations floating around, she might be under guard or hidden away somewhere.

Besides Val's sister, there was one elf who might trust me enough to be an advocate. She might not *like* me after I'd broken things in her laboratory, but she might trust me.

“Let’s try her first, and then I’ll do the capital if that doesn’t work.” I willed an image of the alchemist Hyslara Broadleaf’s tree laboratory into the portal generator and asked it to take me there.

Varlesh, I reached out telepathically, though he might have already left the area. *I’m going to try passing the information to Broadleaf first before visiting the city. She shouldn’t be under guard, so it’ll be easier to reach her.*

He didn’t answer.

The silvery glow of a portal filled my office, the magical disc stretching from wall to wall. Hammer in hand, I sprang through.

After the usual disorienting few minutes of portal travel, I landed in an unfamiliar clearing surrounded by trees and bubbling pools of water. Hot springs? The misty warm air smelled of sulfur and reminded me of the volcanos on Dun Kroth. Had the portal generator taken me to the wrong world?

Squawks came from trees with large nests built among their low branches. Numerous blue-feathered birds—*huge* blue-feathered birds—occupied the nests. *Evinya*, the domesticated elven riding birds.

Okay, so this was the right world, but where *on* it had I arrived?

A young elven female walked among the nests, feeding the birds fish from a bucket, and she stopped to gawk at me.

“Uh, I think I got the wrong number,” I said, then repeated something similar telepathically, certain the elven stablehand didn’t carry a translation charm to work.

Since she didn’t look like she had weapons, I risked turning my back on her to look around. Maybe I’d arrived in a part of Broadleaf’s village that I hadn’t seen before?

But nothing about this place was similar, and there was no sign of a large lake with a magical water creature swimming in the depths. The steaming hot springs didn’t look like they would support life. Numerous elves were out on a network of boardwalks and docks stretching over the burbling water.

Where are we? I asked the portal generator.

It emanated a sense of smugness that reminded me of Sorka.

An uncertain call came from one of the boardwalks, followed by a telepathic one. *Mongrel plumber?*

Only then did I pick out Broadleaf’s spectacled figure as she peered across the water toward me. She knelt on a boardwalk with two other elves, drawing up samples of the water.

Smugness came from the portal device again.

“Huh.” I lifted a hand toward Broadleaf. *Yes, feel free to call me Matti. Do you have a second to talk?*

Have you brought me another stolen dwarven formula that you wish me to make?

Not this time. Someone wants to assassinate your king, and there aren't many elves I thought would listen to me.

You thought I would be one? Despite the question, Broadleaf set down her work and levitated herself in my direction.

Well, because of the formula that I shared with you, sick elves have been cured. I thought you might hear me out.

It's true that I have earned prestige as a result of my work on that formula. I've been invited to contribute to numerous academic journals, and there is talk of an award. Broadleaf sounded more pleased about those things than about having saved the lives of dying elves.

Since I needed a favor, I didn't point that out. *I hear there are awards for saving the life of one's king too.*

I am not interested in rewards for work done outside of my field, but tell me what you know. Broadleaf landed in front of me, adjusting her spectacles as she considered me for only a moment before peering around.

Sarrlevi didn't come with me. Someone's been throwing around accusations that he's the one who wants your king dead, so he didn't think your people would listen to him.

That is not the only reason they would not listen to him. You should not associate yourself with one such as he.

I know, but I love him, and he's a better person than your people think. I waved a hand to put talk of Sarrlevi aside and hurried to tell her everything I'd learned at Slehyra's place. I wished it were more, that I'd at least gotten the name of the world the arena was on.

Broadleaf listened without interrupting, but skepticism lurked in her eyes. Was I wasting my time?

“Did you retain the communications device? After you stole it?” Her lips pursed with disapproval. “Theft is a crime on Veleshna Var.”

“I don't think stealing from vile enemies bent on murdering people is much of a crime.” Relieved I had remembered to bring the device along, I showed it to her.

Nerves flitted through my belly when Broadleaf took it, as the abrupt

worry that she might be allied with Slehvya's people or hate the king came to mind. I envisioned her hurling the device—the only evidence I had—into the hot springs.

But she merely activated it and watched the message.

I am predisposed to believe you might be telling the truth, Broadleaf said when it finished.

Because I helped with the formula?

Because you repaired my faulty plumbing. Broadleaf smiled, but I had no idea if it was a joke or not. This lady had some messed-up priorities. *Come.* She pointed toward the nesting birds.

The stablehand whistled for one, then hurried to grab a saddle from a protected alcove built into the base of a tree.

“Uh, come?” I asked uncertainly, visions of riding one of the birds entering my mind. Something told me that would be even more harrowing than flying on a dragon. As far as I'd heard, the birds didn't have magic they used to keep their riders from falling off.

The capital is a long walk on foot but not far by air. Broadleaf waved for me to join her as the stablehand finished saddling the bird and lifted two fingers and asked a question.

Broadleaf pursed her lips, considered me, then shook her head and held up one finger. *We will ride together*, she told me. *I assume half-dwarves are as inept at anything aerial as full-blooded dwarves.*

That's right. I didn't take offense. It wasn't as if my human half made me love hurtling through the air at great heights either.

But the stablehand objected, pointing to my midsection, the bird, and another bird.

Is she saying I'm too heavy to ride with you? I told myself not to be offended, that the stablehand was probably pointing out a maximum weight allotment for each bird, not saying I had a huge ass.

She pointed out your dwarven stoutness.

So, yes.

Yes.

The stablehand whistled, calling a second bird as she lifted another saddle from the storage area. The new *evinya* landed, long beak parting as beady black eyes considered me. With... suspicion? Was that my imagination?

The bird appeared intelligent but not friendly, or maybe not interested in giving a stout foreigner a ride. An irritated squawk came from its mouth. The

stablehand plucked two fish out of a bucket and tossed them to the birds. That put an end to the squawks but not the suspicious stare.

Are they hard to ride? I wondered if I should offer to take my portal home and then back, asking it to drop me off at the capital. But it would be better to show up accompanied by someone the elven guards trusted.

For an elf, no. They are well-trained.

What about for a half-dwarf?

Riding a bird should not be difficult for one who so quickly mastered elven plumbing. Broadleaf swung up onto her bird with a whisper of magic. There weren't stirrups, nor did I see anything like a bit and reins, and the birds were tall, almost as big as horses.

I approached my *evinya*, not pointing out that I'd mastered nothing, only jury-rigged her plumbing with knowledge I'd already had.

You must have something similar on your world. Sitting atop her mount, Broadleaf waved for me to hurry.

I thought about sharing an image of a horse, but it wasn't as if I'd ridden many of them. Instead, I shared my Harley with her.

Though I could have pulled myself up, one way or another, Broadleaf levitated me into the saddle.

If there is truly a threat to the king, we must hurry to warn him, she said.

Right. There was something similar to a saddle horn, so I gripped that.

The bird sprang into the air with an alarming lurch that sent my stomach into my boots. Broadleaf's mount also took off, its wings flapping so close to those of my bird that their wind battered me.

Heart pounding as the *evinya* angled skyward, dodging branches on their way to open air, I leaned forward and clenched every muscle I had. *Sorka, will you help me stay on if I fall off?*

Levitation is not within my repertoire of skills.

Maybe if you wrap your barrier around me, I'll be insulated and bounce instead of immediately splatting to my death.

I forbid you from dying here and leaving me in the hands of elven scientists. They are not warriors. Stay on your flying mount.

Yes, ma'am.

When the birds reached the treetops, they leveled out, and the ride grew slightly less terrifying—until Broadleaf spoke again.

I've reached out to the queen to let her know of the threat and that we're coming to see her.

“The queen?” I blurted in alarm before remembering to use telepathy. *Why the queen? The threat is to the king. We need to see him.*

He is not in the city. I believe he may have already left for his meeting. The queen would not tell me where it is. Only the king and a select few from our world know its location. I’m told that’s true for the other worlds sending rulers as well. For the safety of all, the location is not shared with many.

If the assassins know where it is, there won’t be any safety.

The queen said she will speak with you and send a team to warn her husband if it’s warranted.

I groaned. The queen didn’t like me, she *hated* Sarrlevi, and I wasn’t even positive she cared about her husband. From the way she’d acted toward him in my presence, I wouldn’t be surprised if she was in on the assassination plans.

We were still flying over the hot springs, their bubbling steam creating a hazy gray mist below, when a flock of *evinya* appeared in the air ahead of us. Elven warriors rode on their backs. *Powerful* warriors. I sensed their strong auras before I could see the details of their weapons and armor. They were flying straight toward us.

I don’t suppose they’re coming to bathe in the hot springs after a hard day of training, I thought, my grip tightening on Sorka.

Broadleaf glanced back at me, no hint of concern on her face. The queen probably *liked* her. *Nobody bathes in those particular hot springs. Should you fall in, their immense heat is enough to sear the skin from your body and kill you within seconds.*

Now with a new reason to worry about falling, I willed my mount to hurry to get us past the springs before the warriors reached us. I sensed the outer edge of the elven city miles ahead, all the magic and magical beings inside creating an aura that I could detect from farther than usual.

“Faster, birdie,” I whispered, tempted to nudge its feathered flanks with my heels, but what worked on horses might not work on *evinya*. If it bucked me from the saddle, I would be in trouble. Thanks to the height of the trees, we were flying hundreds of feet above the ground.

No, above the deadly hot springs.

Unfortunately, the warriors’ mounts flew quickly, and they reached our birds well before the city came into view. Several grim-faced elves wearing magical leather armor raised bows pointed at my chest. Some of those nocked arrows were magical too.

One handsome elf with silver hair had a particularly dour expression as he regarded me. I twitched in surprise because he strongly resembled the elf who'd sent the message to Slehvya. Her husband. For a second, I thought it was the same person, but this guy was younger. A cousin or nephew? It was hard to imagine Slehvya having had children.

"Hygorotho," I whispered, not liking his glower—or the weapons pointing at me.

Sorka's power flared, creating a barrier around me and my mount.

Broadleaf lifted a hand toward the warriors as they surrounded us, their birds forcing ours to slow down. *This one is here to speak with the queen. She has a warning.*

Fly away from the mongrel, a blonde-haired elven female in the lead told Broadleaf. *She is the accomplice and lover of the exiled assassin Sarrlevi. If she is here, he may be nearby.*

He's not here, Broadleaf said.

Their flock shifted, blocking us from continuing toward the city. The leader waved toward Broadleaf, gesturing for her to move her mount away from mine. Because these guys planned to shoot?

Any idea how many arrows you can deflect at once, Sorka? I hoped they wouldn't open fire, but I had no confidence in that.

A lot of the elves looked pissed, not only the silver-haired one. What had the queen told them?

Many of those weapons are magical, Sorka replied. *We should not test my abilities to that extent.*

Especially while flying over scalding hot springs. I glanced down, hoping we'd moved past them, but our two birds had been forced off course, and steam wafted up from pools between the trees below. *Think you can survive falling into them?*

Yes, but I do not believe you can.

The mongrel accomplice is here to try to kill the king, the silver-haired elf spoke. *We cannot let her near the city. She should be killed for her association with the vile assassin.*

More than one elf nodded.

I'm here to warn the king, I tried, though I doubted I would be able to get through to the elves. *I'm friends with Princess Freysha. I'm not an assassin or an accomplice to an assassin.*

His aura is present on yours, one of the more powerful elves accused.

That doesn't mean I'm here to kill anyone. I'm—

The silver-haired elf fired.

Shit. They were going to try to kill me.

The female leader shouted something to him as I instinctively ducked. The arrow skimmed off the top of my barrier, white light flashing as the two magics touched.

My mount shrieked and wheeled away. The saddle tilted alarmingly, and I almost lost Sorka as I grabbed for the saddle horn with both hands.

The female shouted again, she and two riders veering toward Broadleaf. *Brysarth, stop. She will be captured and questioned, not killed.*

Determination and anger twisted the silver-haired elf's face. He shouted what sounded like disagreement.

Take me down and land, I urged my mount. Did the birds understand telepathic words? *For both our sakes,* I added as another arrow sped toward us.

Be careful of the alchemist, you fool, someone yelled aloud and telepathically.

Brysarth, the female leader said, *you will stop.*

Don't kill the mongrel, someone added. *She may be used as bait to catch the assassin.*

She's here to kill the king. That was the silver-haired male who kept firing.

Two others, their faces contorted with their indignation, lifted their bows as if they might join in.

As my mount flew erratically, afraid of the arrows lancing in our direction, I struggled to stay on. I also hefted Sorka with one hand, tempted to hurl her at the archer, but she wouldn't be able to keep her barrier around me if I did that. Besides, I would only get into *more* trouble if I attacked the elves.

Val, Freysha, or Zavryd! I called out broadly, projecting my telepathy as far as I could. I'd reached people on the Olympic Peninsula from Seattle; I ought to be able to reach my allies if they were in the elven city. *If you're here, I could use some help.*

No sooner had the words come out than one of the powerful elves, urged by the silver-haired male, lifted an arm and blasted raw magical energy at me. Before it struck, Sorka strengthened the barrier, and I had an instant to channel my own power to assist her. When the blast hit us, the barrier held,

but the great jolt knocked us back. My mount screeched, tipping wildly, and I fell off.

I tumbled sideways, but gravity soon caught up, and I started plummeting. More elven arrows peppered my barrier as I fell.

I wanted to curse the elves—who the hell fired at someone who was already falling to their death?—but I was too busy being utterly terrified. Though Sorka's barrier remained intact, I plummeted toward one of those pools. The sulfuric air reached up to welcome me into its deadly embrace.

AS I PLUMMETED TOWARD THE DEADLY HOT SPRINGS, I WILLED MY BODY TO float, to levitate instead of striking down. More than once, I'd been able to call upon my magic to do things without knowing how, but I was too terrified—too *panicked*—to make anything happen.

Sorka's magic remained rock solid, keeping the barrier around me. When it hit the surface, it—and I inside—bounced. Though the abrupt change in direction jarred me, it wasn't as bad as it would have been without protection.

Water splashed, sizzling as it hit the barrier, but it didn't strike me as I flew back up into the air. When gravity caught up to me, I dropped down again. Once more, my bubble hit the surface. I bounced three more times before settling, the steaming hot spring burbling around the bottom of my barrier. I felt like a potsticker tossed in a deep fryer, but none of the scalding water reached me.

You're amazing, I told my hammer.

Obviously.

I sensed the elves high above, flying on their mounts and doubtless peering down. The sprawling branches from the great trees hid them from my view—and vice versa—but I jammed my hand into my pocket to activate my camouflage charm. I imagined a scientist nearby, looking out and puzzled at the indentation in the water that my barrier made.

I twisted about, hoping to spot land nearby. It was at least fifty feet away.

“That's a problem.”

One of the riders swooped down between the branches, a nocked bow in her hands. It was the female leader, the one who hadn't wanted me killed—

not that wanting me for *bait* was much better.

She peered straight at me, and I worried that my concern about a suspicious indentation in the water was founded. The steam had to somewhat obscure the surface but maybe not enough.

Surprisingly, the elf removed her arrow from her bow, returned it to her quiver, and lowered the weapon. Her bird flew a few feet above the surface but not for long. With a soft command from her, it rose up again, heading back to join the others.

Maybe she hadn't seen me after all. Or maybe she was letting me go for some reason. Either way, I hoped she told everyone that I'd died when I plunged into the hot springs and that there was no need to start a search party.

She must have said something along those lines because the elves soon flew off, heading back toward the city. Broadleaf went with them.

I was tempted to reach out to her, but what more could I say? It might be better for my health if she also believed me dead.

"Okay, Sorka." I peered around. There was nothing within reach to grab, nothing at all, save a log floating ten feet away. "How are we going to get to solid land?"

You are aware of my capabilities.

I was hoping you might have one that I didn't know about, like turning into a boat motor.

Your mother did not believe it necessary to give me that ability.

Short-sighted of her. I'll let her know the next time we have a lesson. I eyed the log.

I would not be able to keep a barrier around you while you entered a portal, but it might be possible for you to form one and quickly swim through it before the water killed you.

Nothing like arriving home scalded head to toe.

After failing to learn to levitate on the fly, I didn't bother attempting it again, instead going with my strength: enchanting items. It worked best when I enchanted items I was *crafting*, but with the log ten feet away, I would have to manipulate it from afar. At least I had more experience at doing such things now.

While floating on the pool, bubbles popping and emitting their sulfurous scents into the air, I used my power to imbue the log with a motion enchantment similar to what had been on the levitating board on Tramondor. Then I willed it to head in my direction.

With desultory slowness, the log drifted toward me. I glanced at the bank again, afraid this would take all afternoon. Maybe creating a portal and risking scalding to leave would be better, but where would I go? I still had to find a way to warn King Eireth. How I would do that if he wasn't on his world, I didn't know.

Frustrated, I willed more power into the log. It moved more quickly toward my bubble, butting against it. I started to float away, but Sorka must have grasped what I was doing. She altered the barrier to form a notch. The log nestled into it and pushed my bubble toward the shoreline.

An interesting means of locomotion, Sarrlevi spoke into my mind.

I gawked toward the shoreline. His words had come from that direction.
What are you doing here?

When I saw you fall, I sprinted the last two miles to rescue you. It seems that is unnecessary, unless you wish me to speed up the process?

I mean what are you doing here on this world? I glanced at the time on my phone, the hour mark a few minutes away, though I wasn't upset that he'd come. I needed help to figure out what to do next.

I worried you would be attacked. Rightly so. His tone turned cold when he added, *Should I see any of the elves who fired at you, I will kill them.*

Don't do that. We're trying to clear your name, remember?

I fear that will never happen.

Well, let's not make things worse. I'm alive. And aren't you glad to see me?

I am glad. His power wrapped around Sorka's barrier, lifting it into the air and levitating me toward the bank.

The elf that opened fire first and was goading the others into attacking me looked a lot like Slehvya's husband. A younger version. She doesn't have kids, does she?

She does not. Asthidor has numerous brothers, however, and I believe they have children.

Children old enough to be a part of the family plot?

Yes. It is Slehvya and her family who were the royals previously in power, but she has likely promised much to Asthidor and his kin if they help.

Enough that he can forgive her for having sex with you countless times over the years?

Apparently. His tone turned dry. *And there were not countless times.*

Oh? You can give me a number?

He hesitated.

More than three? I asked.

Yes.

Less than three hundred?

Certainly.

Bigger than a breadbox?

What?

Never mind. It's a joke. I blew a kiss in his direction, though I couldn't yet see him. It didn't matter. I knew he wore his Earth-girls-are-so-strange look.

After floating over the roots of trees that didn't mind growing next to scalding water, I landed in front of Sarrlevi, close enough to see him through his camouflaging magic.

Are you injured? Sarrlevi raked me with his gaze. *I should not have let you come alone.*

It looks like you didn't let me come alone. You're here. I hugged him.

It's true. A few minutes after you left, I reconsidered and came after you. He returned the hug, resting his chin on my head.

I'm relieved. I thought you were... going to work on another mission.

It crossed my mind. Before I could decide if I wanted to probe again for details on what that mission was, he added, *Of course, I, believing your portal would bring you to the capital city, arrived there.*

I had what I thought was a bright idea to seek out Broadleaf.

Didn't she forbid you from returning to this world after you destroyed her laboratory? He'd been falling into a lake and battling a water monster during that, but I'd filled him in.

Yeah, but I also fixed her plumbing, so I thought that might make her more inclined to listen to me. And she did, but she relayed my warning to the queen, not the king.

Eireth is not here. Sarrlevi stepped back. *At least not in the city or close enough for me to sense.*

I know that now. I think he's already left for that meeting.

Then it's fortunate that I've learned where it is.

You did? How?

Gondo. A bemused expression crossed Sarrlevi's face. *I've often dismissed goblins as nuisances that one can ignore without repercussions, but because everyone does that, I believe they may be the most well-informed*

beings in the Cosmic Realms.

I don't doubt that Gondo has the lowdown on everything happening in the magical community in Seattle, but how would he know about a meeting among rulers?

The goblins' rulers from their home world were invited.

And Gondo knows them?

As he relayed the information to me, the parcel-delivery goblin, who happens to share coffee with Gondo, is familiar with them. In addition to bicycling packages around your city, he has a partner who handles deliveries that must go back to the goblin home world, and he sometimes receives and takes items to the Great Workshop.

The what?

The goblin version of a royal palace. Sarrlevi waved a hand. You'll have to ask Gondo for more details if you wish them. I came to get you and head to the ogre home world.

That's where all the rulers are meeting in secret?

In a city of ruins where enslaved creatures and intelligent beings from around the Realms were once captured and forced to battle ogre gladiators in an ancient arena.

The ideal place to meet to talk peace. I remembered Mom and Grantik bringing up tensions between the dwarves and the elves. Or is this meeting about peace?

It is a meeting held every five years by the major rulers to discuss what can be done to continue to foster peace and trade among the worlds. Grievances are often brought up and deals made. I knew about it but not where it was. From what I have heard, the location changes each time.

Matti? a distant voice whispered into my mind.

Freysha?

Yes. I heard you cry out, but I was— my mother was in my room with me, and she's a strong telepath and mind mage, so I feared replying with her present. She had just been cursing Sarrlevi and you because of a message she received.

From Broadleaf.

Yes. Freysha sounded surprised that I knew. Are you here with another warning about my father? Are you still in trouble?

I'm okay now, but a bunch of elven guards showed up, and one decided to use me for target practice.

You were fired upon? Now, Freysha sounded more shocked than surprised. Matti, my people do not kill those who visit our world. Even if you'd been forbidden to come, which you have not been, to the best of my knowledge, you should not have been treated so. Not unless... You were not threatening anyone, were you?

I shook my head but couldn't be surprised Freysha might believe that. She'd seen me lose my temper, and if I'd thought I could throttle an elf to accomplish my goals, I might have done it.

No. I was flying on a bird, and Broadleaf was escorting me to your city to talk to the queen. I think the guy who opened fire is a part of Slehyra's plot. He might have known I wanted to warn Eireth. I shared an image of the silver-haired elf, in case Freysha was familiar with him. *Where are you? Sarrlevi is with me, says he's learned the location of the meeting your father went to, and I'm thinking we need to crash it to make sure nobody is targeting him as we speak.*

"To whom are you speaking?" Sarrlevi asked softly, watching my face.

"Freysha." I assumed, since he'd switched to speaking aloud, he didn't sense any elves nearby. For whatever reason—hopefully because the leader was appalled by her bloodthirsty young troop—the warriors had flown back to their capital without searching for me.

"Does she wish to accompany us?"

"I'm sure she *would* like to help if her father is in danger, but I'm also sure we would be accused of kidnapping her if she came along." Switching to telepathy again, I prompted, *Freysha?*

She hadn't responded to my question—or what followed.

My mother has forbidden me from leaving my room, and I am being guarded to ensure compliance.

Aren't you a little old to be grounded? What does she think you're going to do?

Try to find Father and help. She believes that I, as my father's heir, am also in danger. From Sarrlevi and also from you.

I guess you don't want to come with us then.

If I could escape the city to join you, I would. I know you are not a threat to my father or myself, and Sarrlevi... I believe it is unlikely he will irk you. He loves you.

That wasn't quite the same as trusting that he was honorable—and if he said he wouldn't target the king, he wouldn't target the king—but I was glad

she didn't think Sarrlevi was behind everything.

Yeah, I replied. *Do you know where Val and Zavryd are? Did they come here?*

Earlier, yes, but they left when the queen joined me. I believe she suggested they should leave. My mother doesn't trust Val either.

I rubbed my face. "I hope they know what we know and aren't off on a wild goose chase."

Sarrlevi arched his eyebrows.

"Val and Zavryd. The queen shooed them away."

"It is difficult to shoo a dragon."

"Maybe they came up with a plan and are going to help Eireth. We can't assume that though. We may need to save him. I mean, I hope his own people have everything under control, and they won't *need* us, but..." I thought of the Silverclaw dragon that had shown up at Slehvya's house. "This plot may be bigger than they realize."

"We will go to the ogre home world, camouflage ourselves, and attempt to find Eireth."

I nodded but also pointed out, "You know if we get caught, we'll be suspects ourselves."

A meeting of so many important people would not only have a barrier around it but there might be artifacts capable of nullifying camouflaging magic.

"I am aware," Sarrlevi said. "Do you suggest another plan of action?"

"No. For the sake of Val, Freysha, you, and your mother, we have to make sure Eireth survives the week."

"You put your life at risk for the welfare of others." Sarrlevi raised his eyebrows, but I couldn't tell if he objected, approved, or was simply pointing that out. "Who the ruler of Veleshna Var is would make no difference to your existence on Earth," he added.

"I put my life at risk for the welfare of others I *care* about." I rested my hand on his chest. That included him, so he couldn't truly mind. Besides, I was arrogant enough to believe that, with his help, we could make this work *without* dying.

"Yes." He rested his hand on mine, holding it to his chest. "I only remark because it is odd that someone with such a noble streak would spend time with an assassin."

"Well, I keep assuming you'll give up that career one day and join me in

the construction business.” I smirked at him. “If The Wrench comes through with his side of the bargain, I’m going to have twenty tiny homes to build, and I understand goblins *love* accent vines growing all over the siding.”

“*All* beings should find the incorporation of nature into one’s dwelling to be peaceful and appealing.”

“Obviously.”

Sarrlevi released me, stepped back, and formed a portal.

Right, if we were going to be in time, we had better not dawdle.

“Let’s do this,” I murmured.

COMING OUT OF THE PORTAL ON THE OGRE HOME WORLD WAS LIKE STEPPING off a plane in Phoenix. In the summer. During a heatwave.

The dusty earth, dry air, and brown rocky hills and mountains in the distance also reminded me of my one visit to the Sonoran Desert. Except the thorny vegetation that grew here looked like upside-down triangles rather than Saguaro cactuses, and the sky had a red tint. Further, ruins of old stone buildings rose up in clumps, the remains of arches, columns, and walls, everything towering high over the head of a half-dwarf.

Sarrlevi camouflaged us. We'd landed on an ancient stone road with fresh boot prints and wagon tracks in the fine dirt coating it. Our feet stirred up the dust, and I promptly sneezed three times.

I sensed the auras of magical beings in both directions, and voices came from over a nearby hill. I pinched my nostrils closed, knowing Sarrlevi's magic couldn't hide sound, then rubbed my camouflage charm, hoping two layers of magic would make us even less likely to be spotted.

The parts of this world I've visited before are lush and humid. I believe we are hundreds of miles from their major population centers. Sarrlevi waved toward purple mountains far in the distance, no hint of snow on their peaks.

Yeah, I wouldn't build a city here. Not without air conditioning. I don't even see a river or oasis or anything.

There may have been in the past, before the area was abandoned. Sarrlevi touched my shoulder and guided me off the road.

Seconds later, several armored dwarves crested the hill. They led a

magically powered wagon full of barrels with ceramic mugs clinking inside. I gaped in surprise because I recognized some of those dwarves.

General Grantik and my grandfather walked at the front of the procession. Logically, if rulers from many worlds were invited to these meetings, it made sense that King Ironhelm was here, but I hadn't expected to run into anyone I knew.

Should I reach out to him? Try to get his help protecting the elven king?

Sarrlevi tapped my shoulder and pointed, not at the dwarves but at a great stone structure in the distance. The arena?

Also made from stone and maybe cement, it was less in ruin than the buildings. I'd never been to Rome, but it reminded me of pictures I'd seen of the Colosseum.

Poles along the top level flew flags representing nations—or worlds—I didn't know, but I barely registered them, instead staring at two dragons perched on a stone wall looking down into the arena. I recognized one of them and rocked back.

Zavryd.

Varlesh, we could have just asked the people we knew where this shindig was going down. I realized I also recognized the silver dragon perched beside him and barely stifled a groan. Slehvya's dragon ally. What had his name been? Lord Garamezlar.

So it seems, Sarrlevi replied silently, pulling me farther from the road.

The dwarves with their wagon were drawing even with us, and Sarrlevi apparently didn't want us to reveal ourselves to them. Despite the heat and the heavy clothing and armor they wore, they weren't sweating. They must have recently arrived, opening a portal close to their destination.

Down the road on the way to the arena, a platoon of hulking ogre warriors in sandals, loincloths, and finger-bone chest armor waited under an arch. My senses detected the barrier I'd expected intersecting with that arch and encompassing the arena and numerous ruins near its walls.

In addition to the dragons, Sarrlevi told me, *I sense contingents of trolls, elves, and goblins inside, each under their world's flag. If gnomes and orcs are coming, they have not yet arrived. That may mean we have some time.*

Unless the assassination attempt is going to take place before the talks start. I eyed the triangular cactuses and jumbles of ruins outside the barrier, seeing no end to potential hiding places around the arena.

Would the whole barrier be lowered when an approved group of people

arrived? Probably not. The section passing through that archway might be all that dropped.

Reaching out with my senses, I tried to pick out King Eireth from the dozens—no, hundreds—of people inside. Everyone in the arena had magical blood, and we were far enough away that I struggled to locate the elven contingent, much less individual people. Only the dragons with their powerful auras stood out.

I am unable to detect King Eireth among the elves, Sarrlevi said.

Me either.

The elves themselves are difficult to distinguish from one another. They must be applying magic to obscure themselves.

He was right. That was why I was struggling. I could sense the trolls and goblins easily enough, but the auras of the elves were fuzzed and indistinct. If an oddly placed magical tree hadn't been growing out of the seats behind their group, its branches spreading shade over them, I wouldn't have been positive they were elves.

They may be trying to keep others from sensing if Eireth is among them, Sarrlevi added. If so, it is good that they are taking precautions, but it is also likely that he will be called upon to speak. At that point, it will grow clear which one he is.

I frowned, envisioning Eireth walking up to a podium and being fired upon by snipers in a dozen positions around the arena. Snipers and that dragon. Would Gamezlar join in on an attack? With Zavryd, who'd no doubt been sent by his mother the queen, perched next to him?

Sarrlevi pointed to a head-sized glowing dome attached to the arch the ogre guards stood under. *I believe that device will inactivate camouflage magic as people pass through.*

Meaning we're not going to get in without an invitation? I'd been afraid of that.

I've read history books that speak of this place. Supposedly, there are myriad tunnels beneath the arena and the ruins. The captured combatants were held underground until it was their time to fight, and they were brought directly up into the arena. Some of the tunnels may still exist. If one could find an entrance...

All the ways in must be guarded, I said. Especially if there have been rumors of assassins.

Likely, but it might be easier to sneak in that way than here in the open,

with the blazing sun leaving few shadows.

I gripped Sarrlevi's arm and pointed at the dwarves. *That may be our way in.*

What?

Joining them.

They will notice us hopping onto their wagon, he said dryly.

I'll ask my grandfather to let us.

The ogres will also notice an elf among the dwarves.

Will they notice a half-dwarf among the dwarves? I bounced from foot-to-foot. If I was going to reach out to my grandfather and try to join his contingent, it had to be soon. They were almost to the archway.

Notice, yes, but they might not object to your presence if the king vouches for you.

Good. I squeezed his arm. *I'll try to get in this way while you look for the tunnels. If I can, I'll warn Eireth of the danger. And maybe I can get the dwarves to help protect the elves.*

Sarrlevi's jaw clenched. I could tell he didn't want to be separated, but he stepped back from me and said, *Try it.*

I gave him a thumbs-up, then called, *Grandfather?* softly, and as pinpoint as I could, to him.

Ironhelm looked around. *Daughter of my daughter?*

Matti, yes. I'm camouflaged. May I join your group to go in? I've learned that the elven king is in danger, and I came to make sure he won't be assassinated. I wished my mother were the one with the dwarves. She would take me in without hesitation.

Harrumph. We have an issue to bring up in regard to the elves.

Starblade, I know, but you can't want their king dead. I hoped. *May I join you? Before you reach the barrier?*

They were almost there now. With my camouflage active, I risked walking down the road toward their wagon, but if the dwarves in the rear spotted me before my grandfather told them I was joining, their surprise would alert the ogres to something amiss.

When Ironhelm didn't respond right away, I worried I'd made an incorrect assumption. What if he *did* want Eireth dead? It was hard to imagine him being that callous, but they could have had a feud going for years without me knowing anything about it.

Ironhelm said something in Dwarven, lifted his hand, and halted. I tapped

my translation charm, hoping it was up to handling all the languages that would be in use here.

The procession halted with my grandfather.

Come, Matti. He bent to adjust his boot. Slip into the back of the wagon. I am formally inviting you to serve our gift during the post-meeting mingling.

Not hesitating, I came closer. Hopefully, he was warning his people, especially the two dwarves riding in the wagon, to expect me.

Thank you. What's the gift?

Your favorite beverage.

The one that grows your beard down to your toes? Will the elves and dragons enjoy that?

Everyone enjoys it, but the ogres especially do. It's wise to bring offerings that the people from the host world enjoy, especially if you hope they will make arrangements for you to speak privately with those you most wish to make deals with. Some of the rulers are elusive and don't take meetings outside of this forum.

I climbed onto the back of the wagon, the two dwarves close enough to see through my camouflage eyeing me sidelong. One's face held clear suspicion, but he didn't say anything, only glancing at the back of Ironhelm's head, as if to question his king's sanity. As long as he didn't alert the ogres that I'd been lurking beside the road and was a last-minute addition, he could question all he wanted.

Between the barrels—kegs—and clinking mugs, there wasn't much room, but I found a spot hidden from those in front of the wagon, then deactivated my charm. If I was camouflaged when we went past the device, and the ogres saw me pop into existence, they would wonder why I'd been using a charm. Hopefully, they weren't paying that much attention to how many dwarven auras they sensed approaching.

Once Ironhelm finished adjusting his boot, he continued forward, and the wagon rolled into motion again.

Heat beat down on my back, and the dwarves were starting to sweat. Too bad the arena was open to the harsh sun. No air conditioning for this meeting.

The ogres thumped maces and clubs to their chests and did a bow that involved spreading their arms as they leaned forward. It looked like they meant to crush Ironhelm in a bear hug rather than welcoming him, but he thumped his fist to his chest and greeted them without alarm.

Most of the ogres merely stood and looked over the dwarves and the

wagon, but one dug a green oval-shaped device out of his loincloth—I promptly hoped we weren’t required to *touch* it for any reason—and walked toward the contingent. With the device held aloft, beads of moisture—sweat—gleaming on its surface, the ogre stalked around the wagon. It hummed and pulsed, and I held my breath.

Was it a weapons or magic detector? If it was either, it would beep at my hammer. But I wasn’t the only one here with a magical weapon. Several of the dwarves, including my grandfather, carried them.

The device’s humming pulses sped up and intensified when it drew close to their weapons. The ogre nodded as he eyed them, then continued on. Nothing on the wagon triggered the device until the ogre reached me.

Still holding it aloft, he squinted at me.

I smiled and waved cheerfully. And—I hoped—innocently.

“King Ironhelm,” the ogre called in a gruff growl, “why is there a mongrel with your party of pure-bloods?”

Ironhelm peered back, and I lifted a mug to look like a drink server, but he must have decided that story would be suspicious. “That is my daughter’s daughter, who has recently come to our capital city for training in enchanting. Though she has human blood and will never be able to grow a decent beard, she may have some worth to our people, so we are teaching her about the Realms.”

“She has a very powerful magical weapon. You allow a mongrel to use such a hammer when a full-blooded warrior would be more apt?” The ogre eyed Sorka, as if he thought *he* would be more apt.

I was positive the dwarves wouldn’t be any keener on an ogre wielding one of their legendary magical weapons than a mongrel. At least I had *some* dwarven blood.

“Certainly,” Ironhelm said. “It is as I said. She is the daughter of my daughter and, therefore, a part of the family. Also, the hammer has a personality and intelligence, and it likes very few people. It likes her.”

Sorka doesn’t exactly like me, I told him, though it didn’t matter for this.

Another wagon, this one laden with crates instead of kegs, came into view on the road behind us. A contingent of orcs accompanied it.

She accepted you as her wielder, Ironhelm told me.

Snarkily.

You have witnessed that she is snarky with everyone, including your mother. He winked at me.

The ogre grunted and shifted his loincloth aside so he could scratch himself while he contemplated the situation. I looked away, not needing an eyeful of ogre nether regions.

While he scratched, he glanced at the approaching party. With a sigh and grumble under his breath, he waved for the dwarves to continue on. Before leaving, he gave the hammer a last longing caress with his eyes.

Never would I allow an ogre to hold me, Sorka told me. They grunt too much, consider clubs decent weapons, and don't wear sufficient clothing to cover their genitalia.

And that's offensive to a dwarven hammer? I asked, though I didn't disagree.

It's offensive to everyone. You should speak with the dragon and find out why he's here and if he will assist you.

I'll try once I'm inside and camouflaged again.

I hoped I *could* activate my charm once we were through the barrier, that the artifact by the guard post only checked that specific area and didn't keep such magic from being used at all.

Are you certain you should use your camouflaging magic? Sorka asked. *Right now, you are being allowed in as a guest of the king. If you disappear, would that not cast suspicion on you? Especially if you're found trying to get close to the elves.*

She had a point.

If there's an assassin, I have to get close to the elves if I'm going to help protect King Eireth.

Getting close to the assassin would be better, thus to stop him or her.

There may be more than one.

Sorka harrumphed into my mind. *Can your skulking elf lover not take the risk? If you are accused of sneaking into this venue to assist with an assassination, you will be taken by the dragons for punishment and rehabilitation, if not worse.*

I'm touched that you care and don't want to see that happen.

I don't want that ogre to get his sweaty hands on me.

I didn't point out that my own hands were sweaty and getting sweatier by the minute. The tiniest surge of triumph filled me as the barrier dropped inside the arch. Considering Sorka's warning, I didn't camouflage myself as soon as we passed through.

Two ogres trotted forward, telling the king they would take the wagon,

search everything, and place it with the other offerings. I thought Ironhelm would balk at being parted from his fine beverage, but he must have expected it, for he merely waved for his troops to climb off the wagon.

Two more ogres appeared to lead the dwarves. They pointed clubs toward a wide staircase in the exterior wall of the arena.

For a moment, I was tempted to stay with the wagon and see if the guards would take me someplace where I might snoop about, but I could only do that if I reapplied the camouflage. Better to see the lay of the land first. After hopping down, I followed the dwarves toward the stairs.

Feeling out of place in their group, I slumped down and tried not to look taller than they. That didn't keep the ogre escort from eyeing me and looking toward Ironhelm, as if to ask if he knew a mongrel trailed his party. Anticipating the question, Ironhelm waved dismissively. The ogres didn't press him.

The stairway took us up to one of several shaded walkways that circled the arena. We followed it toward chipped and cracked ancient benches molded from the same cement that had been used to build the structure. They looked down upon the flat oval area below, flagstones keeping the dust to a minimum.

Once, warriors might have battled in the arena, but a dais with a marble podium now rose at one end. Wooden benches faced it, but they were empty, with the various contingents all seated in the upper tiers below their flags. For the moment, only a few ogres and several wagons—the gifts each group had brought?—were inside the arena, parked along a shady wall on one side.

As the dwarves walked under the hot sun toward their designated seating area, I had the feeling of being watched. That wasn't surprising since I stuck out among my mother's people, but my instincts told me that more than a random goblin or orc eyed me.

I scanned the arena, seeking evidence of assassins, but I paused to consider the elven contingent and the shade tree behind them. As I'd sensed from outside, its branches protected them from the sun. With silver-green leaves, it appeared similar to a young oak, growing twenty feet up from the cement, roots embedded in and dangling over the seats.

Like Sarrlevi had said, the elves were employing magic to obscure themselves, not only their auras but their faces. Everything about the group was indistinct. It reminded me of the magic that had kept Sarrlevi and me from being able to see what Kurt Hart's mansion looked like when we'd

kayaked past it. I had no idea which elf among the two dozen was King Eireth.

“Must be why they’re doing it,” I muttered.

With that feeling of being watched persisting, I remembered the dragons and looked up. Zavryd had noticed me and was gazing down at me. In puzzlement? His dragon face was much harder to read than his human face.

Unsettlingly, the other dragon, Lord Garamezlar, was also looking at me. His slitted yellow reptilian eyes regarded me with suspicion and flared with inner light.

I recognize you, he boomed into my mind.

Uh-oh.

HOW COULD THE DRAGON GARAMEZLAR *RECOGNIZE* ME? HADN'T SARRLEVI and I been camouflaged before he flew out of that portal?

I raked my mind for the chain of events. Maybe we *hadn't* yet been camouflaged. Or maybe he'd sensed us despite our magic.

With the dragon's cold eyes upon me, I bowed my head out of a notion that one was supposed to be meek and subservient around their kind. *Yes, Lord Dragon. I am the mongrel daughter of Princess Rodarska.*

You were at the home of the elf princess Slehyra, Garamezlar stated.

Uh, it was elf *ex-princess*, wasn't it? Or did their alliance already believe Eireth's assassination a done deal?

A chilling thought came to me, making me look again toward the elves. What if that magical fuzz was keeping people from realizing the king had *already* been assassinated?

No, the elves were too calm, standing and speaking while they waited for the event to start.

I have been many places of late, Lord Dragon.

"Matti?" Ironhelm had climbed up a couple of levels of seats to stand beside me. "Why is that dragon staring intently at you?"

"I'm fascinating."

You will not interfere with the day's events. Garamezlar remained perched atop the arena wall but spread his wings, as if he was considering springing. *Or I will slay you where you stand.*

His gaze shifted from me to Ironhelm at my side, and I wondered if he would have already slain me if I weren't with the dwarven king.

He's working with those who are plotting against King Eireth, I said telepathically to Ironhelm. Though I suspected he, if not everyone here, had a charm to facilitate translations, communicating in a way that couldn't be overheard seemed like a good idea. I think he knows I'm trying to help Eireth. At the least, he finds my presence here suspicious.

“Hm.” Ironhelm squinted at the dragon but only for a moment before his gaze shifted toward the elves. “They hide themselves. It is *they* who are acting suspiciously. They have not promised, as they should have, that they would hunt down the half-elf–half-dragon Starblade and ensure he will not be used against our kind—or allowed to act of his own volition against us. It is the main reason this meeting was called. Many of the races are concerned about the reappearance of one of the half-dragons. And it's even worse now that Starblade has freed the others.”

“Yeah, I heard about that, but where were the other half-dragons?” I didn't remember any of the other prisoners frozen on Dun Kroth having auras as significant as Starblade's.

Garamezlar spread his wings again, rustling them. It must have irritated Zavryd because he bared his fangs, and a growl wafted down to us. Unperturbed, Garamezlar spread his wings even farther, talons scraping at the air, and bared his fangs back at Zavryd.

“There were some who were similarly imprisoned on the elven home world,” Ironhelm replied to me. “Almost forgotten, at least if King Eireth is to be believed. They weren't guarded, so Starblade was able to amble in without effort and free them. *We* fear he intends to build himself an army, and the elves aren't doing enough to stop it.”

Friend of my mate, Zavryd spoke into my mind. He'd waited until the other dragon stopped his posturing and looked away, and I wondered if their kind were able to intercept each other's telepathy. I did not realize the dwarves invited you to this meeting.

It's a recent invitation. Are you here to save Eireth?

I am here at my mother's behest since she had dragon matters to attend to and no desire to perch through what is often a long and tedious meeting.

No doubt. I wagered the *dragon matters* had been the equivalent of getting her talons done.

I believe this is where the assassins will make their move. That dragon is allied with them. I resisted the urge to point accusingly since Garamezlar's gaze had shifted back in my direction.

Zavryd eyed him sidelong but didn't reply until the other dragon looked away. *He is a Silverclaw. Their clan has openly opposed and schemed against mine. Often.*

Any chance you'll tackle him and kick his ass if he tries to go after Eireth?

I expected Zavryd to say he couldn't interfere, but his eyes flared with violet light. *Yes. The father of my mate must be protected. Val is here for the same reason.*

Val is here?

She skulks under the arena, attempting to find assassins and ferret out the threat to the elven king.

Hell, that's what I planned to do. I didn't mention Sarrlevi, in case the other dragon could hear any of this. If you'd come home earlier, we could have carpooled.

Matti? Val's voice sounded in my mind, a whisper, like she worried about being overheard.

I couldn't sense her and found that encouraging. *Yes. Your stealth magic is working in the arena?*

It works under the arena. I'm told there are devices all over up there that will knock it out if I come aboveground.

I was afraid of that.

Yeah.

A new ogre, this one wearing a robe instead of a loincloth, or *only* a loincloth, climbed the steps to speak with Ironhelm.

As long as you're here— Val sounded amused— I could use your help down here.

Doing what?

Dealing with assassins. She shared a memory with me of her silver tiger companion leaping at a shaven-headed elf in black who was—or had been?—skulking in an underground tunnel with weapons drawn. Val rushed in after Sindari, and they fought together to deal with the assassin, someone with a lot of weapons skill. He drew blood from Val *and* Sindari before they managed to defeat him, take his weapons, tie him up, and drag him into an alcove. *It was luck that we stumbled across that one. We were both camouflaged, but a lot of the tunnels are narrow, and we spotted each other at the same time.*

Ironhelm nodded in response to the ogre, who was asking if he wanted to speak first to state his grievances with the elves. All the parties from the other

racers had arrived, and apparently there would be a pretense with everyone voting on the path forward, though the dragons always had the final say.

I could use your enchanting abilities, Val added. I don't have any charms that let me see through other people's magical camouflage, and I'm hoping you do. This guy barely spoke to me, and there wasn't time for a long discussion anyway, but I did get the gist that there are a bunch of assassins down here. Also that the Silverclaw dragon is attempting to aid them without anyone noticing.

Yeah, these people want to frame Sarrlevi for Eireth's death. That was their plan and why Slehvya invited us to her place for entertainment.

I really hope you didn't have to have sex with her to learn that.

We didn't. I refused to count Slehvya getting off on her couch while we'd been there as *having sex*.

Can you find people who are camouflaged? Val sounded a little desperate.

I imagined her scouring miles of winding, lightless tunnels, randomly stabbing into alcoves and hoping to get lucky. I hoped she and Sarrlevi, assuming he'd found a way in, didn't run into and prong each other before they realized they were on the same side.

I don't know how to— Wait. I remembered my mom's device for finding hidden nooks. Was it possible it would let me detect hidden people? *I may be able to help.*

Good. There are a number of ways down here.

Guarded?

Yeah. But only by one ogre in most spots.

One ogre would be enough to get me in trouble if I couldn't use my camouflage until I made my way underground.

I'll try to reach you, I said anyway.

"I need to go to the bathroom," I announced.

The ogre had departed, and Ironhelm still stood by me, conferring with a dwarf to his other side. His lips parted in surprise at my announcement but only for a moment before he said telepathically, *You will seek the assassins?*

Yes. I hope you don't want Eireth dead just because of the stuff with the half-dragon. The half-dragon I'd inadvertently been responsible for unleashing on the Cosmic Realms. If Starblade was building an army that would threaten Mom's people, it would be my fault.

I do not wish the elven king dead. Simply held responsible. And for his

people to hunt down the beings that their ancestors created.

We need to keep him alive long enough for him to be held responsible.

Yes. Ironhelm pointed to one of his dwarves. “Escort her to the toilet, Hegor.”

The pock-faced bearded dwarf who looked at me wouldn’t have been my first pick for a bathroom buddy, but I nodded, not wanting to delay further. Besides, I had no idea where the toilet was here.

Hegor, an axe gripped in one hand, led me to a covered corridor, then down narrow stairs back to the ground level. We turned to follow an interior corridor, and I swiped sweat from my eyes. At least it was cooler in the shade.

We passed arched doorways, and I glanced down each one, hoping to spot stairs leading belowground. Ogre guards trod past, eyeing me suspiciously, but with Hegor leading me, they seemed to accept that I was a guest.

We reached what must have been the bathroom since Hegor stopped and pointed inside, but another ten feet down the corridor, an ogre stood guard in front of a doorway. One leading to stairs going down? As Val had implied?

I’d like to go there. I nodded subtly toward the ogre, wondering if Hegor would distract him for me.

“That is not a toilet,” he said in Dwarven. “It leads to the cells and catacombs under the arena.”

Uh, catacombs? Lovely. Sarrlevi hadn’t mentioned that.

Perfect. I have a shy bladder. I’d like to go somewhere secluded. I headed toward the ogre, wanting to peek behind him before committing myself. On the off chance it would work, I slipped my hand into my pocket to rub my camouflage charm. The ogre looked right at me.

Hegor stomped after me, and I walked faster, sure he would reach out to grab me and haul me back. The ogre shifted to face us, lifting his club.

“This area is forbidden to guests,” he rumbled.

Scant feet away from the ogre, Hegor caught up, gripped my shoulder, and raised his axe. “You will not embarrass the king by finding trouble.”

I hesitated. I couldn’t smack one of my grandfather’s troops with my hammer. Was he truly threatening to use that axe on me?

The ogre stepped toward us, also reaching for me.

“We will *not* be embarrassed.” Hegor waved the axe in the air for emphasis. Or so it seemed. His movement was swift and unexpected to the

ogre, who wasn't prepared to defend himself. The flat of the axe blade cracked him in the nose.

As the ogre staggered back, Hegor whispered, "Go," to me.

I darted around the ogre and through the doorway, hoping their eyes watered as much as human eyes when one took a blow to the nose.

Cement stairs descended into darkness, and I charged down them without hesitation.

"My apologies," Hegor was saying. "It is very difficult to restrain the young."

The ogre roared in response. I hoped he wouldn't attack Hegor.

"*Eravekt*," I whispered to Sorka, unable to see in the pitch darkness of the corridor at the bottom of the stairs.

I also touched my charm again, hoping it would work now that I was underground. If not, the glow of my hammer would give me away to anyone down here. But once I moved away from the stairs and rounded a bend, no light seeped down from above, so I had no choice.

A whiny musical instrument I wasn't familiar with sounded. Someone calling the meeting to a start?

Sarrlevi? With his face in my mind, I reached out telepathically, willing my words to find him, wherever he was.

The argument between Hegor and the ogre faded, and I hoped he'd kept the guard from stomping down to look for me.

But how was I supposed to find Val?

I was about to pull out my mom's device for detecting hidden nooks when a soft scuff followed by a faint thud sounded in the corridor ahead of me. I pressed my back against the cool stone wall and froze.

My imagination conjured a vision of the scenario Val had shared, of chancing across an assassin but not seeing him or her until we were five feet apart, close enough that the camouflage charms didn't work. Hefting Sorka, I wished *I* had a tiger ally. The idea of fighting a full-blooded elf who might be as well-trained as *Sarrlevi* chilled me.

There wasn't room in the corridor to avoid being seen by someone passing. Up above, the arched halls and doorways all towered above my head, the place built to accommodate ogres, but maybe only those they'd captured and their servants had worked below, and they hadn't needed spacious walkways.

Sarrlevi? I tried again, uneasy because he wasn't answering me.

Even if he hadn't found a way in yet, he couldn't be that far away.

Val? I asked.

Yes. It sounds like I'm not far from you. I heard someone walking, but they stopped.

It wasn't as easy to discern distance and direction with telepathy as with ears, but I almost laughed, having a feeling... *Did you make a scuffing sound a moment ago?*

She hesitated. *It wasn't a scuff. Some kind of scaled rat scurried out of a big crack, and I kicked it.*

I think I'm in front of you.

The shadows stirred in the tunnel ahead. When Val was five feet in front of me, she and Sindari came into view, her own magical blade glowing to guide her.

She patted me on the shoulder. *I'm glad you made it down. Is Sarrlevi with you?*

We split up, and I can't reach him now. I came in with the dwarves.

I came in with Zav.

I assumed. I wondered if her dragon had cracked an ogre guard in the nose so she could slip down here to snoop.

The barrier may have a way to keep people from communicating telepathically through it.

I grimaced at the thought that Sarrlevi might not have found a way in yet.

I think I figured out where the tunnels under the elven contingent are. I'm guessing more assassins might be skulking near them. Val waved for me to follow. *This way.*

Trusting her to lead, I stuck close. If we drifted more than five feet apart, she and her light vanished to my eyes and senses.

When we passed near stairways leading up, my grandfather's voice drifted down. The words were too muffled for my charm to translate, but I trusted he was now in the arena, making his case against the elves.

Do you know why Eireth's party has illusion magic obscuring them? I asked as we walked past statues, ceramic urns, and stone markers in dusty alcoves filled with cobwebs. The tunnels themselves must have seen more foot traffic, because they weren't dusty. *To hide which one is Eireth?*

That's what Zav thinks. He believes there may be snipers. He is going to do his best to keep an eye on things up there and stop any attack. He's concerned, though, that the Silverclaw dragon may be there to distract him at

a crucial moment. I'm concerned he might outright attack Eireth and that his elven bodyguards won't be able to stop a dragon.

I don't think that's the plan. They wanted to blame Sarrlevi for the assassination. I'm guessing the rest of elfdom won't be eager to appoint a new king from a family that was involved in assassinating the old.

Where is Sarrlevi?

I wished I knew. It occurred to me that, if he'd been caught, he might *still* be blamed. Was it possible he was right now being beaten and knocked out to be left where people would later find him, as Slehvya's husband had wanted?

I'll try reaching out to him again, I said.

But Sindari halted, which prompted Val to halt and hold up a hand.

A hint of daylight came from up ahead. And whispered voices. They weren't speaking in Ogre but in Elven.

Assassins? Or ally elves who had been stationed down here to make sure no assassins made it past them? If they were allies to Eireth, would they realize we were allies too?

We could also hear my grandfather's voice again, louder now. We must have moved closer to the dais-end of the arena. It sounded like his talk might be wrapping up. What then? Eireth would be called out to make a rebuttal?

Mongrel dwarf, Garamezlar's voice spoke into my mind. *You did not heed my warning.*

I didn't answer, afraid that if I did, he would be able to locate me. Of course, he might be able to do that anyway...

Val crept forward, and we rounded a bend. Two elves came into view. They wore green and beige under their magical leather armor and looked like some of the king's bodyguards.

We stopped far enough back that they wouldn't be able to see us but close enough to hear. Val rubbed one of the charms on her neck thong. Maybe she had a translation trinket too.

"Sarrlevi is down here somewhere," one of the elves said. "One of our scouts sensed him arriving through a portal outside before he camouflaged himself."

I froze, distressed that they were speaking about him. If the elves all believed Sarrlevi was here to assassinate the king, they might miss the *real* assassins.

Val looked grimly at me. I shook my head, tempted to reveal myself and

ask the elves to read my mind and see the truth. Like a dragon mind scour. It had sounded like certain elves could do something similar to that.

As if thinking of dragons had summoned the attention of the one above, Gamezlar blasted my mind with a dagger of raw power. Agony split my skull, far greater agony than I'd known against Slehyra, and I couldn't keep from gasping and falling to my knees.

Sorka clinked loudly against the cement. I was barely aware of the elves turning to look in our direction. My skull hurt too much, and with terrifying certainty, I knew the dragon would kill me.

VAL CROUCHED BESIDE ME AND GRIPPED MY SHOULDER AS SHE POINTED HER sword toward the elves.

“Someone’s over there,” one said. “I heard them.”

“Sarrlevi?”

“*He* wouldn’t make noise.”

More pain assaulted me, and I couldn’t keep from making even *more* noise. Panting in agony, I struggled to wall off my mind, to use my power to protect myself from the dragon. Sorka’s power also flowed into me as she attempted to assist.

The pain lessened infinitesimally, but even our combined strength was too little to match the might of a dragon.

What is it? Val asked telepathically. *Who’s attacking you?*

The Silverclaw dragon, I managed to reply, tears streaming from my eyes and blurring my vision.

That didn’t keep me from sensing one of the elves striding toward us with a sword raised. Sindari crouched, prepared to defend us, but we couldn’t let him attack Eireth’s bodyguards. We had to get out of there.

Shit. One sec. Val looked skyward—toward Zavryd?—as she rose and faced the elf, her own sword poised.

The pain halted abruptly, but it was too late. The elves knew we were here, and the closest one charged while the second one raised a bow. As soon as we defended ourselves, our quick movements would break the camouflaging magic, and they would both be able to see us.

We don’t want to fight, Val said as the first elf drew close enough to see

Sindari, and his eyes widened. *We're here to protect Eireth too. I'm his daughter.*

Surprising rage flashed in the elf's eyes, and he blasted us with magic.

Sorka wrapped a barrier around me in time to protect me, but the power struck Sindari, and he flew backward. He would have crashed into Val, but she was fast enough to dodge, flattening herself against the wall. The huge tiger bounced off my barrier, managing to land on his feet, but for a moment, I saw only silver fur.

The indignity! Sindari cried telepathically into our minds.

The elf took advantage of our discombobulation and lunged for Val with his sword.

I leaned around Sindari and hurled Sorka, aiming for the elf's weapon hand instead of his chest. We couldn't kill these guys. Even attacking them could get us in trouble.

The elf with the bow aimed an arrow at my chest. My hammer struck the other elf in the arm, knocking his weapon against the wall, and he cursed. He fumbled his sword, and Val and Sindari *both* sprang for him.

I didn't regret throwing Sorka, but I'd lost my barrier when I did so.

"*Vishgronik,*" I whispered, hoping she would return to me before an arrow landed.

A flash of orange light came from the corridor behind the archer. Something must have struck him, because his arrow flew wild, clipping off the ceiling instead of hitting me.

Sorka returned to my grip, and she raised a barrier instantly. But the archer didn't try to shoot again. He whirled, raising magical defenses of his own. The orange light continued, gleaming off the walls, and a great blast of power—of *familiar* power—shredded the archer's barrier.

Sarrlevi.

Damn it. I appreciated the help, but it would be even worse if *he* attacked the king's bodyguards.

I rushed past Val, Sindari, and the elf they were battling, hoping to stop Sarrlevi before he did something irrevocable. But he was using his sword to fire a powerful magical beam from the tip, and with his foe's defenses down...

The elf jerked back, dropping his bow and clutching his chest. He started to scream, but Sarrlevi sprang, clamping a hand across his mouth as he drew a blade across the elf's throat.

“No.” I lunged but caught his arm too late.

The elf dropped to the ground between us as someone announced, “King Eireth will approach the dais to answer this charge of negligence from the dwarven king.”

Sarrlevi startled me by only frowning briefly in my direction before twisting his arm from my grip and stepping past me with a throwing knife. Though I tried to stop him, I was stunned by his actions, and he was too fast. He hurled the blade, and it thudded into the back of the elf Sindari and Val had been trying to defeat without killing. The knife did what they hadn’t, and the second elf dropped to the ground.

Val stared at Sarrlevi in shock, then lifted her sword in case she needed to defend herself against him.

“Is someone magically controlling him?” she whispered to me.

“I—”

Were they? Could it be the dragon?

“No.” Sarrlevi lifted a finger to his lips, glanced up the stairs, then activated his camouflaging magic. *Hide yourselves. There is an ogre up there. He will have heard our noise and check on this.*

Why did you kill the king’s guards? I asked, including Val in the telepathic conversation.

Those aren’t the king’s guards. I recognized them both. There aren’t that many elven assassins. Slehyra’s family either wants to keep this in the species or— Sarrlevi was close enough that I could still see him and that his eyes were toward the arena, *—they wanted people who could pass, at least at a glance, as elven guards meant to be here.*

They fooled me.

Surprisingly, the ogre Sarrlevi had said would come down didn’t.

Instead, Gamezlar’s telepathic voice boomed through the arena. *You miscreant murderer of Silverclaw dragons, do you think my clan has forgotten your crimes? I will indeed challenge you to a duel.*

Was he talking to Zavryd? It sounded like the end of a conversation that had started in private and then escalated.

“I didn’t mean for that to happen when I asked Zav to get him off you.” Val stepped closer to us to peer up the stairs. “They’re going to fight.”

From our positions, we couldn’t see anything but the sky, but if we ran aboveground, our camouflage would disappear.

“Gamezlar was goading Zavryd earlier,” I said, “like he *wanted* a

fight.”

A roar filtered down to us; I couldn't tell which dragon it came from. Loud conversations in numerous languages broke out all over the arena. Orange light flared outside—fire.

My senses told me the dragons had engaged in battle above the far end of the arena. I winced. My grandfather and the dwarves were at that end. I hoped they wouldn't be blasted with an inferno by accident.

Several elves are at the dais. Out in the open. Sarrlevi had to be thinking about accidents too. He took a step, as if he would charge up there, camouflage be damned, but he halted and lunged for one of the dead elves. *Help me change into this one's clothing.*

They're going to recognize you, I said but did as he asked, grimacing at the fresh blood that came away on my hands when I untied the elf's shirt laces.

Not if they're focused on the dragons, Sarrlevi said. *Not at first.*

Instead of helping, Val ran to the other elf and started taking off his clothing.

You passing for an elf bodyguard is even less likely than Sarrlevi, I told her.

Gotta try.

Sindari swished his tail. I didn't know how she would try to pass *him* off as an ally to the elves.

Another roar came down from above. The dragon battle had moved closer to the dais—and the elves. Accidentally? Or intentionally?

“They'd better get out of there,” I whispered.

The elves seemed to be crouching, a barrier around themselves in case the dragons drew too close. That fuzzy illusion remained around their group, keeping me from picking out Eireth. Had I sensed him, I would have shouted a warning into his mind.

While Sarrlevi and Val donned the fallen elves' clothing, I crept up the stairs, doubting anyone was looking over here when dragons were wheeling and snapping at each other above the dais. A screech of fury came from one, followed by power that ripped across the arena like a typhoon. It knocked ancient stone free and sent flagstones flying, as if they were chips of sawdust rather than heavy rocks embedded in the floor of the arena.

The gnome delegation, their leaders in the line of fire, cried out as they ducked behind their seats.

“Dragon lords,” the ogre who’d spoken to Ironhelm yelled, “please take your duel out of the arena! You may wound innocent people with your battle.”

Our stairs came out directly into the arena instead of a nearby corridor, and two ogres crouched on either side of the exit, their weapons raised as they watched the sky. I dared not creep farther out.

The enraged dragons snapped at each other, coming together in the air above the dais with a slashing of talons. If they heard the ogre moderator, they gave no indication.

Another blast of power sent Zavryd tumbling. He would have crashed into the seats, but he somersaulted in the air, wings spreading, and stopped himself. Gamezlar arrowed after him. Once more, they came together in a flurry of biting, slashing, and wing beating. One of the dragons—I couldn’t tell which—screeched in pain.

“Zav!” Val charged up the stairs, beckoning for Sindari to follow, and almost bowled me over.

She ran past the ogre guards, who, captivated by the dragon fight, only glanced at her. Maybe because she wore elven clothes and had their blonde hair, the ogres didn’t notice the lack of points on her ears. One did gape at Sindari, but another roar from the dragons and a blast of fire that caused cement to crack and shards to fly drew their focus back to the battle.

At first, Val ran toward Zavryd with her sword raised, but he must have said something to her. She halted and instead veered toward the elves, waving and pointing toward me. No, toward the stairs.

Father, take cover, Val yelled telepathically. Zav believes the Silverclaw dragon is only distracting everyone so an assassin can reach you.

The elves looked toward her and then toward the stairs, where I ducked lower, afraid I was visible to them. Though they’d appeared to hear her, they didn’t move, other than to raise bows, some pointed toward her and the dragons and a couple pointed toward the stairs. Eireth didn’t respond.

That confused me. Unless...

Sarrlevi drew even with me, his blades in hand.

I grabbed his arm to keep him from charging out, especially with people peering this way. *I don’t think he’s in that group.*

Sarrlevi looked sharply at me.

You can’t sense him, right? I asked.

Not through their magic, no.

If he was there, he would have responded to Val. They're using that magic to protect him. Using my senses, I scanned the elves that remained in the seats. My gaze snagged on the tree behind them, still casting shade with its branches. The obscuring magic wrapped about it, just as it did around the two groups of elves, but I could tell it had an aura and almost seemed alive. *Uhm, can your people turn into trees?*

Sarrlevi squinted at the strangely placed oak even as the dragons landed hard on the arena floor, one tail whipping toward the dais as they fought. The elves scurried back, their bows shifting toward the battle, though they didn't dare fire at two dueling dragons.

Garamezlar's tail flicked, the tip knocking into the podium and sending it flying. If not for the barrier, it would have crashed into two of the elves.

Turn into trees, no, Sarrlevi replied, still studying it, *but with magic, an elf could appear to be one. Maybe that's—*

He broke off and pointed at two of the ubiquitous ogre guards climbing down the seats toward the elven group from above. They gripped axes in their hands.

Unlike the rest of the ogres, magic made them fuzzy, and, for a second, my senses seemed to tell me they were elves instead of ogres. My eyes didn't agree, but I found it suspicious that they were angling straight for that tree. While all the elves in front of it and below it were focused on the threat from the dragons...

That could be Eireth, Sarrlevi said.

The tree?

Without confirming the thought, Sarrlevi leaped to the arena floor and ran toward the low wall separating it from the seating area. He didn't charge straight for the elven contingent—they would recognize him and the threat right away if he did—instead leaping up in front of the goblin group.

Though I feared being recognized—I had neither bodyguard clothing nor looked anything like an elf—I worried he would need help and ran after him.

The fighting dragons nearly flattened Val as they smashed into the dais. *Everyone needed help.*

You dare lift your weapons at a dragon? Garamezlar snapped toward the elves in the arena with them, though they hadn't attacked him.

Great magic swirled about the dragon. Was he preparing to unleash it on the elves?

Before he could, Zavryd sprang atop Garamezlar, pinning him to the

ground and preventing him from breaking through their barrier.

The ogres—or elves that *looked* like ogres—had almost reached the tree. They raised their axes—*magical* axes.

Sarrlevi angled toward them but wouldn't reach them in time. The tree wavered as it shape-shifted into an elf with a sword and shield. A *familiar* elf. Eireth turned to face the threat with his weapons raised.

Still down in the arena, I lifted my hammer to throw at one of the axe-wielders.

You made a stupid choice, mongrel, a voice spoke into my mind. Slehyra. *This time, I'll do far more than grab your ankle with a plant.*

My senses couldn't pick her out, but her telepathic words came from inside the elves in the seats. How had she gotten herself invited along? After Val and Zav had warned the king about her?

What are you doing here? I demanded, trying to narrow her location further. *You're a schemer, not an assassin, aren't you?*

For the second time in ten minutes, a stab of pain blasted me in the head. It came from Slehyra, not Gamezlar, so it wasn't as incapacitating, but I couldn't keep from gasping and gritting my teeth.

Aware that I was out in the open and vulnerable, I drew upon Sorka's power and tried to wall myself off, to push away her attack. Sarrlevi might not need my help, but I couldn't know that for sure. There might yet be dozens of assassins about.

Somehow, Slehyra was stronger than the last time I'd faced her. Assisted by some artifact?

Though I struggled heroically against her power, the pain pummeling my head like a jackhammer drove me to my knees and left me helpless.

GUNFIRE RANG OUT—VAL SHOOTING HER MAGICAL PISTOL. SHE COULDN'T have seen Slehvyra any more effectively than I, and couldn't want to risk hitting her father, but maybe she fired over the elves' heads to startle Slehvyra. Whatever happened, the attack flattening me lessened slightly.

Though I could still feel Slehvyra's presence in my mind—and the mental dagger she was trying to thrust through my skull—I managed to scramble to my feet.

In the seats, Sarrlevi was running through an aisle, drawing closer to Eireth's would-be assassins. They hadn't seen him yet. He threw a dagger, and it sped through the air, then sank into the neck of one of the axe-carrying ogres.

The assassin's outline wavered as he stumbled, the ogre illusion wavering and disappearing. Another elf assassin in the king's colors was revealed as he tumbled between the seats with the dagger embedded in his neck.

Eireth barked a warning to his people as he crouched to defend himself from the other assassin. That one's ogre illusion was still in place. Seeing that he was spotted, he slowed down, glancing toward the oncoming Sarrlevi but also continuing toward Eireth.

Sarrlevi faltered, his head jerking, as if something had struck him above the ear. Or was that Slehvyra attacking him with a mental blow?

Val had stopped firing, distracted as Zavryd and the other dragon rolled across the arena floor. She had to leap aside to keep from being flattened.

Broken flagstones ripped free as a whirlwind of power whipped around the dragons. Huge pieces of rock flew toward the elves, keeping the group

from turning to protect Eireth. It *appeared* accidental, but it couldn't be. The flagstones flew too precisely.

As I tried again to reach the wall, Slehvya refocused her magic on me, the pain intensifying. I struggled against it to lift my hammer, but I didn't have a clear shot at her. I couldn't even *see* her.

Teeth gritted against the pain, I kept running toward the elven contingent, hoping the illusion would fade if I got close enough. Once I could pick out Slehvya, I vowed to plow my hammer into her.

Sindari and Val had realized where Eireth was and also ran in that direction. But only Sarrlevi was close enough to stop the second assassin before he reached the king. He shrugged off whatever mental attack was afflicting him and threw another dagger.

The second ogre-illusioned-assassin had a barrier up, and the blade didn't reach him. Seeing Sarrlevi coming, he threw a wave of power at Eireth, then whirled to defend himself with his magical axe. Sarrlevi attacked with his own magic, tearing into the assassin's barrier.

The ogre illusion dropped as his foe staggered back. A foe I'd seen before—the silver-haired Asthidor. Come to kill the king himself? To make sure the family plan worked?

It was Sarrlevi who Asthidor locked his gaze onto. Hatred burned in his eyes as he snarled and readied his axe.

If Sarrlevi was surprised by the assassin's identity, he didn't show it. Not hesitating, other than to glance at the king, he charged straight at Slehvya's husband. But Asthidor had recovered from the last attack. Axe raised, he cast another magical blow, this time at Sarrlevi. The raw power wrenched Sarrlevi's barrier away.

Both elves paused, ten feet from engaging each other with their weapons, and hurled magic back and forth instead.

"You'll not reach my king and slay him, foul assassin!" Asthidor shouted, as if he hadn't been on his way to sink an axe into Eireth's skull.

"You're the assassin here, doing your wife's bidding, as always," Sarrlevi bit out as he struggled to brush aside another mental attack.

King Eireth watched them both warily, his shield and magic raised in defense. He *had* to know Asthidor had been sneaking up on him. And that Sarrlevi was helping him. He *had* to.

Maybe I mentally transmitted that thought by accident, for Eireth glanced at me. His face was a hard mask, and I couldn't tell if he knew I was running

to help or thought I was one of the assassins after him.

I'd reached the seating area and started to climb the low wall, but another stab of mental magic sank into my brain. Another attack from Slehvya.

It packed more of a punch than the first and knocked me back to the arena floor. Snarling, I fought the urge to hurl my hammer at the cluster of elves and hope to get lucky and hit the right one. Or hit *all* of them. It wasn't as if they were helping.

Half were cowering as flagstones and pieces of cement continued to pelt the seats, and many didn't even appear aware of the threat to their king. Since Asthidor and Sarrlevi were throwing magic instead of blades, they weren't making much noise, not nearly as much as the dragons thrashing and roaring in the arena.

More gunfire rang out. Val. Her bullets sailed toward Asthidor, but they didn't make it anywhere close before pinging away. At least some of the elves were doing something. A magical wall protected their group. Unfortunately, it also protected Asthidor, at least from the direction of the arena.

You will die, mongrel toad, Slehvya snarled into my mind. *And so will your mongrel friend and your obtuse lover.*

Remembering the trinket that found hidden nooks, I wrapped my fingers around it, willing it to show Slehvya within the group of elves. Whether it was meant to do that or not, it partially worked, and, for a second, I spotted her. Her outline wavered as she stood on a bench surrounded by elves in the aisles, her focus alternately on Sarrlevi and me.

A flagstone flew past, inches from my head, and slammed into the wall. Shards struck me, gouging my cheek, as the image of Slehvya wavered again and started to disappear.

"Oh, no you don't." Ignoring the blood dripping down my face, I hurled my hammer, certain where she was now. I willed Sorka to have the strength to bust through the elves' wall and reach her.

Distracted by another flying flagstone, Slehvya glanced to the side and didn't see my throw. As Sarrlevi and Asthidor battled several rows up in the seats, and the dragons continued to roar and fling magic in the arena, Sorka pierced the elven barrier and slammed into Slehvya's chest.

She flew backward, tumbling between startled elves with their arms raised against flying rock. The pain assaulting my mind vanished.

A great clash rang out, weapons coming together—Sarrlevi and Asthidor.

They'd closed the distance and set aside magic in favor of axe and sword. Their blurring blades glinted as they reflected the harsh sunlight, and their faces were twisted in snarls of hatred. They'd ripped each other's magical barrier down, and now they tried to slice each other's head off.

Asthidor seemed to have forgotten the assassination, his focus solely on Sarrlevi. Had he even seen his wife knocked back? I doubted I'd killed Slehyra, but she hadn't yet risen.

When I called for Sorka, the hammer flew over the elves' heads toward me. A grunt of pain came from the duel as Sarrlevi gouged a hole out of his foe's chest.

Asthidor faltered, one hand slipping from his axe, but he kept it up to defend while launching more magic at Sarrlevi.

One of the elves finally figured out what was going on behind their group and yelled for the guards to protect Eireth. Whoever had been maintaining the illusion around the elves had dropped it—either that or my trinket was allowing me to see through it. Now I could pick out their auras and see individual people, including one who pulled out a dagger. At first, I assumed that was one of the guards, turning to help defend the king, but he crept toward Eireth's back, and my gut sank. Slehyra wasn't the only traitor among the elven contingent.

"Look out, Father!" Val yelled, she and Sindari rushing up the seats toward the group.

She'd holstered her pistol and now carried her sword. The elves must have believed her a threat though, for they moved to intercept her.

I was more to the side and had a decent view of the dagger-wielder. With a great heave, I hurled my hammer at him.

At Val's warning, Eireth turned, but he saw Sorka instead of the real threat. His eyes widened as he jerked his shield around. But my aim was on point and slammed into the assassin with the dagger. Less than three feet from Eireth, he flew back, landing between the seats where Slehyra was trying to rise. He flattened her.

A gasp of pain came from Asthidor as Sarrlevi slipped through his defenses again.

"Damn you," Asthidor snarled, dropping to a knee. Blood ran from numerous gashes in his face and torso. "You amoral bastard, you slept with my wife and every female in the capital. Why couldn't you *die*?"

Sarrlevi lifted his sword, looking like he would plunge it into Asthidor's

chest, but he glanced at Eireth—Eireth, who had turned back to watch—and instead rested his blade on the side of Asthidor’s neck.

“Drop your blade, *assassin*,” Sarrlevi told him.

Asthidor let his axe fall.

In the arena, the dragon fight ended, and all fell silent, save for the clatter of that axe tumbling down.

Still crouching with his weapons raised defensively, Eireth looked all about, braced for further threats. His people fanned out around him, those remaining presumably loyal to him, and pointed bows and swords at everyone close, including Sarrlevi.

Sarrlevi lowered his swords but raised a barrier. I tensed and called Sorka back, preparing to defend him if anyone attacked.

Several elves squinted warily at me as my hammer tumbled through the air on the way back to me. Eireth stared a long time at Slehyra and the elf who’d tried to reach him with a dagger. Both were alive, though they had to have broken ribs after being the recipients of Sorka’s wrath.

Eireth flicked his fingers, waving for his guards to bind them, then looked for a long moment at Sarrlevi before finally turning his gaze to Val and Sindari. I wagered he hadn’t expected to see *any* of us today.

As all have witnessed, Zavryd boomed from the arena floor, where he stood atop Gamezlar, talons digging into the pinned dragon’s scales, blood dripping from gouges in both of their flanks, I, Lord Zavryd’nokquetal of the Stormforge Clan, have defeated this weak Silverclaw dragon, who only challenged me to a duel so that he could distract the elves and everyone else while his assassin allies attempted to slay the elven king.

Lies. Gamezlar’s head came up, and he snarled at Zavryd. I challenged you to a duel because you are an odious Stormforge who mates with mongrel filth and helped her kill noble dragons from my clan. I have nothing to do with the assassins.

The Dragon Justice Court will determine whether that is true. Zavryd flicked a wing, and artifacts flashed, then dimmed all around the arena.

He formed a portal—had he knocked out the devices that kept people from doing so here?—but he looked at Val before going anywhere. They held gazes long enough to make me believe they had a telepathic conversation. When Zavryd left, he forced Gamezlar through the portal ahead of him.

“Due to copious interruptions, this meeting will be adjourned until tomorrow,” the ogre moderator announced from the destroyed dais and

podium. His robe hung in tatters, and blood trickled from his broad forehead.

Nobody responded to him. The elves in the arena, some also bleeding, climbed into the seats and toward their king and the rest of their group.

Sarrlevi backed away, letting them handle Asthidor and Slehvya. I hoped Eireth's people would question them and find out that we'd caught or stopped all of the assassins.

Boots thudded on the cement near me, and I turned, worried the ogre guards would grab me now that things had settled. But King Ironhelm and his dwarves were heading toward me.

"I trust you found the toilet?" Ironhelm asked me, Hegor at his side.

"Yeah. Thanks."

The dwarves gathered around me and faced the elves. To protect me in case Eireth's people hadn't figured out that I'd helped them?

"The dwarves will adjourn," Ironhelm announced to the moderator.

"As will the gnomish contingent," came a call from the rattled gnomes, pieces of flagstones littering the seats all around them.

"And the elves," Eireth said wearily. "We have matters to settle."

That was an understatement. If Eireth said anything to Sarrlevi, it was telepathic. Again, I *hoped* he realized the truth of what had happened, that Sarrlevi had helped him and not been one of the people angling for him.

"The goblins will stay and help the ogres with the clean-up," came a call from a wispy-haired elder munching on something as he and his people watched the proceedings. They didn't appear to have been hurt or disturbed in any way by the dragon battle, and several were eyeing the wagons of libations.

"Same as on Earth," I murmured.

Sarrlevi limped toward me, the dwarves eyeing him warily but not stopping him from approaching. I didn't know if he'd received new wounds, or if that was the same limp from the fight at Slehvya's house, but he looked even wearier than Eireth.

Val waved to us, but she and Sindari headed for the elves. I trusted Eireth had offered her a ride home, or maybe Zavryd had said he would return shortly.

The elves formed a portal, and Eireth's people ushered him through it quickly, then pushed Slehvya and Asthidor after him, the prisoners surrounded by guards. To promptly throw them in elven jail, I hoped.

"Did Eireth say anything to you?" I clasped Sarrlevi's hand. "Like that he

was utterly grateful for your assistance and now realizes that you're a decent person?"

"He nodded to me."

"That's a little underwhelming."

"I believe I *won't* be implicated in the assassination attempt," Sarrlevi said. "That's enough."

Was it? I'd hoped for more.

“I APOLOGIZE FOR THIS MESS, MATTI,” TINJA SAID AS WE STOOD TOGETHER IN the morning light, regarding my front door and the rotten eggs spattered all over it. “I didn’t realize until the projectiles started landing that the human hoodlums would be able to throw their detritus across the defenses of your property.”

“They were trick-or-treaters, not hoodlums, I assume,” I said, though, given the mess, I was inclined to agree with her descriptor. “It’s not your fault. I was so distracted by the assassination threat that I forgot it was Halloween back home.”

Technically, it had been the day and a half I’d spent with Sarrlevi in his chalet on Jiaga *after* the threat that had distracted me from the holiday, but I didn’t point that out to Tinja. After his battles, Sarrlevi had needed someone to tend his wounds. Admittedly, I hadn’t known how to do much more than wrap green elven bandages around him, and my touching of his bare chest—and other bare bits—had somehow led us to the bedroom. Eventually, he’d sent me back to Earth so he could meditate and regenerate and I could get some rest. My lips curved at the memory of how little *rest* we’d gotten on Jiaga.

“If it’s any consolation,” Val said, coming up the walkway with an armful of frozen ribs, “the topiaries were toilet-papered and shaving-creamed again too. Mom said she and Arwen were able to track the delinquents to their home, but it turns out they’re twelve-year-olds, so Mom refused to take any action against them. *Zav* wants to take action against them, but I made him promise he wouldn’t do any worse than respond in kind. He says dragons are

far too noble and mature to fling toilet paper at people's homes, so we're at an impasse."

"I'm not too noble or mature." Maybe I would get the address from Sigrid. The parents might get an inkling about what their kids were up to if they woke up every morning to toilet paper dangling from their gutters and tree branches.

"Had I been more alert, I might have *goblinated* the miscreants," Tinja said.

"I'm glad you didn't," I said. "It's against the law to pelt teenagers with blender blades and whatever other sharp things you're using for ammo these days."

"Is it not also against the law to hurl rotten eggs at a domicile?" Tinja asked.

"Not on Halloween night."

Val nodded. "It's true. If they come back tomorrow, you might be justified in defending the property."

"Don't give her ideas." I pointed at the frozen meat Val had lugged up the porch steps. "What's all that?"

"I went shopping while you were gone and picked up some supplies for your barbecue party. You invited Zav, and he's eager to visit, so long as the odious elf isn't there—his words—but I worried you might not realize how much dragons eat. Especially compared to elves. Sarrlevi picks at his food like a bird." She frowned toward the door. "I just remembered how small your fridge is. I can help you thaw some of this if you want."

"My fridge is standard size."

"Exactly. You need a couple of commercial units to hold food sufficient for a dragon. And did I hear that Xilneth and Zondia might show up too? Matti, you need a walk-in freezer."

"While I appreciate the sentiment, I'm not sure my barbecue grill is big enough to cook those anyway. They look like the ribs that tipped over Fred Flintstone's car. Where'd you get them?"

"I have a butcher that hooks me up."

"With what? Rhinoceros? Woolly mammoth?"

"Ha ha. Cows are big, you know."

"Even to a dragon?"

"Well, no. That's why Zav sometimes brings haunches from the game he hunts and kills. That's what's filling *my* freezer. Freezers."

I considered Val. “You must love him very much.”

She grinned. “Yeah. He’s hot, and we dig each other.”

“Is he back from dropping off the Silverclaw dragon at his mother’s feet?” I hadn’t sensed Zavryd since my return the previous night.

“He came home briefly yesterday to give me an update, but he’s at the Dragon Justice Court for deliberations today. From what he told me, Garamezlar has admitted—via mind scouring—to scheming with the insurrectionist elves. His clan may even have been the catalyst that stirred up Slehvya and her family, offering assistance to put them in power in exchange for elven aid in making a few crucial Stormforge dragons disappear.”

“Are elves powerful enough to be a threat to dragons?”

“There have been assassinations before,” Val said grimly. “They’re the most dangerous of the lesser species, as dragons call us, for many reasons.”

Since Sarrlevi had killed a dragon before, I couldn’t scoff at the idea.

A small magical item appeared out of nowhere and floated between Val and me. Startled, I reached for my hammer before I recognized it.

I thought your defenses protected your home from projectiles, Sarrlevi said from the yard, his camouflage hiding him as his magical kerchief went to work on the dried egg yolks on the door. Did you not say last week that you were well-defended from snipers?

Snipers with magical blood using magical ammunition, yes. I told you my defenses don’t do anything to mundane humans. They also don’t attack eggs.

Shortsighted.

I want to be able to get mail and cheese-of-the-month deliveries.

Do your cheese-of-the-month deliveries not come from me? Sarrlevi asked.

Yes, and that’s why you’re allowed on the premises. And because of that. I pointed at the kerchief cheerfully cleaning the mess on the door.

Sarrlevi let his camouflage drop and came into view a few paces away, eyeing Val’s frozen ribs. In addition to his pack and swords, he’d returned with what looked like a head-sized mushroom. With a handle.

You’re back sooner than I expected, I said. What is that?

It didn’t look like a cheese basket, but who knew how elves carried their fromage?

I have meditated and am sufficiently healed. Sarrlevi glanced at Val, probably willing her to leave us alone. *Once you were no longer in my bed, I*

grew... aware of your absence.

I smiled as I trotted down the steps to hug him. *Does that mean you were lonely?*

In general, I do not mind being by myself, as I have my books and my training to occupy me, but of late, I have grown to appreciate your presence. He spread his arms to return the hug without setting down the unexplained mushroom.

It sounds like you were super lonely.

Sarrlevi rested his face against the top of my head as we embraced. *There is an elven poet who spent some time in exile. He wrote, 'I will openly admit that the solitude of the forest can grow oppressive but never hint of the longing for another to walk at my side.'*

I imagine stiff and haughty people have a hard time saying they need someone. But how does a poet get exiled?

By writing unflattering verse about the queen of the time.

Wow, a truly heinous crime.

"I'll see what I can stuff in your fridge," Val said, taking her stack of ribs into the house.

I waved a thanks toward her, then leaned back to prod the large mushroom. The spongy side *felt* like fungi, but a crease around the top hinted of a lid and that it was hollow inside. A box?

"It is the elven equivalent of your picnic basket," Sarrlevi said.

"Really? It looks like something you get after hitting your head on a brick in Super Mario Brothers."

Sarrlevi gave me an I-don't-know-what-you're-talking-about-but-it-sounds-like-Earth-inanity look, then shifted the handle and opened the lid. The scent of salami or something similar wafted out on a whisper of cool air—maybe fungi had insulating walls like a Coleman cooler—but a green cloth hid most of the contents from view. Only the stoppered spout of a brown jug was visible. An elven drink I hoped would *not* grow a beard down to my toes or put hair on my chest.

"I've selected a scintillating selection of delicacies to delight your palate." Sarrlevi's eyelids drooped. "I've also located a secluded wooded area by a romantic waterway. It is not far from here."

Though I couldn't imagine how secluded any wooded areas around busy Green Lake would be, I would happily join him for a picnic. "You want to take me on a date?"

“A date to discuss my remaining mission.”

I almost asked *what mission*, then remembered The Wrench and the folded paper he’d given Sarrlevi.

I licked my lips, abruptly nervous, and waved at the bottle. “Will that discussion go better if I’m sloshed?”

“I’ve sensed your unease around it.”

“That’s a yes, right?”

Sarrlevi opened his mouth, but magic swelled in the street before he could speak.

We turned as a portal formed. An *elven* portal.

“We don’t have anything to worry about, right?” I asked without certainty. “We did crash that meeting, but we saved the king, so nobody should be *that* irked with us...”

Unless Slehvya and her husband had blathered a story about how Sarrlevi had set them up, and *he* was the mastermind behind everything. That wouldn’t work, would it? The elves had mind readers; they could learn the truth. Assuming they were willing to dig into the heads of those two. I remembered that Eireth had been hesitant to have Slehvya questioned earlier.

Perhaps with similar thoughts in mind, Sarrlevi set down the picnic basket and wrapped an arm around me as he drew one of his swords.

Two armored elves that I didn’t recognize leaped out with swords drawn. Hell.

Two more followed. They spotted us right away as they surveyed the terrain. Four more elves came out of the portal, and I recognized one from their capital, one of the guards that had been there the first time I’d visited.

“Is this an arrest squad coming to get you?” I activated my translation charm so I would understand the elves.

“I believe these may be the king’s guards,” Sarrlevi said.

“That doesn’t answer my question, does it?”

Sarrlevi shook his head, his face hard to read.

One elf stepped forward, noted the wards, and didn’t attempt to continue up the walkway. Instead, he faced us and bowed. “King Eireth requests that Varlesh Sarrlevi and Matti Puletasi join him at the royal outdoor garden lounge for a discussion.” The elf turned toward the front porch. Val had come back out sans ribs. “The dragon Lord Zavryd’nokquetal and his mate may also attend.”

Their portal winked out, but one of the elves with a powerful aura created another one.

“Zav’s not here, but I love a good garden-lounge shindig.” Val looked at me and silently asked, *Do you know what’s up?*

No.

Do you know why there’s a giant mushroom beside Sarrlevi’s boot?

Picnic basket.

“Princess Freysha and the mother of Varlesh Sarrlevi are also there waiting,” the elf added, maybe noticing that none of us were leaping to join them.

“I will come.” Sarrlevi looked at me. *We will have to delay our picnic for a time. Will the food be safe here?*

Sitting on the lawn? It might be scavenged by goblins.

Will that not also occur if it is placed in your refrigeration appliance?

Yeah.

As Val headed to join the elves, Sarrlevi released me and summoned magic. Numerous vines sprouted from my lawn and grew over the picnic basket, the tendrils weaving together to secure it to the ground.

“You don’t think that will make it more tempting to goblins?” I grabbed my hammer from the wall inside the door. “As soon as they spot it, they’ll think there’s a great prize under there.”

“Even if they are tempted, their magic is insufficient to thwart mine.” Sarrlevi nodded firmly and strode toward the elves in the street.

As I joined him, I imagined us coming back to a pack of goblins crouched around the mushroom with chainsaws and blowtorches.

The elves eyed my hammer and Sarrlevi’s swords but didn’t insist that we remove them. Their portal took us directly into their capital city, to the decks around the palace itself.

The guards led us up steps with flowering vines growing all along the railings and even over the treads. Reminded of Slehyra’s defenses, I stepped carefully and didn’t touch any foliage.

We reached a deck the size of a swimming pool, four great trees at the corners sending branches arching overhead to make a great arbor. More vines twined along them, flowers filling the air with pleasant scents. Magical planters held bushes, some sprouting fruit that servants were collecting, slicing, and setting on trays with squares of bread.

Sadly, I didn’t see any cheese. Dwarves, I decided, put on better spreads.

Freysha, King Eireth, and the queen waited, seated on green-cushioned wooden sofas that grew out of the deck boards. Eireth appeared regal in a golden tunic with a matching circlet perched on his head. Freysha wore a dress lacking tool-filled pockets, and her expression was wistful, as if she would rather be off building things, but she smiled at Val and me.

The queen was... her usual frosty self. If she appreciated that Sarrlevi had saved her husband, she didn't show it.

Eireth, however, smiled with genuine warmth as he rose to greet us, lifting a hand and gesturing toward someone sitting in an alcove half-obscured by flowering plants. Sarrlevi's mother, Meyleera. Tall, slender, and much healthier than when we'd first met, she strode out to hug her son.

"Good news," she whispered, extending an arm to include me in the hug.

"The king has realized that Varlesh is wonderful and amazing and deserves to be allowed to visit his home world?" I asked.

"He did not use precisely those words," Meyleera replied, "but he has led me to believe my request for that will be granted."

I returned her hug, hopeful. Sarrlevi deserved to be allowed to visit his mother whenever they desired.

Val and Freysha exchanged a sisterly hug, and Eireth nodded to Val during a telepathic exchange. Maybe getting an update on what Zavryd had told her?

"It's taken a couple of days," Eireth said, addressing all of us, "but Slehyra and Asthidor and a number of their kin have been gathered and telepathically questioned. We believe we've found most of those involved in the assassination attempt. And most of those who wished to thwart it." He nodded distinctly to Val, me, and Sarrlevi.

I let out a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding. "How did Slehyra end up with you at the end, Your Majesty? When we, uhm—" Val looked at me, and I kept myself from blurting *when we warned you*.

"She came to me right before I left for the meeting," Eireth said, "claiming her *husband* was the one angling for me. She said she knew of the clever illusion magic he would use and could point him out to my guards if he showed up at the arena. I was skeptical and did not trust her, but..." He looked to Val. "I remember an Earth saying from my time there with—" he glanced at his wife and changed whatever he'd been about to say to repeating, "—from my time there."

"Keep your friends close and your enemies closer?" Val suggested.

“Yes. On the chance she was telling the truth, I could use her, and if she wasn’t, she would incriminate herself in front of witnesses. I’ll admit I didn’t expect so *many* assassins to be angling for me or that the Silverclaw dragon planned to challenge Lord Zavryd’nokquetal to a duel.” Eireth smiled faintly. “The ogres are complaining about the damage done to their ancient arena.”

“Given all the booze the dwarves brought, I’d expect damage to be common after those meetings.”

“That reminds me that I need to check in on the Coffee Dragon when we get back,” Val murmured.

“Trouble since you added the liquor license?” I murmured back.

“Let’s just say that I’m not as convinced as Nin that all our magical patrons will pass out after a few drinks.”

“Did you learn why Lord Asthidor himself joined the assassins?” Sarrlevi asked. “I would not have expected one such as he to involve himself in the actual deed.”

“We learned from the questioning that Slehvya goaded him into it, using *you* as an incentive, I believe. It seems he has long wished to slit your throat.”

“I see.” Sarrlevi didn’t look surprised. Maybe a lot of jealous husbands wanted his throat slit.

“Though she did not admit it,” Eireth continued, “it is also possible the Silverclaw dragon goaded—or magically coerced—Slehvya into that last minute attempt to ensure their plan worked out. Once they learned I had been warned...” He shrugged and spread a hand.

“I’m just glad we caught everyone,” Val said.

“As am I.” Eireth nodded at us again.

The queen made a flicking gesture with her fingers. Telling the king to get on with things so she could go knit a scarf from vines or whatever uptight elven wives did?

Eireth nodded toward her, then faced our group again.

“Approach, Varlesh Sarrlevi,” Eireth said, lifting his arms in a friendly if firm invitation.

Several guards in addition to the ones who had accompanied us—and were sticking close—stood behind the king’s seating area, their hands on their weapons. Even though he’d risked himself to save Eireth, it might be some time before any elves trusted Sarrlevi without reservation.

I half-expected him to object to being given an order, but he nodded, moved to stand before the king, and bowed.

“You and your mother have requested that you be granted the freedom to come and go to Veleshna Var as you wish.” Eireth drew out a rolled scroll.

“That is correct.” Sarrlevi kept his face masked, and I had a feeling that was all he would give. He wouldn’t plead with his monarch or admit how much he missed his homeland. He was too proud for that.

Maybe not *proud* exactly. The lines from that poem he’d quoted came to mind as well as a discussion we’d had in the past about how hard it was to admit vulnerability. Or to be perceived as having vulnerability.

“Due to your role in recent events—” Eireth touched his chest, “—I am prepared to lift your exile and also return your noble title and your family’s land, which should fall to you as the only surviving child of your father.”

My breath caught. It was all that Slehvya had promised she could deliver. All that Sarrlevi wanted?

“There is, however, a condition that must be met,” Eireth added, holding Sarrlevi’s gaze and lifting the scroll. Was that a deed to his family’s lands or the elven equivalent?

Though his face remained masked, a touch of wariness entered Sarrlevi’s tone. “Which is?”

“You must give me your word that you will retire from your current career. You will no longer be an assassin, and you will never kill an elf except in self-defense. Even then, I require that you attempt to subdue your assailant without killing anyone. I would *hope* that none of our people would be foolish enough to attack a noble, but, as we’ve recently seen, not all elves are law-abiding, and some are overly eager to jump into bed with factions plotting to their own ends. I am aware of this.”

“Retire?” Sarrlevi didn’t recoil in horror, but he didn’t sound delighted, nor did he reach for the scroll.

“In exchange for your citizenship and nobility back, yes.”

Meyleera stepped closer to me and gripped my hand. This was everything *she* wanted, I had no doubt, including the required retirement.

Even though I would never put chains around Sarrlevi or demand he change, it was what I wanted too. Oh, I didn’t care if he was a noble—I even worried that he wouldn’t be able to spend as much time with me on Earth if that happened—but for him to retire from killing people for money? Yeah, I wanted that. If he was willing.

I clasped Meyleera’s hand back, nodding at her.

“It is a fair request,” Sarrlevi finally said. Grudgingly.

Meyleera's grip tightened and she leaned against my shoulder.

"One that you accept?" Eireth asked.

"I..." Sarrlevi looked back at his mother and me. She smiled and nodded vigorously at him.

I kept my face neutral, not wanting to pressure him. Whatever he decided, I would love him. But if he said yes, I would be tempted to let out a whoop of pleasure.

After holding my gaze for a long moment, Sarrlevi turned back to the king. "I *will* accept that stipulation, but I must complete one last mission, one that I've already accepted."

Eireth's lips pinched together with disapproval.

The queen frowned at Sarrlevi. "Not killing any *elves*."

"No. No elves." Sarrlevi looked at me again.

"Weren't we going to talk about that?" I whispered. This could only be Mikki the Wrench's mission.

Sarrlevi shook his head grimly. Maybe he'd wanted my permission—or at least understanding—earlier, but this seemed to change things. Because he now felt pressured to finish quickly?

"It will not take long, as I have already done my preliminary scouting." Sarrlevi nodded toward the elven guard who'd formed the portal here, one who presumably had permission to create them within the city's barrier. "If you will return me to Earth, I will complete my last task."

The guard looked toward Eireth, who hesitated but ultimately nodded. "Go."

Varlesh, I told him silently. *You don't have to do any more missions for that goblin. You don't have to do any more missions for anyone.*

Before departing, he held my gaze. *That is incorrect. There is one person for whom I must do missions. Always.*

He sprang through the portal.

I contemplated going through it after him, but who knew where he'd asked the elf to deliver him? Probably not my house.

"You are welcome to our hospitality while you wait." Eireth's jaw was tight, but he nodded to us and gestured to the trays of bread and fruit.

Val walked over to me and quietly asked, "Who's he going back to kill?"

"I don't know, but I think it's for Mikki the Wrench."

"Willard won't be pleased about that."

"How's she going to feel if she finds out I agreed to build twenty tiny

homes for him?”

It took Val a stunned moment before she replied, “I suppose it’ll depend how many flayed bodies he’s going to string up in them.”

“Not many. Despite Tinja’s claims, there isn’t a lot of storage room in her tiny homes.”

“Freysha,” the queen said, “give our guests a tour of the city while they wait.” She probably wanted the mongrels out of her garden.

“Or show them some of your projects,” Eireth suggested.

Freysha brightened. “I would love to demonstrate for them the elevator system I’m constructing using a mixture of elven magic and goblin engineering—for when visitors who can’t levitate or fly on *evinya* visit the city.”

Eireth smiled indulgently. “Of course.”

Meyleera hadn’t yet released me—her furrowed brow suggested she wasn’t pleased that Sarrlevi had disappeared on a *mission*.

I patted her hand, then eased mine from her grip. “It’ll be fine. Varlesh has assured me he’s only accepting missions where the targets are despicable.”

That wasn’t *exactly* what he’d said, but he had implied he would research those he hunted down before agreeing to go after them. Beloved dwarven princesses and the like were out.

“I suppose it’s worth it if he’ll stop after this,” Meyleera said. “And before he left, he told me it was to protect you.”

“Ah.” I wasn’t surprised after the significant look he’d given me, but I yearned for the day when my life returned to normal and I didn’t *need* protecting.

“Come, my friends.” Freysha smiled and waved toward the stairs. “Let me show you around.”

IT WAS DARK ON VELESHNA VAR WHEN SARRLEVI RETURNED. VAL AND Freysha had already gone back to Earth, a mage opening a portal for them, but I'd stayed to visit with Meyleera and invite her to come to my barbecue. The more the merrier. My small charcoal grill might struggle to cook burgers, hot dogs, and portabella caps fast enough for all my guests, but I could always order delivery if people were starving.

Sarrlevi found me in Meyleera's home, watching her paint while we spoke about her work and mine—and pointedly not discussing what her son was doing. When he entered, he smiled contentedly, either pleased to find me with his mother or pleased that he'd completed his mission. Maybe both. He must have stopped in to see Eireth first to tell him he was done assassinating people, for he carried that scroll with him. Good.

I didn't ask Sarrlevi who he'd been after, or comment on fresh claw marks on the side of his neck, merely hugging Meyleera goodbye and accepting his hand clasp. He led me outside, then levitated us toward the city barrier, so he could make a portal. More than once, I eyed his pack, wondering if more severed heads had found their way inside, but I didn't ask.

We arrived back in my front yard, almost landing on Tinja and Gondo, who crouched near the vine-covered basket. Though I didn't see a blowtorch, some of those vines were distinctly *singed*.

Tinja and Gondo skittered back from us, Gondo sticking his hands in his pockets, and Tinja hiding a tablet, the screen open to *How to Kill Noxious Weeds Forever*. Guilt stamped their faces.

Sarrlevi squinted at them and might have said something, but he turned

toward the street, sensing something before I did.

“Oh, dear,” Tinja said. “Mikki the Wrench returns.”

“Prompt,” Sarrlevi murmured.

“You were expecting him?”

“I told him to come collect his proof of the mission accomplished, because you wouldn’t let me bring it with me on our picnic.”

As the goblin limo rolled into view, I debated if I wanted to point out how unsettling it was when he spoke of decapitated heads in the same breath as our date plans. No, I decided. He’d told Eireth he would retire from being an assassin. There shouldn’t be any more heads in the future. I would only have to worry about what other kind of work my challenge-craving and danger-courting elf would find to keep his mind and body occupied and content. As much as I would enjoy it if he came to work with me in my business, I couldn’t see him being happy remodeling homes.

The Wrench stepped out after his bodyguards, and Sarrlevi met him on the sidewalk. I lingered with Tinja and Gondo, not wanting to hear the details of the mission or see the exchange of *proof* up close.

“We should go inside and hide from his notice,” Tinja whispered.

“I have heard that he plans to put in an order for your house plans,” Gondo said.

“He can do that online. I have a website now.”

“Do you know that the tiny homes he wishes Plumber Puletsi to build would be for our people?” Gondo asked. “A rural goblin sanctuary safe from poachers. It is possible he is not as evil as they say, at least to goblins.”

Tinja touched a thoughtful finger to her lips.

“Mataalii,” Sarrlevi called softly, beckoning for me to join them.

The Wrench stood with his hands clasped behind his back. One of his orcs held a dark lumpy bag and, at a nod from his boss, put it in the trunk of the limo.

“I have the funds necessary to acquire materials for the tiny-home project.” The Wrench handed me a purse, heavy coins clinking inside but fewer than had been in the chest he’d originally offered me. Did that mean he’d been able to accomplish the favor I’d asked for? “Are you prepared to start on the construction soon?” he added.

I lifted my eyebrows. “Does that mean you’ve arranged...?”

“The reward out for your head has been revoked.” The Wrench nodded firmly.

Sarrlevi also nodded. “I checked with Nesheeva at the Assassins’ Guild before returning, and she said the original minion, and a human controlling the minion, came to take back the gold coins and pay the severance fee.”

I didn’t like the idea that someone, or many someones, in that organization still had minions magically under their control, but the rest of the news was good.

“How did you change their mind?” I asked The Wrench, suspecting Sarrlevi’s last mission had been tied into this.

“I informed them that people in their organization would start disappearing if they continued to be a threat to you,” The Wrench said. “Through my research, I ascertained who were the most connected, and whose deaths would most disturb the others, thus to ensure compliance. As you might guess, they balked at first, but those who are wise know The Wrench has far-flung associations and the power to make things happen. And once a few key personnel were confirmed dead...” He extended his hand toward Sarrlevi.

Sarrlevi, his face masked, watched me. Afraid of how I would react?

I sighed. I hadn’t wanted people killed—and Willard *really* hadn’t wanted people killed—but if this put an end to the attempts on my life, it was hard to object. I reminded myself that these had been horrible people who would have been deemed criminals themselves if they hadn’t been wealthy enough to buy their innocence.

“Should this organization, what remains of it, ever trouble you again,” The Wrench said, “I will take care of it. You have proven yourself a friend to goblins, and, as I said, few go out of their way to help those who are smaller and weaker than they. I will not forget this.”

“Thank you,” I said.

“Please inform Work Leader Tinja that I will put in an order for the customized house plans shortly. I wish to support goblin entrepreneurs. Especially goblin entrepreneurs who claim enchanters for friends.” The Wrench winked at me, then bowed toward Tinja but didn’t presume to call out to her, merely turning and climbing back into his limo.

“Am I really free of assassins now?” I asked Sarrlevi, scarcely able to believe it after so many months worried about the threat not only to myself but to my friends and family.

“Until you vex someone new, yes.” His eyes gleamed with humor.

“So, a week or two, you think?”

“That sounds accurate.”

I took his hand as the limo drove away. “Thank you. For everything.”

“You are welcome.”

“Matti?” Tinja called softly, her face aglow from the light of her tablet. “I do not wish to interrupt if you are going to proceed with amorous activities, but I have just received an order.” Why did she sound stunned?

“That’s good, right?” I assumed it was the twenty home plans that The Wrench had promised to buy.

“It is good, but there is... a large tip.” Tinja looked in the direction the limo had gone. “A *very* large tip.”

Tinja showed me the tablet, now open to her payment processor instead of the weed-annihilation site. I released Sarrlevi’s hand and went over for a closer look. The payment for twenty custom home plans plus tip had been put in by Pinnacle Goblin Industries, and it was indeed significant, the tip far more than the price of the goods, even with customization.

“Huh.” I scratched my jaw. “That’s a lot of money.”

“Between this and what I’m earning from the sales that have come in since the viral video, it would be enough...” Tinja gazed down the street toward the for-sale house that her people had been ogling all week. “It would be enough for me to purchase that home *without* chipping in with twenty other goblins.”

I blinked a few times. “You were planning to do that?”

“That is how many have expressed interest in living in this appealing neighborhood, and I did consider a joint purchase, yes. Your banks do not give mortgages to our kind, no matter how successful, so even though I was making good money, it would not have been enough to purchase a house outright. But now...” A smile crept across her face. “Now, I could own that residence all by myself and call the shoots, as you humans say.”

“Yes.” I didn’t correct her on the idiom.

“I could turn it into my vision, my urban goblin sanctuary.”

“You could.” I glanced toward Val’s house, wondering what Zavryd would say about goblin neighbors. Up to *twenty* goblin neighbors.

Zadie would be tickled. She believed all the magical *weirdos*, as she called us, should live in the same neighborhood.

“But I am uncertain. Do you think I should... send this money back?” Tinja winced, as if with genuine pain at the idea, but added, “Considering the source?”

I wondered if that tip was equivalent to the amount of gold The Wrench had originally been willing to trade me for the twenty enchanted tiny homes. He wouldn't have had to pay Sarrlevi to eliminate threats to me, and I'd been willing to do my work for the cost of materials. As a savvy business-goblin, The Wrench probably had a better idea than I how much value enchantments added to homes. Maybe this was a fair price.

"No." I doubted Mikki the Wrench was a good guy, but I also didn't think he was as heinous as people believed. At the least, he looked out for goblins, and the goblins who lived on Earth needed someone doing that. "Sometimes, the world craps on you, but, if you're lucky, it also gives you people who care enough to help you out. Their methods might not always be ones you would employ or even approve of... but, sometimes, it's better to be grateful and appreciative so the other stuff doesn't seem so bad."

I looked at Sarrlevi, who stood above his vines, using his magic to unravel them and dissolve them back into the earth. He nodded solemnly at me.

"Besides," I added, "didn't you tell me that if someone offers you great wealth, it is rude not to accept it?"

"I did say that. It is wise."

"Yup."

"Okay. I will keep his tip." Tinja brightened, then crooked her finger for me to bend lower. So Sarrlevi wouldn't hear?

I leaned my head down. "Yes?"

"I like to be independent and pretend I am very confident and do not need the help of anyone, but I know I was lucky to find you and that you have been very helpful teaching me about construction and starting my business. I thank you for this."

"You're welcome." I patted her on the shoulder.

"I will build you something."

"That's not necessary."

"Then I will *bake* you something. Gondo recently shared with me his clan's recipe for ten-pound cake. I will make some for your barbecue tomorrow."

"Uh." I hadn't tasted the *last* ten-pound cake a goblin had given me. After their discussion of whether fat derived from roadkill counted as *lard*, I hadn't been tempted. Also, the sheer heft of the dessert had daunted me. Until undiscerning rodents had gotten to it, the last ten-pound cake had operated as

a doorstep in my toolshed. Still, Tinja's pleased smile promised she wanted to do something for me. "Sure. Thanks."

"Are the goblins invited to the barbecue?" she asked. "I can put them to work acquiring the ingredients."

"Sure," I said again.

Somehow, I'd managed to invite far more people to my barbecue than I'd planned—including not one or two but *three* dragons—but I doubted they would all come. And if they did, the more the merrier, right? I scratched my jaw. How often had I thought that lately?

"How *many* goblins?" I asked.

"A number sufficient to gather ingredients." Tinja waved her tablet vaguely, then skipped around the house toward her tiny home.

Sarrlevi, his mushroom-shaped picnic basket back in hand, joined me. "I believe you will need a quiet and romantic interlude before the preparations for your gathering begin."

I leaned against him. "I think you're right. You said you have a spot in mind?"

"Yes."



Stormwater Detention Pond, the sign read, the words and picture of a heron barely visible in the moonlight. The rumble of traffic was audible in the distance, though the foliage muffled it and also blocked the view of the houses in the neighborhood.

"This is the romantic spot you found us, huh?" I waved toward reeds, mud, and a half-fenced pond, with a stand of trees behind it. The chilly air reminded me that Halloween had passed and the time for outdoor nighttime picnics might be on the wane. "It looks damp."

"It is located near your domicile. Given the many people you must prepare food for, I thought you would not wish to leave Earth tonight."

"I suppose that's true. How many people have I invited, anyway? I'm not sure."

"*Many* that I have witnessed, and more, I am certain. At least three dragons and thirty-seven goblins, in addition to your parents and family and acquaintances."

“*Thirty-seven?*” I’d been envisioning eight or ten.

“A foraging unit is thirty-seven.”

“How do you know that?”

“I’ve traveled far and wide for my work and encountered many beings from all the intelligent species.”

“Yeah, but you largely ignore goblins.”

“I rarely respond to their jibber-jabber, but I do not ignore it. As you’re aware, they often know more than one suspects.”

“Tell me about it. Gondo should be working for the CIA.”

Sarrlevi looked blankly at me.

“Never mind. Did you bring your cot so we don’t have to picnic in the mud?” With frogs croaking, a few crickets chirping, and the moon occasionally visible between the clouds, the wetlands area wasn’t *that* unappealing, and I knew Sarrlevi and I could find a way to keep warm. Smiling, I took his hand.

“I have my cot *and* my moss rug. It’s waterproof and insulating.”

“You know how to get a girl excited.”

“I do.” He smiled smugly and gazed at me through his lashes.

His bedroom eyes never failed to make me flush, and I was already forgetting the night chill. But I couldn’t quite forget my earlier concern about whether he would be able to spend much time on Earth now that he was a noble on Veleshna Var. A noble with duties and lands that had to be cared for?

Before, he’d implied he would help me raise children if we had them, but that had been when he’d been an exile, and the only other homes tempting him had been remote places he only visited part-time. Now... what if he wanted to live back on his home world, a home world I knew he loved? When he’d been losing his mind, he’d found peace for a time by resting his forehead against the trees there, trees far greater than any we had on Earth.

With a whisper of his magic, Sarrlevi floated us over the muddy path and toward a nook behind the pond. The soft glow of his travel nightlight, as I thought of it, greeted us, though the green sphere camouflaged his camp as well as providing illumination. Tonight, it emanated warmth too.

As his moss rug and cot came into view, nestled between trees and overlooking the pond, I decided making love in the wilds—the stormwater detention wilds—might not be so bad. Or did he still want to discuss something? Maybe as a prelude to lovemaking, for a couple of folded

blankets rested on his cot next to the mushroom picnic basket. Or were those fur hides?

The levitation magic faded, settling us on the moss rug. Sarrlevi removed his boots and wriggled his toes in it.

“I’ve had it freshly threaded.” He waved at the rug.

“Like, new moss applied?”

“It’s a moss-based weave, not moss.”

“*Huge* difference.”

“Yes.” He wriggled his toes again, then looked at my shoes. “It’s soft. Females often delight in the feel of it on their bare flesh.”

Deciding not to ask how *many* females he’d invited onto his rug for sexual encounters, I only said, “And males too, huh?”

“Perhaps.” He rubbed the sole of his foot on the rug and smiled contentedly.

Since the moss *weave* was dry, I followed his suggestion and removed my shoes and socks. All right, he hadn’t lied. Whatever the rug was made from, it tickled the soles of my feet, soft like mink fur. I was tempted to take off my clothes and roll around on it.

Sarrlevi sat on one side of the cot and delved into the mushroom-shaped picnic basket. The first thing he pulled out was a metal object the size of a deck of cards. He unfolded it into a four-legged camp table and set it with plates, utensils, cups, food, and the jug of an alcoholic beverage I’d seen earlier. Faint magic emanated from the table as well as the basket.

“Is that like your pack?” I peered into the hollow mushroom, amazed as more and more food came out. “Capable of holding more than it appears it should?”

“Naturally.”

“There is not much I now have to discuss with you over the meal,” Sarrlevi said, “since I... took action on my own. Earlier, I wished to ensure you were not upset that I would assist The Wrench in dealing with the members of that organization. I know you did not want more people killed. But when King Eireth put forth his stipulation, I felt... I did not know how much time he would allow me before rescinding it. I *had* to make sure the reward for your head was removed, that you would not be in danger going forward. If my word bound me not to assassinate people in the future, and that was the only solution, I would either have had to constantly worry about your fate or be foresworn. Neither was appealing.”

“I understand.” I sat on the other side of the cot as he continued to unload and set up. “I get why you did it. I’m not sure there won’t be repercussions, and I can’t say killing people seems like a good way to solve problems, at least to me, but I will admit I’m relieved there won’t be any more wanted posters showing up at the Coffee Dragon for me. At least not until I piss off someone else.”

“Indeed.” He smiled. “As we agreed, you should receive a week or two of respite.”

“Ha ha. Can I... ask you something?”

“If it’s how much cheese I brought along, you can be assured that there is a sufficient amount to sate your hunger.” Sarrlevi showed me triangles of the foil-wrapped algae-dotted cheese from Dun Kroth as well as rich orange cubes protected by pink wax, a variety he hadn’t brought before.

Distracted from my question, I salivated as he unwrapped the offerings. “I am grateful for that.”

He sliced off a piece of the orange cheese and handed it to me. “You are wondering if the lifting of my exile changes anything,” he stated with certainty.

“Yeah. I’m glad you’re able to go home now. But I was wondering... Well, you’ve talked of feeling we’re fused—” I waved to the trees, though I didn’t see any examples of that fusing around us, “—and you know I feel the same way, but we haven’t discussed marriage or living together. I mean, we kind of did when we talked about kids, but I know you’re not that excited about the idea of living across the street from Zavryd, and I don’t know how many responsibilities you’ll have on Veleshna Var now...”

Sarrlevi cocked his head, watching me. “Being fused is, in my mind, as great a bond as being wed, but I am willing to engage in that formality with you if you wish. I might have suggested it, but I am still wanted by your authorities, and I am not a citizen of this world, so I didn’t know if it would be possible.”

“Maybe I can ask Val how it worked when she married Zavryd. I know she had a big wedding. I think Eireth married them in the elven way while a human priest married them too, and then Zavryd claimed her in the dragon way, which apparently means he announced to a bunch of dragons including his family that he was making her his mate.”

“Like an ogre with a club. Dragon mating practices leave much to be desired.”

“Everyone has their own preferences.”

“I doubt King Eireth would preside over a wedding that involves me,” Sarrlevi said.

“No? You’re not besties now that you’ve saved his life?”

“We are not. I believe his willingness to allow my return has more to do with guilt he feels over having allowed Princess Barothla to kidnap my mother out from under his palace guard’s nose. He did not admit this to me, but my mother suggested it. I understand he struggles to look her in the eye.”

“As he should. Anyway, the elven way doesn’t concern me, if you don’t care about it. I bet King Ironhelm would marry us. Or order his stuffy priest Lankobar to do so. I’m not sure how it works on Dun Kroth, but a dwarf wedding has to be more fun than an elf wedding.”

“I have been to a dwarf wedding. There was a lot of drinking, eating, and, in the end, snoring from unconscious dwarves passed out all over the floor.”

“See? *Fun*.” I smirked at him. “Elves probably sing and weave vines two hundred feet up in a tree.”

“There is singing.”

“I thought so.”

“The couple often says their vows on the backs of *evinya* symbolically joined loosely together with colorful flowering vines.”

“*Flying* vows? That’s horrific. We’re definitely doing a dwarven wedding.”

“I am amenable to that. Will your Earth family find it acceptable?” Finished with laying out the food, Sarrlevi set the picnic basket on the rug beside the table.

“Hm.” Would they? Mom and Dad would approve and attend, of course, but Penina would sneer at a wedding where the guests got drunk and passed out on the floor. And I’d barely talked Grandma and Grandpa into coming down to Green Lake for my barbecue; there was no way they would travel to another planet. “Maybe we could do a small Earth wedding. I’m going to be so busy with work these next few months that the thought of organizing a big ceremony makes my head hurt. I’ve never been one to get excited by weddings anyway. Not that there’s a hurry to get married or anything. I love you, and I know that you love me. It’s mostly my family that would give me a hard time—mostly my prim and proper *sister*—if I had children without being married. Not that *I* would mind, or that we were planning to have children right away anyway. I just...” Damn, I was burbling. “I don’t want to

pressure you. About anything.”

“You are not. I know this because you did not bring your hammer on our date, which means you do not feel the need to threaten me with a thumping should I perform inadequately.”

I snorted, remembering when he’d joked about that, when he’d found out I slept with the hammer in my bedroom. “I stopped bringing Sorka with me during our intimate times because she makes snarky comments later if she’s nearby when we have sex.”

“She has never spoken to me,” Sarrlevi said. “Perhaps I am glad.”

“Does *your* sword make snarky comments about what you do in bed? Or on a cot?”

“Or in a tree?” Sarrlevi kissed me, smiling against my mouth, then looked toward a nearby maple growing amid evergreens, a few red leaves remaining on its branches.

“Uhm, sure.” I wasn’t sure what to make of the speculative gleam in his eyes.

“It has occasionally voiced disapproval over my choice of females. It prefers warriors to mages, nobles, and princesses and such.”

“Your sword wants you to be with warrior women?”

“Naturally. It is a weapon, and it appreciates those with martial skill.” Sarrlevi lowered his gaze to mine. “It likes you. As I’ve told you, most of my magical items do.”

“Because *you* do?”

“Because you’re an enchanter.”

“And a warrior.”

“Yes. That matters most to my sword.”

“I’m never quite sure if you’re messing with me when you say your magical items like me.”

“Good.” He grinned and kissed me. “As long as you know I will be here for you and am amenable to whatever type of joining ceremony you wish.”

“I love you, Varlesh.”

“And I you.”

EPILOGUE

I DIDN'T TRY TO COUNT THEM ALL, BUT I WAS CERTAIN *MORE* THAN THIRTY-seven goblins showed up for my barbecue. They arrived hours before the start time, trundling into the kitchen with jars of honey and homemade lard—or something *like* lard—as well as bags of seasonings and sacks of acorns their people must have saved from earlier in the fall. No doubt they liked to be prepared for when an occasion to make ten-pound cakes came up.

Several goblins also brought roadkill in sacks, cheerfully offering the carcasses for the barbecue. Managing not to flinch away, I asked them to store those outside, saying we would wait until the hot dogs, burgers, and ribs were gone before cooking their meat. After all, we wouldn't want to taint their unique finds with pork and beef drippings. Fortunately, this logic seemed reasonable to them.

I immediately put in a grocery order for more burgers and hot dogs to make sure we wouldn't run out, no matter *how* many dragons arrived. Val had offered to let me store items in her commercial refrigerator until they were needed. It was, I decided, good to have a friend and neighbor who well understood the needs of those with magical blood.

As more guests arrived, the goblins congregated in the kitchen, demolishing my cheese stash. Fortunately, I'd thought to hide the good stuff—the offerings Sarrlevi brought from other worlds—in another part of the house until later. I wanted to make sure my family got some of that.

Sarrlevi was away now, picking up a few items from around the Cosmic Realms that he believed my guests would like. At the least, he'd promised that a root-vegetable-loving half-dwarf would love them. And probably Mom

and whatever other dwarves she brought along. Of course, after seeing her bodyguards demolish the peanut brittle, I wasn't worried about finding items that would be acceptable to the dwarven palate—and teeth.

As I made coleslaw, I kept glancing through the living room window, wanting to catch my family when they arrived. Penina, Zadie, and Abbas had all been to this house already, but my grandparents hadn't. Of course, they'd spent time at Val's house across the street, so they ought to find it easily, but I wanted to greet them and give them a tour too.

During one such check, I spotted Val and Dimitri walking across the street toward my house. Between them, they pushed a giant stainless-steel barbecue grill with extra propane tanks clattering atop it. I recognized it as a component in their outdoor kitchen and, though I hadn't requested that they bring it, when I thought of my little charcoal grill on the back porch, I decided it was a good idea. My guests would go hungry in the time it took to cook enough food on mine.

"Oh, wonderful," one of the goblins said, hopping onto the couch to peer out the window. "Now there will be room to cook our meat *and* your meat all at once."

"No, no," I blurted. "The taint, remember?"

"You do not think there will be room to sufficiently space the human meats and the scintillating goblin meats apart to avoid that?"

"I'm afraid not. I'm a very messy spatula wielder." Before the goblin could argue further, I hurried outside to help Val and Dmitri.

"We thought you'd need more cooking power," Val said as I helped them push their grill over the curb. "I've got my smoker going too with as many ribs as I could rub down and shove in. Zav was salivating like Niagara Falls this morning."

"Ew," Dimitri said.

"I caught you drooling too," Val pointed out.

"Not like Niagara Falls."

"Like Snoqualmie Falls?"

"Maybe."

"Thanks, Val." I waved to the grill. "It's a good idea, especially considering what the *goblins* brought."

"I heard there'd be ten-pound cake." Dimitri smiled and patted his belly.

"You *like* their cake?" I asked.

"Sure. It's got heft."

“Like a kettlebell.”

“And it’s sweet,” he said. “You just have to be prepared to quaff some Maalox later.”

“You’re not old enough to need Maalox, are you?” Val asked him.

“After I eat goblin food, I am.”

“Understandable.”

“Is it a potluck?” Dimitri asked, noticing a pair of goblins coming from the direction of the house Tinja was in the process of purchasing. They carried ropes of sausages slung over their shoulders. What kind of meat were *they* made from? “Was I supposed to bring something?”

“No.” I waved the goblins toward the kitchen, wondering what my family would think when they showed up. Mom and Dad wouldn’t bat an eye but Penina, Grandma, and Grandpa? I worried about them. Maybe I would do another family-only gathering soon. “Val is providing plenty from your household.”

She nodded, pausing to lift the lid on the grill to show a Costco-size box of burgers inside.

“That’s good.” Dimitri, appearing relieved to take a break, wiped sweat from his brow. “I’ve been too busy crafting lately to grocery shop. All I’ve got are Pop-Tarts.”

“No need to bring those,” I said. “Sarrlevi isn’t a fan.”

“The goblins like them.”

“Is there anything goblins *don’t* like?” I asked.

“Not much,” Val said.

We paused as not one but two dragons approached from the direction of Green Lake. Zavryd and Xilneth.

“Are those two... flying together?” Even though I’d invited both, I’d assumed they would spend the day sniping at each other and one would leave early in a huff.

“I believe Zav is *chasing* Xilneth,” Val said.

Cowardly hatchling who mates with a verminous female from this lowly world and then sings to my sister of true love, I shall slay you.

I only mated with a human female, came Xilneth’s reply, because the beautiful Zondia’qareshi has not yet succumbed to my romantic advances, and the urge is great when one assumes a human or elven form.

Then you should remain in your superior dragon form, though I will mercilessly slay you in whichever form you take, you spineless, rock-kissing

lizard.

The two dragons flew into view, but, with their wings beating so hard they stirred leaves on trees far below, they rapidly passed over our street, one after the other. Zavryd snapped his teeth at Xilneth's tail as he gained ground—air.

With a bland expression on her face, Val watched them pass. Once they disappeared from view, she said, "Zav says he'll be back soon for food. He's working up an appetite."

"Will *Xilneth* be back?" I asked.

"Oh, I'm sure."

"*With* his tail?"

"I'm less certain about that, though I understand dragons have the ability to grow their tails back from all but a complete severing."

"A fact to keep in mind for Trivial Pursuit," I murmured.

"With the knowledge you're gaining from living across the street from a dragon, you'll rock the Science and Nature category."

"I have no doubt."

A portal formed in the street, emanating powerful dwarven magic.

"That's my mom," I said with certainty, hoping Dad was with her.

Ten dwarves hopped out of the silver disc hovering over the pavement, the same bodyguards that had accompanied Mom last time. As soon as their armored feet hit the ground, they started for the house, waving eagerly, but Grantik barked an order. He pointed at the ground in front of the portal. Shoulders slumped as the dwarves lined up to either side, hands on their weapons. Prepared to defend Mom from the dangers of Earth?

Though they waited dutifully where Grantik pointed, several gazed longingly toward the house. Or maybe the *kitchen*. One smiled and pointed at his mouth while smacking his lips.

"They must be really excited to get their hands on Earth burgers," Val mused.

"As hard as it is to believe," I said, "I think it might be my Grandma's peanut brittle that has them excited."

"The stuff you were going to panel the den with?"

"Yeah. Dwarves like it."

"They must have jaws like steel traps."

"I believe that's a typical quality of dwarven teeth, yes. I come from sturdy stock."

“I’d envy you your sturdiness, but I don’t know if I would trade my height for it. I like being able to reach things on the top shelf at the grocery store.” Val winked at me.

“Yes, I don’t understand why stores don’t have stools in the aisles.”

Mom and Dad came out of the portal together, holding hands as they landed. Unarmed and in work clothing similar to what they’d worn the other day in the smithy, they waved cheerfully at me. They passed the dwarves, who trailed dutifully after Mom, and headed toward us in front of the fence gate that we hadn’t yet made it through with the grill.

“Thanks for coming, Mom and Dad.” I hugged them. “I hope we can talk later after everyone is fed.”

“Of course, *Nika*,” Mom said. “You know I enjoy giving you lessons every chance I get.”

Dad looked around the front yard and through the gate. “Will Penina be here? With her kids?”

“I think so. I invited them. Grandma and Grandpa said they’ll come for sure.”

“It’ll be good to see them.” He smiled, but it didn’t quite reach his eyes.

Mom, noticing that sorrow, squeezed his hand, then patted him on the butt. “Give it time. Your older daughter will come around and see what a good person you are.”

“Thanks, Roxy.” Dad managed a more genuine smile for her as they headed into the backyard.

“It’s not my imagination, right?” Val asked. “Your mom was grabbing your dad’s ass.”

“I think it was more of a comforting caress than a *grab*,” I said in protest, though I hadn’t watched the butt touching that closely. Even though Mom, Dad, and I were all adults now—as she kept reminding me—I preferred not to imagine them being intimate.

“A grabby caress,” Val said. “That’s cool that she’s still into him after all these years. And vice versa.”

“I understand he’s never stopped being her noble soldier.”

“With a taut, grabbable ass.”

“You’re horrible, Val.”

“Yup.” Val rapped her knuckles on the grill lid. “We better get this back there and put it to work. Your hungry guests are arriving en masse now.”

Nodding, we worked together to push it into motion again. But before

we'd hoisted it through the gate, a BMW arrived, and we paused again.

"Oh, you invited Thad?" Val waved to the car.

"I invited Nin and her barista since they saved me from poisoning. I don't think I've ever spoken to Thad." I sensed Nin inside with Val's ex-husband, as well as two goblins in the back seat.

"Ah. They're seeing each other, so it makes sense that she brought him. I'm not sure why they're driving around goblins though. Maybe the barista couldn't come."

As soon as the BMW parked, a back door opened, and the two goblins got out, carrying one of several giant insulated beverage containers.

"Beer?" I wondered.

Val laughed shortly. "*Coffee*. The Goblin Fuel blend. Nin's contribution to the party."

"Oh, gosh. That stuff is strong. I'll have to make tea for my grandparents."

"You don't think they want to be stimulated this afternoon?" Val asked.

"Grandma gets enough stimulation flirting with Sarrlevi."

"I bet he loves that."

"I think he's used to women of all ages—and species—hitting on him," I said.

"I'll bet. I heard a few orc patrons of the shop whispering about him the other day. He wasn't even *there*, but they'd seen him around." Val lifted a hand toward the street again, an SUV rolling into one of the few remaining parking spots along the curb. "There's Willard. She says she has some news for you."

A whisper of familiar magic wafted between us, and the big grill and propane tanks lifted into the air. Sarrlevi released his camouflaging spell, startling Dimitri as he levitated the barbecue equipment into the backyard.

A cheer went up from the guests when it arrived on the patio.

"How long have you been here snooping?" I asked Sarrlevi.

"Snooping?" He touched my arm. "I was stealthily checking the perimeter for possible enemies and observing your guests to make sure none are engaged in suspicious activities. You've lowered your wards and defenses for this event."

"I'm aware." I stepped closer and leaned against him, memories of the night's interlude in the trees coming to mind. Never would I have thought my mind would contemplate asking him to take me into the woods for sex again,

not when I had a perfectly good bed upstairs. But swinging from a branch while having sex had been exhilarating. Since others stood nearby, I didn't mention it, only saying, "I see some things aren't going to change, even now that you're retired from being an assassin."

Sarrlevi gazed smugly at me, doubtless tracking my thoughts. "Even elven nobles have enemies. It is wise to travel stealthily."

"Of course."

"Just who I want to talk to," Willard said, walking up with a huge Tupperware bowl secured with a lid. I could see green through it. A giant salad? Sarrlevi and any other elves that showed up would approve.

"Me?" I touched my chest as Val raised her eyebrows.

"You." Willard nodded at me, then squinted at Sarrlevi. "*That* one I have no interest in seeing. I do hope his goal has been achieved and that he'll stop assassinating Earth residents." Willard looked at Val. "I would say Americans, but he traveled to Europe to dispatch one of those people."

"Do you have proof it was Sarrlevi?" Val asked.

"He left his calling card of decapitation followed by taking the head with him."

"He's not assassinating anyone else," I assured Willard, glancing at Sarrlevi, who regarded her with a cool expression, neither confirming nor denying anything. "*Ever*. It's part of his deal with King Eireth."

"I thought he was exiled," Willard said.

"Not anymore," Val said. "I was there as a witness. He's a noble now."

"A what?"

"A member of the elven nobility," Sarrlevi said. "King Eireth has suggested that, due to my travel experience on this and other worlds, I might have some use for him in a diplomatic position."

"Well, doesn't that just fluff my muffins?" Willard asked.

Sarrlevi looked blankly at her.

Val raised a finger, probably to point out that the saying had some unintended slang connotations.

"Muffins are like cakes," I explained, speaking first, not needing the conversation to devolve into anything dirty.

"Did someone say cake?" Gondo's voice came from the backyard.

He staggered through the gate with a tray that bowed his legs while requiring both arms to carry. Several ten-pound cakes, the sludgy frosting as thick and dubious as I remembered, weighed it down.

“I don’t eat sweets,” Willard said.

“I’ve recently stopped,” Val said.

“Does your carnivorous mate object to frosting on your lips?” Willard asked her.

“I object to frosting on them. *That* frosting, anyway.”

“But they are *delicious*.” Gondo stepped closer, showing us the tray up close. “Work Leader Willard, after all the hours we’ve toiled together in your office, you cannot doubt my taste.”

“It’s *because* of the hours we’ve toiled together that I doubt your taste.”

The coffee-carrying goblins staggered past, their load sloshing inside the large beverage dispenser, and Willard pointed at it. “I will try that. After I give Puletasi her news. Is your father coming today?”

“Uh.” I pointedly did not look toward the backyard where he, Mom, and the dwarves were already hanging out. “If he *were* coming, would you be professionally and morally obligated to call the police?”

“No. That’s what I came to tell you about. The arrest warrant that was out for him disappeared. I double-checked the database and made a couple of phone calls, both to Fort Lewis and the Seattle PD.”

“Disappeared? Like by accident? Or...” Val squinted at Sarrlevi.

“I am unaware of how to manipulate the technology on your world,” he said.

“Yeah, but you’re good at manipulating *people* who might know how to operate the technology.” Val made a cutting motion over her throat.

“Who else do you know with the power to do favors, Puletasi?” Willard asked, though she looked like she already had a notion. “*Illegal* favors.”

“When does the house tour for Work Leader Tinja’s new goblin sanctuary begin?” a goblin helping to carry another coffee dispenser to the backyard asked.

“You can tour it now,” his partner said as they sloshed past. “She will not own the home for some weeks, but it is vacant, and many goblins are already visiting it.”

“Perfect. A new place in the city for urban goblins will be most excellent.”

“It will indeed.”

Willard watched me as the goblins disappeared into the yard.

“Mikki the Wrench?” I offered, not sure who else might have been responsible. “I didn’t say anything about my father to him though.” I looked

to Sarrlevi, who'd spent more time with the goblin, even if it had largely been to deliver heads.

He smiled, inclining his own head slightly.

"I love you." I wrapped my arms tightly around him.

"Yes." Sarrlevi rested a hand on my back.

"Diplomat, my ass," Willard said as she headed for the backyard.

I sensed a dragon approaching, not Zavryd or Xilneth but Zondia. Sarrlevi tensed and stepped away from me, a hand reaching for his swords.

"I invited her," I said, though she hadn't acknowledged that invitation.

"And she accepted?" he asked skeptically.

"Maybe." My senses told me she was flying in this direction. "I suspect there are more pounds of meat per capita on this block than in all the wild worlds combined. Why *wouldn't* a dragon want to visit?"

Zondia landed on the rooftop, but she didn't look at us. Her lilac tail drooped over the front of the house, dangling onto the covered porch, as she peered into the backyard. At the grill?

Some of the guests squawked in alarm, but Tinja called, "Start the fire! The mighty dragon requires delicious meats!"

Zondia *did* look hungry. Maybe she'd burned a lot of calories fleeing from the crooning Xilneth.

"Guess that's my cue to fire up the grill," Val said, leaving Sarrlevi and me by the gate.

"Don't let the goblins put *their* meat on with the burgers and hot dogs," I called.

"Oh, I won't."

Sarrlevi must have decided that Zondia didn't represent a threat, as long as the food was prepared quickly enough, for he lowered his arm around my shoulders instead of drawing a sword.

"Thank you, Varlesh," I said.

"For not challenging your scaled guests to duels?"

Had he been contemplating that with Zondia? Or had he already refrained from doing so with Zavryd when he'd flown by?

"Yes, that, but... the rest too." I gripped his hand, leaning my chest against him and gazing up into his beautiful blue eyes. "For watching out for me. And for helping me get my family together. Penina shouldn't have any reason not to let Dad visit her and Josh and Jessie now. And I'm sure Grandma and Grandpa will be relieved their son won't have to worry about

being arrested again. You are a most amazing elf.”

“I am,” he agreed.

“Still a touch haughty.”

“Which you like, as attested by the adoration in your eyes—and the squish of your chest against my torso.” His own eyes gleamed with appreciation.

“It’s more that I look past the haughtiness since the rest of you is so wonderful.”

“I am not certain that it is considered *looking past* when you bring it up so frequently.”

“Almost as often as you bring up your mangled soap dispenser.”

“I believe I have not mentioned that since you made me the new one and we tested it in the wash basin you crafted from a boulder.”

“The boulder you gave me.” I was positive the colorful striated tub was made from a rare stone and didn’t qualify as a *boulder*, but it did have a lot of size. “You’re an excellent gift-giver.”

“My wisdom and experiences have made me thus. I could even be—” Sarrlevi shot a look toward the gate through which Val and Willard had gone, “—an effective diplomat if I chose.”

“That’s not really going to be your new career, is it?”

“Likely not, but I am undecided about what to do next.”

“Elves live a lot of years. You’ve got plenty of time to decide.”

“True.”

My sister arrived, her husband driving and the kids in the back of the van. I glanced warily up at Zondia, but she wasn’t doing anything menacing. Considering the family got out without anyone gawking and having a heart attack, I guessed she was camouflaged from mundane humans. I hoped she would stay that way. That *all* the dragons who might visit would.

“Dad’s here,” I warned Penina when she walked up with a bowl of potato salad. “But everything’s okay now. His name has been cleared.” Technically, the authorities’ records on him had disappeared, but that ought to be good enough.

“Oh?”

“Yup.” I gave her a brief summary that left out mentions of assassinations and Mikki the Wrench. It amounted to, *An acquaintance did us a favor.*

Her brow furrowed, but she must have wanted to believe it was okay to hang out with Dad because all she said was, “I guess there’s no problem with

letting Josh and Jessie see him then.”

“No problem at all. I’ve invited only good, wholesome people to my barbecue. There won’t be any troubles today.” I resisted the urge to look up at Zondia.

Two goblins ran between us on the way to the backyard, one carrying a detached windshield wiper with a dead rat pronged on the tip.

Penina’s jaw dropped, and her skin paled. “There won’t be *any* troubles?”

“Well, nothing that should bring the authorities to my door.” Besides, thanks to a few strategic enchantments, the police would have trouble *finding* my door.

“Hm.” Before Penina could decide if she wanted to ooze disapproval at me, the kids giggled and ran into the yard after the goblins. She sighed and walked after them, clutching her bowl of potato salad like a weapon she might be forced to throw to facilitate a swift escape from the area.

“Zavryd’nokquetal and Xilnethgarish are flying back in this direction,” Sarrlevi said.

“I better help Val cook enough food for everyone. Will you assist me?” I clasped his hand and nodded toward the gate.

“I am not an experienced preparer of meat.”

“Then will you glare menacingly at the goblins to keep them from throwing roadkill on the grill while *I* prepare the meat?”

“*That* I can do.”

THE END

AUTHOR'S NOTE

There was originally a sex scene in Chapter 31 (it's the second half of the "stormwater detention pond" scene) just before the epilogue. I decided to take it out (it's possible not all my readers want to read about Matti and Sarrlevi getting athletic in a tree), but if you're interested, you can find it here:

<https://dl.bookfunnel.com/dw7ue0eshd>

Also, if you're ready for one more adventure with Matti and Sarrlevi, the series wraps up with Book 8 (*Cursed*).