

Santa Claus:  
The King  
of the Elves

BY

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And now would be a very good time to share with you a most important part of the story of Santa Claus. Linnea was her name, and how he came to know her was no small adventure in and of itself.

She had been born to human parents in a small village in the wilderlands and was, in most respects, a victim of her parents' mindless, endless search for riches. In her childhood, she had not known love because the only thing her parents loved was gold. Their obsession had become so complete that she went without a word from them for days while they worried and wondered about where next to search or what next to sift. She had no time for play as some children do, but instead spent every moment trying to cultivate roots and tubers for eating. One day, rumor of Dark Elves seen on the horizon spread like wildfire among the village, and her parents fled the house to secure their golden hordes. That night, they did not return.

After many tumultuous days of insecurity and neglect, little Linnea made her way shivering and starving through frigid winds to the south in search of

a distant aunt.

Unfortunately, her aunt had also fallen victim to the Dark Elven raid. It seemed she had lost so much that even her mind's whereabouts were unknown. Her madness was, in one respect, a positive improvement on her previously severe character, in that she had become relentlessly happy and optimistic. It is a well-known fact that someone mad but glad is far better company than someone sane but sad, so she made for a cheery companion—though she could not be relied upon to tend the garden or do anything industrious except weaving and knitting, both of which she did poorly.

Linnea's aunt's abode was but a hollow in the ground with stones and sticks piled up around and atop it. There was no window because there was no glass, and the crude door hung loosely with breezy cracks all around. Inside were two beds of straw, a pit for a fire, a simple table, and a bench to sit on. A copper pot, some wooden cups and spoons, and a chipped knife were stored in a basket by the door. Curiously, on the table was a silver goblet and plate

that she always kept in the same place, never used and never washed. When Linnea had arrived, there had been an elegant rocking chair and some other furniture, but Linnea traded these for a sheep. When she tried to sell the silver goblet and the silver plate, her aunt went into such a fit of hysterics that she quickly relented, fearing her poor aunt would pull every last hair out of her head.

Linnea applied a great deal of time and effort to transforming a patch of weeds by the house into a garden. Whenever she entered the door, her aunt would say, "Any gold today, my dear?" to which Linnea, having learned through trial and error to avoid explaining that she was gardening and not gold-sifting, simply said, "No, not yet."

Her aunt, always the optimist, never failed to reply, "Don't worry, my dear. It will turn up!"

Through the course of these arduous years, Linnea had blossomed from young lass to graceful lady. Tending gardens and milking sheep and scouring pots and beating clothes and carrying water buckets was not very graceful work, but Linnea

herself, no matter what she did, had such grace about her that, once he made her acquaintance, Santa was entirely entranced. She was passionate in everything, and there was no emotion that she did not express in the most emphatic of terms. There was nothing about which she did not have an immediate opinion, and from one moment to the next she could change her role or attitude. She either absolutely hated something or she absolutely loved it, she either jumped and danced for joy or wept and wailed for sorrow, she was either repentant beyond reason or would never apologize ever, she was either nigh unto death with illness or positively bursting with health, she was either sharper than the sharpest tack or . . . well, in short, she was a marvel and it was not long after he met her that Santa came to be a willing servant to any wish she expressed. Linnea, though polite, showed no affection in response to his attention, but rather assigned him tasks, such as hoeing the garden or delivering buckets of fresh water from the spring a long walk away.

Among his first concerns was to assemble a new

rocking chair for her aunt. After this followed more furniture until, at length, the hut was quite well-appointed.

One night the families gathered to celebrate a successful mammoth hunt. A large, blazing bonfire was built in the center of the village and the choicest cut of mammoth meat was roasted. Each and every person had his fill and then, with every ear pricked and every face eager, Santa related his most cherished story of all. They heard his voice and saw the twinkle in his eye as he told of angels and shepherds and wise men and a soon-to-be mother and father with nowhere to stay and a newborn child in a feeding trough that would grow up to be the good shepherd who would lay his life down for his sheep. But in this, of course, he was merely making a prophesy.

When he finished this story, everyone was preparing to go back to his own home for the night. He took Linnea aside, wrapped her up warmly, and led her out the door. With her hand in his, he strode under the starlit sky and through the woods to a grassy glade overlooking a tree-lined valley. There,



situated perfectly in the moonlight, was a new cabin made of the finest cedar logs and cedar shingles. He spoke in great detail of the intricacies of every labor and every thought he had devoted to its construction. He did not specifically state that it was built with Linnea in mind, but his frequent, hopeful pauses for approving words or gestures (which Linnea was careful not to reward) indicated as much. When he finished, he stepped back and surveyed his work and the woman beside it, and, with a nod, folded his arms. But not a word came from Linnea, so he cleared his throat and shuffled his feet a bit. When still no word came, he said simply, “What say you?”

But she said nothing because tears were streaming down her cheeks, so happy and so grateful was she.

The next day, Linnea was doing her best to milk the sheep. I say, “doing her best” because, as anyone who has tried to milk a sheep can tell you, sheep’s milk is a valuable prize, due not only to its mild and wholesome taste, but also because of the naturally skittish nature of its manufacturers.

On this day, matters were worse than usual. The sheep's eyes were open wide, darting hither and thither in a constant search for danger, and its legs were kicking here and there as if ready to leap into action at the slightest sound. Linnea had been unable to coax even a single drop of milk from it when the sheep suddenly bolted, tearing away up the hillside as if a pack of ferocious wolves was in hot pursuit.

She jumped up and, with a sigh, gathered her skirt to chase after it, but stopped when she had a very odd and disconcerting feeling that she was being watched. And indeed she was, for on the rise behind her was a mob of Dark Elven raiders, hooded and tall and daunting astride their stamping black horses. One of the horses neighed—a terrible, shrieking sound, and launched its sprint down the hill, the dark figure atop it armed with a silvery, curved sabre that glinted in the light of the sun. In his other hand, the elf held a shackle for Linnea's neck.

You see, the elven raids were of the vilest sort, for they came not in search of property or goods, but in search of human life. They took as many of the

youngest and the fairest as they could, all to be sold as laborers in the kingdom of Balekhon to the distant south. The hostages were dragged away with their hands tied behind their backs and their necks chained together like oxen, never to be seen nor heard from again.

Santa was in the woods that day, as he usually was, and had been confronted by a dark figure that stepped silently out from among the trees. The figure, standing in shadow so that his appearance could not be discerned, said nothing.

“Speak, elf,” said Santa, for he somehow knew who it was without asking or seeing, “and I will listen.”

Myckel answered, “On this day many years ago I left you with Mr. and Mrs. Claus because I knew they could protect you, though I don’t think much of tawdles.”

Santa said, “You won’t find more compassionate folk anywhere.”

“Centuries before you were born, I saw a sign in the stars. The one to rescue the elves would be born

in the far north.”

“What sign did you see?”

“Do you know the stars?”

Santa said, “I watch them whenever I can.”

“But do you know their names and meanings?”

Santa pointed to the blue star, and said, “Kyron.”

He pointed to a group of white stars, “The Captives.”

Myckel nodded with satisfaction, “In the northern sky I saw the Morning Star face Beliach. Then the White Captives rose from Euchaia to meet him.”

Santa raised his eyebrows, “And what should that have to do with me?”

“You were left to die on the pagan altar. When I saw that you were neither fully elf nor fully human, I took you to save you from Beliach, for I knew he would seek to destroy you. I brought you here and left you with a promise to your parents that I would return when you were of age.” He paused and then, as if he had lingering doubts himself, said, “Some say that the prophesy is not true.”

“What do you say about me?”

“You are the king of the elves to save us, foretold

to be born on the night of the shooting star.” Myckel held out his arms, showing Santa the black rings around his wrists. “These rings keep us earthbound and enslaved to this darkness. We elves are immortal when the light of the stars is upon us, but here our lifeblood diminishes night by night. The time is drawing near for us. Our life-song is running out. Some of us are on the threshold of passing. We need to hear the stars sing again and to bask in their light.”

“And how do you suppose I am to save you?”

At this, Myckel hesitated. “You must defeat Beliach. There is an abyss called the Deep of Balekhon. Where it leads, no one knows for certain, but it is said whoever enters will find himself in the remotest part of the heavens. You must cast him into the Deep. He will be held captive there every moment of every day except one: each year, from the time the sun rises to the time the sun sets on the date of his birth he will be free. But all the other elves will be free forever.” Myckel stepped forward, “That is why you must cease your affection for this daughter of men. You have a destiny. Do not forsake the elves because of a foolish

distraction.”

“Linnea is no distraction.”

“The elves are your people. You must lead us to victory against Beliach. It is your fate. You cannot escape it.”

Santa suddenly became very distraught, for he was hearing Linnea’s voice as clearly as if she was right next to him. With desperation and terror, she was screaming his name. Elves, you see, have excellent hearing, magical hearing, if you will, so much so that when anyone calls to an elf, no matter how great the distance, the sound always reaches the ears of the one called. Santa, therefore, could hear her cries, but he knew not whence it came. He would have called back to her, but of course she would not have heard him because she was no elf. To Myckel, he said, “It’s Linnea. She is in trouble!” Without delay, he whistled for a reindeer and rode with furious haste for her home.

When he arrived, he was greeted by her aunt at the gate who, in the greatest distress, cried out, “They took her! The Dark Elves! *They took her!*”

“Which way did they go?” Santa demanded from atop his steed.

The hapless aunt, blubbing and whimpering, looked to the ground.

“Which way?” Santa shouted, his reindeer anxiously stamping beneath him.

“I do not know!” the poor woman cried, cupping her face in her hands. “I cannot remember!”

Santa leaped to the ground beside her and, placing his hand on her back, compassionately said, “Come, come into the house.”

He led her inside and sat her on her rocking chair. “Please, you must try to remember,” he implored, gazing into her eyes.

“I cannot!” she wailed. Her hand shook as she put it to her forehead.

Santa fetched a cup of water from the bucket and offered it to her, “Here, drink this. Do not fret.”

The aunt obliged, sipping the drink and taking a breath.

Santa stared at her expectantly.

Hopping off her chair, she exclaimed, “I have seen

it!” and rushed outside. She pointed in the direction of the hill, “That way!”

“Bannonith,” Santa said in a low voice. He leapt astride his reindeer, who seemed to know which way to go without being directed and galloped up the hill with tremendous speed. The aunt, after watching him depart, hands wringing together under her chin, went into the house and stared down at the cup and bowl that sat, as they always did, on the table. “I lost you so long ago!” she said, tears streaming down her cheeks. “I cannot lose Linnea this way! It is too much to bear!” And with that, she fell on her knees, overcome by weeping.

With her hands pinioned behind her, Linnea was pulled up an ancient stone path leading to the imposing, erect stones of Bannonith. Around her neck was a shackle linked to a heavy chain that was fastened to the saddle of the black horse. The horse’s tail flicked in her face as she struggled to keep pace with it. She never caught a glimpse of the elf’s face who sat astride it, though she heard his fearsome



voice as he hissed at her, “Keep up!” and saw the glint of his black eyes from under his hood. The other Dark Elves addressed him as Viardech.

Once they were inside the perimeter of giant circle of stones, all the people the Dark Elves had collected, men and women, boys and girls, were joined together by their chains. None of them dared attempt an escape, due to the glinting sabers the elves clanged on the chains, sending showers of sparks in all directions, and the poison-infused arrows they carried, said to magically reach whomever they were fired upon, no matter how poorly the elves aimed them.

Linnea, however, already having lost her parents to the elven raids, knew the likely fate of those who were captured by the Dark Elves. She struggled against her bonds with increasing panic, tearfully beseeching their dark captors to spare them. The leader, Viardech, wearying of her cries, dismounted from his horse. He shouted, “Silence!” and he struck her. His long, black nails left three red streaks across her cheek, and she was thrown to the limit of her chains, the shackle cutting into her neck. The Dark

Elf raised his hand for another blow, but from the base of the hill a voice loud and defiant bellowed, "Let her alone!"

The Dark Elf's hood turned as he cast his gaze towards the voice. Standing there was a man with a white coat and hood, wearing no armor, and holding nothing in his hands but an axe. A large and powerful, panting reindeer stood beside him.

The elf laughed and took several steps around the prisoners to the stones, which were arranged in a circle, towards the man, "Who are you?"

The man slipped the white hood off his head, revealing his elven ears. "Let them go," he said.

From the blackness under his hood, the elf's eyes could be seen glinting with wicked zeal, "Let them go? And why should we do that?" His elven kin joined him to stand between the monumental stones that towered high above them.

"Let the people go!" the man repeated,

Viardech looked at his companions and started to laugh.

Linnea blinked, tears running down her cheeks,

her eyes hopeless. “Santa,” she cried, “they will kill you!”

Viardech nocked an arrow, raised his bow, and released the string. The arrow whizzed through the air directly towards Santa, but he easily deflected it with his axe. Viardech nodded to two of his companions, who fired their arrows upon Santa in unison. The arrows sailed towards him, but as they reached him they veered to the sides, crossed behind him, and flew back around to pierce the hearts of those who had fired them. They fell to the ground.

“You use black magic to power your arrows,” said Santa, “but your dark deeds will find you out. He who lives by the sword will die by the sword.”

“Who are you?” Viardech demanded, his voice spewing from inside his black cloak like a spiteful sneer.

Santa clenched his fist around his axe, his jaw set with determination, and his eyes blazing like white hot flames. A booming crack suddenly sounded as a fracture split across the face of the stone nearest Viardech like a bolt of lightning. The top half of the

stone slid off to collide with the stone beside it, which also cracked. In this way each stone in the circle was split into halves that collided with their neighbors until the last stone ruptured, its top half grinding off directly above the group of elves, who scampered forward to avoid being crushed. The humans in the center of the circle of stones cowered as they were showered with debris. As the giant stone landed behind the elves with a thunderous boom, they beheld Santa with a great deal more respect than they had previously.

“Get on your horses,” Santa said, his eyes now no longer blazing nor white, but certainly still furious, “and leave the wilderlands.”

With a glance of defiance at Santa, Viardech mounted his horse and rushed to Linnea, slicing through her chains with his sabre and lifting her off the ground to cast her upon his horse. Then the Dark Elves urged their horses to gallop away.

Santa leaped onto his reindeer to pursue, but the poor beast’s strength was already expended, and, at the top of the next hill, he stumbled and fell, sending

them both sprawling down the face of a cliff.

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Then, out of the darkness stepped an intimidating line of majestic reindeer. These were not the sort of reindeer one sees today, but were large—taller than a moose and stronger-built, and white as the fairest snow. With a voice resonant and clear, the first and biggest deer spoke, “You know we are always here for you, Santa.” The deer held his head high, his grand, sparkling golden antlers towering above the meadow like a great candelabrum.

Barely audibly, Myckel said, “I didn’t know.”

The chief deer said, “Didn’t know there were talking reindeer in these woods?” He nodded, “Humans are as quick to kill talking reindeer as they are walking elves—especially when the talking reindeer bear antlers of pure gold.”

The elves and the deer closed the distance between

them, neither making a sound. The stately deer, who was their chief and whose name was Roatark, said, “We have seen Dark Elves of Beliach in these woods. They are searching for you.”

Santa nodded, “We are trailing a raiding party who took a daughter of men. Did you see them?”

The reindeer shook his head.

“I have need of your aid, and this time it is no small favor.”

“You have helped us many times when we were in need. A true friend is there in both times of joy and of trouble. We are at your service.”

“We make our way south to Balekhon. We would be most indebted if your swift hooves conveyed us as far as the sea of Sevant.”

In response, the chief deer knelt low before Santa, followed by all his herd.

Having no experience riding anything, the elves awkwardly swayed from side to side as they sat astride the deer. Santa, however, was quite steady, coolly resting his hands upon his thighs.

Kintel, for his part, found the experience fascinating. He could hear the animal's heavy breathing and see the white puffs it made in the cold night air. Trying to be sociable, he asked his deer if he had lived long in these woods, but the beast simply snorted in response.

Suddenly, Myckel said, "Stop! I hear a voice!" No one else heard this voice, but Myckel explained, "It is Dryrie! She asks me to wait. She is coming to join me." None of the other elves could hear her because she had called only to Myckel.

Santa said, "We mustn't delay."

"By now they must be halfway across the Sea of Sevant," Myckel said. "We have no way of catching them. She is lost."

"She will never be lost as long as I live."

"Rarely does Dryrie fire an arrow that does not meet its mark. And there is no one as loyal. We need her aid."

So they waited, for minutes and minutes while the deer became increasingly impatient, stamping their hooves and pawing at the ground and Santa stood

watching in the distance, listening for Linnea's voice. The chief deer warned, "We must be wary of the Dark Elves. We should not linger!"

"Myckel?" Santa said.

"She will not be long."

"Has she spoken to you since?"

"It is unwise to say much when Dark Elves are nearby. They use their dark magic to capture what is spoken in secret."

The sky was thickening with clouds, and cold winds began to creak and sway the giant cedars. A fierce and biting snow fell, and the deer huddled together for warmth.

Just when they were about to lose hope, they saw a strange light glowing through the thick of the snowfall.

"The Dark Elves?" Roatark questioned in a foreboding voice.

"Ready yourselves!" Santa commanded.

"On your guard!" Roatark shouted.

As the light drew near, Myckel cried in uncharacteristic excitement, "Dryrie!" for it was she,



holding a torch of elven flame which never goes out until blown out. Accompanying her was a friend, Jaylit, who said he would offer whatever aid to Santa that he could. Upon her arrival, Dryrie told Santa, perched as he was atop the imposing reindeer, “I do not believe that you are the king of the elves. I come for the sake of my friends, Myckel and Kintel.”

With the icy snow swirling around him and a white frost formed on his beard, Santa said, “I am not a tyrant, Dryrie. I hope that, for now, you will at least count me among your friends.”

Dryrie stared at him with a fierce gaze, not acknowledging that she would, in fact, be his friend.

Riding the deer, the elves and Santa made swift progress over the increasingly mountainous terrain. They reached a frozen river that coursed down the rocks forming ripples and still forms like bulbs of glass. The deer followed this, nimbly finding their footing on the boulders and jagged outcrops until they came upon an icy pool where a solid crystal waterfall spilled from a mighty plateau. Myckel dismounted,

saying, “The High Elves of Duzenfeld are many. I will try to sway them to our cause.”

Myckel led the elves behind the frozen waterfall and into the darkness of a tunnel. With the brush of her hand, Dryrie lit her torch with a blue flame.

“Have any of you been to the Elven City of Duzenfeld before?” Myckel asked, to which he received a negative response. “They began digging these tunnels when men launched the great persecution against the elves.”

The stone was marred by countless gouges from pickaxes, and the ceiling was blackened with soot. A large stone blocked all but a narrow gap in the tunnel, and each elf had to squeeze through. Beyond this, the way was thickly impeded by spears that had been thrust down through holes in the ceiling. Myckel tried to squeeze his way between them but found he could not.

Santa held up his axe and offered, “Perhaps my primitive axe might be of some use.”

Myckel stepped aside and allowed Santa to put his

weapon to work. The blade was so sharp that it cleanly sliced through each pole with a single strike. When at last they made it through the poles, they came to a pile of collapsed stones. There was only a thin opening at the top of these through which the elves could pass by wriggling their way on their stomachs.

When at last they had squeezed through and were dusting themselves off, Dryrie held up the torch so they could see. They were in a large chamber with blackened, round walls and ceiling. Visible through patches where the soot was thin were spellbinding mosaic scenes of natural wonders: forests, waterfalls, and animals.

The floor was littered with the charred remains of wooden furniture and, strewn among the ashes, beautifully crafted goblets, pitchers, and swords of silver and gold. There were also glass ornaments of the greatest beauty: animals real and fanciful, elves, and designs which looked like the most intricate of snowflakes.

Shaking his head in disbelief, Myckel said, “What happened here?”

Lifting one of the goblets, Dryrie said, "Everything burned."

A wide entrance with a downward ramp invited them deeper into the subterranean labyrinth, and they followed this through to a branching passage. One had a staircase leading down, and this they followed. The stairs were rounded, each step carefully and painstakingly chiseled from the stone. The staircase took a meandering route, sometimes spiraling, sometimes straight, but always deeper and deeper into the darkness. The acrid smell of burnt ruins grew increasingly thick in their nostrils the farther they went, and the soot became heavier on the walls. Branching off from the corridor were more round tunnels and round rooms, all of them decorated with beautiful mosaics of minute glass beads dulled by ash and soot. Myckel peered into each, but found them all blackened by fire, whatever furniture was in them now nothing more than fragments of coal and gray powder. In one room were several large, gaping holes in the floor. Myckel said, "The wine distillery." He walked to a window that looked into blackness.

Dryrie followed him and pushed the torch through, revealing a wide and seemingly endless shaft of shining silver, with openings spiraling all the way down. “This was made to provide starlight. Elves can survive a siege here longer than the lifetimes of their attackers. But I feel no starlight here. Whoever attacked this place knew of this weakness and must have packed it at the top.” He called, “Is anyone here?” His voice echoed down the chute, lost to the interminable black depth.

In a low voice, Santa cautioned, “Be wary. We might have enemies in these depths.”

“If there are, they already know we are here,” Myckel retorted.

Myckel led them ever lower, passing tunnel after tunnel and room after room. The air grew cooler.

Finally, they reached the base of the stairs where there was a small, bare hollow. Here the walls were ornamented with visions of galaxies and planets and stars. Myckel brushed some of the dirt from one of the mosaics, revealing a seascape with towering, orange waves illuminated by two moons. “These were made

before the elves' existence among the stars was memory. Now, it is only myth." He pushed on the wall with both hands and, with a loud grating sound, it shifted. He pushed harder and harder and the wall spun, revealing a vast, cavernous space. They stepped inside and stared up in awe. Overlooking the cavern were many walkways and dark openings like a city of windows looking in. The hall was so large that giant, round pillars supported the weight of its lofty ceiling. Torches burning in various shades of warm light shone from patterned notches that formed arches and crosses of light, and the walls were all of the brightest silver.

"This, this is the true Secret Elven City of Duzenfald. Everything above was a mere trick and shadow of this."

The sprawling floor was blanketed in a thick layer of ash and charred ruins. As they walked among these, Myckel sadly shook his head.

"Oh, no!" Dryrie cried. "It cannot be!"

Many of the charred shells were not of furniture at all, but were the remains of all the elves who had

perished there. Some were on their hands and knees, some covered their eyes, some lay in tender embraces, some covered with their feet tucked under their bodies, and others lay with their mouths gaping in silent screams of anguish. As the elves looked across the immense space, they were filled with heavy grief. The number of their fallen kinsman was vast.

Kintel stood before an ashy figure whose arm was outstretched as if to reach for the hand of a rescuer who never came. His tears flowed freely as he asked, “Who would do this?”

Myckel said low, “It is the Dark Elves. Only they could have known of this place.”

Santa lifted a lustrous, black orb that looked like polished onyx from where it sat among the ashes. Having closely studied it, he said, “Dark magic is at work here. Beliach would destroy all the elves who do not follow him—if we allow it.”

Myckel exclaimed, “Then you must finish him before it is too late!”

Santa raised his eyebrows and said, “You have not the good of the elves in mind but your own vengeance.”

“You are correct,” Myckel seethed. “Kelia was there the day Beliach stepped foot on Euchaia. She saw him, and he knew she would be an everlasting witness to his crime. I heard her cry my name as he tore her wings off her back and stifled her life-song.” He bitterly cast his eyes to the ground, “I was not strong enough to defeat him.” His eyes rose to meet Santa’s, “But you are.”

“You say this only because you saw what I did at Bannonith.”

Myckel, his face filled with awe, asked, “How do you know I was there?”

“I saw you hiding in the tree.”

“You could not have seen me. I made sure of that.”

“No elf is hidden from me,” Santa said. “You watched as the Dark Elves secured the chains of the humans, and yet you did nothing.”

“Men and their troubles are no concern of mine.”

“The fate of the world rests on those who adopt the concerns of others as their own.” Santa dropped the orb. It landed in the dust, sending a plume of ash into the air.



The elves, at length, climbed the long tunnel back up to the surface and emerged from behind the waterfall to find the deer waiting for them.

“Hurry!” Roatark exclaimed, “The wolves are coming!”

## Chapter Five

The deer's ears pricked and they nervously stamped as a distant howl echoed in the night. The elves leaped into the trees and dropped onto the backs of the deer, who sprung down the hill with such long, arching leaps and so much speed as to make the elves afraid they should be cast off and dashed to pieces on the boulders.

Kintel clung to his deer's fur with all the strength he could muster. He was violently jostled and the frigid wind mercilessly whipped him. But he held all the tighter when the deer reached the top of a ridge and, in the hollow below, Kintel caught a glimpse of a pack of large, black wolves adorned by prominent, furry manes around their shoulders like regal coats. The wolves rapidly tore their way up the hill, snarling and barking with fiercely confident gleams in their eyes. Their canine teeth were long, curved, and pointed like the teeth of saber-toothed cats.

Roatark shouted, "Make for the Gorge of Kizdel!"

With terrifying speed and agility, the deer flew along the top of the ridge, veering right and left to

avoid the pine trunks. The wolves quickly overtook them, but due to the vertical rise of the ridge, could merely nip at their hooves from below.

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Before he could chance an escape, wooden poles grew up out of the ground around him and twisted together at the top and the bottom, forming a much-too-small enclosure. A cage then sprouted around each of his sleeping companions.

The woman squealed,

“One, two, three, four.

Pity that there weren’t more!

Oh well, these will do.

Perfect pairings for my stew!”

She hooted and laughed, holding her belly as she almost rolled onto the ground in delight. “Four darling

little cages for four darling elves!” She quizzically peered at them, “Now...which one shall I try first? The plumpest, juiciest one?” She scratched her head and eyed Kintel with a lick of her lips, “Patience, Garbella. Save the best for last!” She pulled up her skirt and capered over to Myckel’s cage, hungrily eyeing him, “Or should I try the strong, fearless leader?” She threw her head up and cackled, exposing what remained of her rotted teeth.

## Chapter Seven

I should perhaps take a respite from Garbella's dining conundrum to reacquaint you with Santa's part of the tale. He, unwilling to follow his friends to the cottage, had continued his track towards the Ashot mountains. He had hoped, I presume, that his companions would be quick to follow his lead.

Now, as I think I mentioned before, Beliach had circulated the notion that elves were not made to fly and were meant to stay on earth. The few elves whose shriveled wings had not entirely fallen off and who staunchly refused to remove them were forced to roam the wilds for fear of Beliach's Dark Elves.

One such elf was named Faybin, and, although he could not really recall flying, he refused to discount the notion that it was possible or that he had, in the past, done it. His wings were now not wings at all but ghastly protrusions of shreds and tatters. Rather than remove or alter them, he stubbornly insisted on allowing them to drag the ground behind his feet in the hopes that someday they might miraculously prove useful. So Faybin, having been banished from

the company of elves, was now slipping in and out of shadows in the woods. His years of stealthy seclusion had rewarded him with a talent for spying (or otherwise sneaking and snooping about unnoticed), so it was no difficulty for him to follow Santa and his friends for mile after mile without their slightest awareness of his presence.

As Santa struck off alone, Faybin stayed behind, for he knew that the elves were falling into the clutches of an evil and despicable witch who could deceive even the shrewdest person through her powers of transformation. He watched them as they naïvely stepped into her counterfeit cottage. When the tall elven lady (whom he knew to be the witch) crept out of the shadowy woods and snuck to the door on the tips of her toes, her hands outstretched before her like hawk's feet and her long fingernails looking much like talons, Faybin became fraught with worry.

He stayed hidden there, wringing his hands. Because he hated everyone, he saw no reason to interfere. The troubles of these elves were not his concern, he reasoned. And yet, he was overcome by

discomfiting feelings that wouldn't leave him alone. The witch would eat them, he had no doubt, and being eaten is not a very pleasant way to die.

When the cottage suddenly vanished and all the elves were trapped in the cages, Faybin grew even more agitated.

But then, the witch suddenly shrieked, "Where is it? *Where is it!* Where is that blasted, old wand?" She looked to the toad that sat on her shoulder, "Did you see where I put it?"

In a peculiar, little voice her toad replied, "No, Garbella."

"Well it must be here somewhere! We've got to find it! You go that way and I'll go this way!"

The toad leaped to the ground and hopped off in Faybin's direction, saying, "Find the wand, got to find the wand!"

Garbella, on the other hand, was stomping off in the other direction, irritably shrieking and spitting and scratching her head.

Faybin jumped up some roots and into a branch, well out of sight as the toad passed beneath him. Then,

when he could hear neither the witch nor the toad, he snuck down to the cages in the gulley.

Seeing him approach, Myckel demanded, “Who are you?”

“None of your concern,” Faybin replied, casually eyeing a pile of the elves’ weapons that Garbella had collected.

Myckel asked, “Do you know that witch?”

Faybin strolled up to the cage and said, “I know she’ll eat each and every one of you as soon as she can find her wand.”

“Please,” Myckel said, “help us.”

“And what will I receive in return?”

“Friendship.”

“I do not want any friends.”

“What do you want, then?”

Faybin eyed the weapons. “I could take anything of yours I want.”

Myckel impatiently demanded, “Are you going to help us or not?”

Faybin strode over to the weapons and picked out a sword. He found the scabbard that matched its



ornamentation and buckled it around his waist. “A fine weapon. This sword, for your life.”

“And the lives of my companions,” Myckel said, nodding to the sleeping elves.

“I will free the animals,” Faybin said. He then proceeded saw open the squirrels’ cage.

“The animals?” Myckel exclaimed. Then, hearing a shriek, he lowered his voice to a whisper, “But what of us?”

“There is more to these animals than meets the eye,” Faybin said, prying open the cage and allowing the squirrels to happily scamper away. “I’ll get to you if I can.”

A hoot echoed from the woods, this time closer.

“She is coming back!” Myckel whispered. “She will be very angry if she sees you have set all her food free.”

The rabbits were hopping off. Faybin now attended to the chickens.

“The chickens, too?” Myckel said. “Witch or not, the woman has to eat something!”

Only after the chickens had fled did Faybin turn to sever the poles of Myckel’s cage.

But he was almost too late, for the witch's gleeful voice called out, "I found it! I found the wand!"

As soon as Myckel was free, he ran for another sword and set to work on the cages of his companions.

Garbella's voice came nearer and nearer, "Now, what shall I have with my soup? Not more chicken! I've had too much chicken already!"

Dryrie and Kintel were out of the cages and snoring on the ground. Myckel and Faybin worked together to free Jaylit.

"Rabbit? Too fleshy. Squirrel? Not fleshy enough. Duck? Too fattening. Pig? Too provincial. I want something special, something succulent, something refined."

Myckel and Faybin dragged Dryrie and Kintel into the woods and out of sight.

"I've got it! I know what I want. Some nice, tasty mutton. Or, even better, lamb! Four darling little lambs to fill Garbella's hungry little belly. Now all I need—" her voice abruptly stopped.

Jaylit was still lying by the cauldron, and Myckel was about to return from the shadows to rescue him,

but Faybin stayed his shoulder. He whispered, “She is here. She will see you.”

Garbella’s voice suddenly came from the treetops high above the ravine, “What have we here? Four darling elves—but three are missing!”

Jaylit abruptly began to move. His legs shrank, his hands turned to sticks, his face grew longer, and white hair sprung out over his body. Still sleeping, he rolled over. He now had four hooves, and his transformation from elf to lamb was complete.

The witch’s voice came from a different corner of the ravine, “Where are you, my darling elves? No need to hide!” Her voice traveled from one place to another as it said,

“Mutton, lamb, pork, or fowl?  
Would you like to snort or howl?  
It’s your choice, what’s your flavor?  
Garbella has some soup to savor!”

She chuckled quite cheerfully. Myckel and Faybin looked towards the source of the voice, but could see

no sign of her. Her voice came closer now, in the branches above them,

“No need to run or be afraid.

I’ll season you nicely—before you’re fileted.”

But she wasn’t there. The anxious elves started trying to pull the sleeping elves away, but then her voice came from right behind them. “There you are!” she hissed, “I found you!”

When they looked, they saw nothing, at first. But then they realized that the voice had come from a small spider. It held a tiny wand with one of its eight tiny legs.

Faybin leaped to crush her underfoot, but she scuttled to safety and taunted, “What a fool! You think you can squish me like a little bug? Squish me now, why don’t you?” As she said this, she tapped herself with her wand and grew in size and form until she was a hulking, hairy mammoth. She held her wand in her trunk and swung her long tusks like two reaping scythes.

“Garbella the Gorgeous,  
Garbella the Great!  
You’ve met your match,  
now meet your fate!”

She stomped towards them, stridently trumpeting. Backed against a tree trunk and with the tips of the tusks about to skewer him, Faybin volunteered, “If you please, ma’am! I want to be a goat!”

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## Chapter Nine

A murleith, you see, is a very nasty creature, with eyes so blood-red and bodies so death-white that you’d feel its icy grip on you sooner than you’d see its sharp claw reaching for you. Because their eyes were so noticeable in the snow, the murleith hunted with their eyes closed and spread their webbed hands out

to feel for the thaw of any poor warm-blooded creature. Most of the time, the murleith fed on mountain goats, but delightful to them was the rare occasion when they could stick the long claws of both hands onto the flesh of something smarter or more difficult to catch. Murleith breaths were so cold that they could turn flesh to solid ice, so after they captured their prey, they would shackle its hands and legs and wait for the rest of it to freeze.

I must tell you that Kintel had never been so afraid as when he was scaling the cliff with his bare hands, waiting for the murleith to suddenly slip out of some crack and send him tumbling down to the treacherous depths below. The group's only comfort was the rugged beauty of the sharp, magnificent peaks high above them, shrouded by wisps of cloud, looking almost as if the stone had been a violently churning sea that had suddenly stopped still in its place, to be relentlessly whittled away under the buffeting winds and snows of the ages.

When the group reached a ledge that had enough

room for them to pause for a respite, they did so, with Jaylit proposing that they light a fire. Darkness was closing in, and the air which before was cold, had now numbed their faces and toes, but Myckel spoke with a low voice, "I should not light a fire if I were you."

Jaylit paused, seeming agitated, "Why ever not?"

"They are attracted by warmth."

Jaylit shrugged his shoulders, "If we don't light a fire we'll all freeze to death."

Myckel raised his brows, "As you wish, but just remember that the light of the fire won't make it any easier to see them. They are concealed by any light."

When Jaylit had awakened the flames with the brush of his hand, they gathered around in a circle, sitting down to warm themselves, except for Santa, who eyed the cliffs with concern. As they gazed into the beauty of the blaze, a deep and heavy weariness fell upon them. One by one, their eyelids drooped until they could hold them up no longer.

Two spots of blood-red glinted in the moonlight high above them. They disappeared and reappeared, each time nearer than before.

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The dwarves became palpably more spirited as they walked, and when they entered a giant crevasse in a glacier, the sides of which were a beautiful, glassy blue, they forsook any discretion that they had thus far exhibited and began to noisily chatter amongst themselves, mostly with boasts about their ore and their tools and their weapons. The crevasse narrowed above them until they were entirely encased in an icy, blue tunnel. At this juncture, the dwarves took up a song, their merry voices echoing off the crystalline walls.

“Elves, elves, too many came!  
One’s too many; they’re all the same!

Not a lot and not a few.  
So many elves, what shall we do?

Pack them up and bring them down,  
down to the deep to meet the Crown.



What will he think? What will he say?

“Chop off their heads! Take them away!”

The cheerful song ended when they came to an abrupt termination in the tunnel where solid rock blocked the way. But this was no ordinary rock. It was smooth as glass, polished so finely that Dantor's reflection shone on it as he approached. He uttered not a word, but the stone suddenly shifted, sliding straight down as if the ground had given way underneath it and it was dropping into the mountain. But then a top lip appeared, exposing a perfectly straight tunnel hewn from rock. Lining the tunnel were a series of torches set neatly on the walls in golden sconces shaped like the horns of rams. One of the dwarves hopped through the opening into the tunnel before another stone slid down from the top, blocking the way again.

And so it went, with stones giving way to gaps over and over again that each dwarf jumped through and each elf was pushed through until all were on the

other side. The stones stopped shifting and the entrance was once again blocked.

The tunnel was not very long; at the end was a black opening through which could be glimpsed a shaft of undeterminable depth. The dwarves stood patiently at the opening as if they had suddenly lost all sense of where they were or where they were going. But then a golden cage with detailed embellishments and an intricately woven carpet descended and, with a loud clang and a shudder, stopped. A system of copious gears and springs whirred and clacked, causing a sturdy wire door to drop open across the gap between the cage and the tunnel—like a little drawbridge.

The cage was of such large capacity that, after the last dwarf and the last elf was in, a second party of dwarves and elves could have easily followed.

Dantor lifted a well-greased lever with the tip of his finger. With the same clickety-clack-whir of the mechanism, the little drawbridge raised up and the cage started to descend, creaking and swaying a little as it did. The stone walls on all sides flew by with

increasing speed until the sound of the air squeezing through the gaps on the sides of the cage was as loud as the gale of a violent storm. The air was heavier the deeper they descended, and descend they did, for so long and with such speed that Kintel became thoroughly convinced they were traveling to the very center of the earth.

Finally, the cage slowed with a reverberating whine, and they heard the echoes of clinks and clangs and huffs and rumbles coming up the shaft. The walls of the shaft fell away to reveal a tunnel of cavernous proportions. Scattered everywhere like an army of ants were dwarves engaged in all kinds of labor. On ledges, in holes, on scaffolds, and manning large machines with assemblies of giant gears and levers and billows: the dwarves were everywhere. They wielded picks and anvils, hammers and mallets, and chisels and files. Most of them were shirtless, the sweat from their labor glistening on their tubby abdomens. Mules taller than the dwarves were yoked to the spokes of giant wheels that they turned by walking. Channels in the stone and golden aqueducts

conveyed water to steaming pools and giant waterwheels. There were enormous heaps of stone cut or crushed, having been dumped there from carts that rode tracks on rock ledges above. This great spectacle was illuminated by torches which were everywhere they could possibly be: on posts, from ropes, and in cracks and crannies in the rock-faces.

Dangling from a thick rope that slowly bounced up and down, the cage passed over this great manifestation of industry. One dwarf stopped to look up at the cage and shouted, "Did ye catch anything?"

"Aye!" shouted back Dantor. "Elves!"

"The master will be none too pleased to hear that!"

"Nay," eagerly chuckled the dwarf. "A right fit he'll have, no doubt!"

The dwarves all found this highly amusing, their beady little dwarf eyes glinting at the elves from under dark, bushy brows.

The cage entered a small tunnel before dipping down into a huge cavern. A vast lake filled the base of this, dotted with many vessels, some of which had sails (though the elves were at no small loss to see how

they could be of any use down here with no breeze to blow them) and were quite large. Shimmering on the lake's surface was the sparkling reflection of what stood in the middle: glowing and resplendent like a celestial city floating on the water was a cluster of innumerable structures with heights ranging in size (but larger in the center) and lit with countless torches. Brass pipes protruded from the flat roofs of each of the buildings. These connected to larger brass pipes and these to even larger pipes until there was but one thick pipe which was carried on a series of trusses across the water and into the stone of the cavern wall.

The cage lightly came to rest on four stone pillars and the door fell open. A stone staircase led down to a wharf on the water where several longboats were moored. The faint din of voices and claps and clangs and clamors echoed across the lake, but clearer was the sound of the water lapping against the pier.

"Tell me now, elf," Dantor said. "Do ye still think this isn't our mountain?"

Myckel did not respond, but was willingly led into one of the longboats. There were rows of benches and,

at the foats of these, metal slots into which the dwarves slipped their feet. Dantor gave the command and they all began pedaling. The sound of trickling water came from the rear of the vessel where a dwarf manned a rudder, and in no time the boat was making a speedy crossing towards the center of the lake. A damp but pleasantly cool breeze whipped the dwarves' hair and beards.

They passed another boat, this one laden with fish. Dantor called to the dwarves on board, "Had ye a good catch?"

"Aye! And we'll catch a pretty price at market for this bounty!" one of the dwarves replied with a laugh.

The closer they came to the city, they saw that the buildings were very tightly compacted except where lanes for boats divided them. Wood beams layered in gold leaf supported them and stones either chiseled, crushed, or mixed into mortar made up the walls. They were quaint and charming, with glowing windows overlooking the water—though except for several which were made entirely of meticulously sculpted stone, they were inelegant and imprecise,

leaning into one another like idle children. The buildings had no roofs, but were rimmed on their tops by wooden walkways with shiny bronze balustrades and thick woven ropes laced with gold. At the center of these walkways were buildings that looked like they had been dropped onto the buildings below them. On top of these were more skywalks and more structures, with catwalks connecting all the buildings across the gaps. The effect was such that the place on the whole looked like a collection of giant layered cakes of metal, wood, and stone.

Busy dwarves in all manner of dress were hurriedly carried by their big dwarf feet over the walkways and under bridges and down staircases and over roofs. They greeted one another, tipped their hats, and cheerfully tugged the beards of those they bumped into. The dwarves in dresses had beards just as thick as the dwarves in pants, but their cheeks were quite a bit rosier.

The boat passed down a waterway between structures, with the elves gaping up at the bustle and activity high above in the footbridges. Aside from the

occasional rug-beater or bearded dwarf child peeping out, there was little activity in the windows lower down.

The boat eased softly through the watercourse until it intersected with a larger one. Here, the dwarf manning the rudder made a sharp turn, and ahead was a large, stately-looking stone building with a shining domed roof. A queue of uncharacteristically despondent dwarves led all the way around the building and then some. There was no particular pattern to this population, with the same variety of dwarves present as could be seen doing business among the roof-tops, though there were at least two mothers holding little infants with large eyes peeping out from under their bushy eyebrows and busy hands fiddling with their little beards.

Near to the structure was a kind of a harbor with numerous wharfs and jetties. Sailing ships, mostly small, but also two sizeable cargo windjammers were docked. Great catches of fish were being unloaded, as well as all manner of cargo from the largest of the ships.



The dwarves maneuvered the longboat into the harbor and docked. The prisoners were directed to disembark and were conveyed up to the entrance of the stone building.

In short order the elves found themselves in an expansive polished-stone hall that looked very much like a library—with books lining every wall. Dantor bowed before a plump and very short dwarf with an extremely elegant mustache and meticulously braided beard who sat upon a monumental throne. With cushions that were much too big for him, it appeared that he struggled not to slide off at every moment. He was dressed more like a broker than a king, however, with neatly pressed trousers and a buttoned vest. He wore but a simple, modest crown. Dantor said, “We caught these elves in the pass, King Bufus.”

“In the pass, ye say?” King Bufus said, hopping off his seat and eyeing the elves with disdain. He threw up his hands in despair, “No, no! Not more elves! Whatever shall we do? ‘Tis as if they’re pouring out of the rocks! I’ve done my part, I’ve done what can be done, but we’re not running a charity. We’re running

a robust and diversified kingdom! Have ye any notion the challenge it is to move the attitude of an entire people from a mindless fixation on a handful of commodities—the value of which rises and falls at the whims of supply and demand—to a stable exchange of a plurality of goods and services? Well, we are at the crux of just such a transformation, and let me assure ye it has been no small success! The kingdom of the Ashot Dwarffolk have never been more prosperous. But we won't be for long if these detestable, destitute elves keep knocking down our doors!" Then, looking to Myckel, he said, "Say, whence do ye hail?"

"We are elves of the north."

"Duzenfald?"

"No, the wilderlands."

"And what be yer business?"

Santa said, "I am the king of the elves."

Blinking in surprise, the king shuffled over to him and brought his face up as high as he could to look at him closely, "*You* are the king of the elves?" He gave a chuckle, "The elves have no king. They are leaderless."

Stepping up to his large seat, King Bufus said, “These are the last days of the elves. They shall very soon be no more.”

Before the dwarf king could say more, a very frightened-looking dwarf rushed in from the door, “King Bufus! Dark elves have come! They insist upon an immediate congress with your highness!”

“How immediate?” asked the flustered king.

“Right away!”

“Oh!” the king moaned in distress. “This comes at a most inopportune time.” He flitted his hand, “Hurry, hide our guests!”

And with that the elves were speedily whisked away through another set of doors into a great dining room. Huddled together, they peeped through a crack between the doors.

The hall seemed to fill with an overpowering darkness as tall figures in black cloaks strode inside. Their movements were graceful and yet somehow extremely aggressive.

The dwarf king tried to speak, but one of the Dark Elves raised his hand and interrupted with a voice

strong and confident, “Word has reached us of a troupe of elves passing through these mountains. Your watchmen wouldn’t have apprehended them, would they?”

“Elves, say ye?” the king blustered, beads of sweat glistening on his forehead. Looking to Dantor, he said, “Had ye seen an elf, ye’d have seized it, wouldn’t ye?”

“Aye,” Dantor said with a grin. “And yoked it to our mule team.”

“No elves, here, as you see,” King Bufus assured, “exceptin’ yerselves, of course.”

In a voice filled with disdain, the Dark Elf said, “We are no longer known as elves. We live among men, as men. The elves,” he spat the words out, “are a dying race. Beliach wishes to be sure of that. Any elves who will not convert are to be destroyed. You know he has a great and formidable power.” The Dark Elf turned his hooded head to look around the hall as he said, “You have such a prosperous kingdom under the mountain. It would be a terrible loss should it come to ruin.”

“A terrible loss, indeed,” said the king, “and one

which we are very much eager to avoid.”

The elf looked directly at King Bufus, “Then be doubly certain your loyalty to Beliach’s cause cannot come into question.”

“Rest assured our loyalty increases every day. We consider it an accretive asset!”

“Very well. We leave you with a parting gift: a small demonstration of Beliach’s power.” With the flick of his hand, the Dark Elf cast a shiny round orb like onyx to the floor. It rolled, coming to rest in a groove between stones. The Dark Elf, in perfect synchronicity with his kinsman, turned around and walked towards the door.

As soon as the door slammed shut, an inky, wispy black smoke like luxuriant tresses of hair began to stream from the orb, and an ear-splitting, shrieking sound filled the hall. This cloud of smoke, once fully discharged, appeared to move entirely of its own accord, snaking and curling about the hall until it touched upon Bompus and entered his body.

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As they neared it, they could see that it was a rocky island dominated by an intimidating stone fortress perched on the cliff face of the coast, like the mountaintop nest of a mighty eagle. A moat at the entrance to the stronghold was filled not with water, but with flames that licked up at the walls to a tremendous height and had charred the stone with heavy soot. There was no indication as to whose castle it was, for no banners ornamented its lofty towers.

As they stepped foot on the ground, they stared up at the ominous ramparts with unease. The hints of perhaps some long-past battle were found at the embrasures of the tops of the walls, where sharp markings had deeply scarred the stone. An ancient cobble path led up the hill, inviting the inquisitive to follow, and inquisitive they must have been (or very foolish) because they warily began to climb it. Sparse conifers clung to life from crevices in the rock, but the island otherwise seemed very much devoid of life. At points boulders blocked the way and the cobblestones were smooth, as if it had recently been a thoroughfare

for water, no longer for hooves and wheels and feet.

They approached the gate and were surprised to see that the drawbridge was open over the fiery moat. Making a speedy crossing due to the searing steel on their feet and the blistering winds on their faces, they found themselves in a courtyard guarded by six soaring watchtowers, the tops of which were shrouded in the rolling black smoke from the flaming moat. A tall fore-building with vacant windows ominously stood over the opposite side. Piled in great mounds along the sides and corners of the courtyard were jumbles of old ropes, rotting wooden frames, snapped poles, and torn fabric. Shards of pottery littered the cobblestone. There was total silence.

Santa walked to the nearest heap and pulled out a mass of tangled rope. "These were ships." And indeed, it was true, for among the rubbish could be seen tackle, anchors, oars, and masts.

Santa led the way farther into the courtyard. As Dryrie walked, she thought she faintly heard the sound of a voice speaking her name. But the voice did not come from outside her head as if someone in the

courtyard were saying it. Nay, it came from *inside* her. As she continued to listen for it, the voice grew in strength until it was as distinct as if she were speaking to herself.

“Dryrie,” said the voice. “Dryrie, we know your sssecret. We know the burden you bear...” Dryrie felt a cold chill run from her head to her toes. It sounded as if the words were formed by a long, forked tongue. “Many years ago you made a wicked choice...” the voice hissed.

In her head, Dryrie said, “I know not of what you speak.”

To Dryrie’s horrific shock the voice responded, “Oh yesss. We know. And we know more...”

“Leave my head!” said Dryrie in her mind, wishing she had some threat she could bring to bear against this voice.

“It would perhaps shock your companions if they knew of your sssecret.”

“I have no secret.”

“In the dark of the woods...in the middle of night...something happened to you which has



happened to no elf before. You bore a child, did you not?”

Dryrie shook her head.

“And this was an extraordinary child. You recognized that it was not fully elf, but also human. And you were deeply afraid. So you took your *sssecret* and you left him to die.”

“*Not to die,*” Dryrie feebly said, a tear streaming down her cheek.

“You deceive yourself. You knew the winter cold would make short work of him.”

By now Dryrie’s face was dripping with tears.

“We think that your friends would be eager to know your *sssecret*. It would be better for you if you did as we say.”

“How do you know my secret?” Dryrie inquired.

“We are friends of Beliach. He knows all.”

“He does not know *all*. Who are you?” Dryrie demanded.

“We keep our enemies close but our friends at a distance....”

The voice paused, waiting for her response, but

she had none. She would not engage in riddle games with voices in her head.

“We are worth less than the ground we lie on....”

“I am not playing with you,” Dryrie said, feeling that she had gone quite mad.

“We have thousands of teeth that have no bite....”

Dryrie stopped walking. “*Dragons*,” she said aloud. The other elves paused and looked at her quizzically. She nervously murmured, “Dragons are here!”

Myckel asked, “How do you know this?”

“They spoke to me—in my head.”

“What did they say?”

“They...,” she hesitated, not wanting to divulge her secret, “they told me riddles.”

“Riddles?” Myckel questioned.

Suddenly the pebbles on the cobblestones trembled as a powerful voice that seemed to echo from every wall thundered, “Yessss, riddles.”

The companions hastily formed a defensive circle, fearfully looking in all directions for the source of the voice.

The voice bellowed, “Licks, but never tastes. Eats,

but never chews. Drinks, but dies.”

Santa said low, “Fire.”

The voice, now from one direction, said, “Excccccelent.” Two bright orange lights, like two burning coals, shone from within the smoke shrouding the tallest tower. The smoke suddenly swirled away, revealing an enormous red dragon beating its broad, mighty wings. It clung to the tower, its huge talons neatly fitting into etches in the stone where they had clearly been innumerable times before. Its head bore two long, curving horns, its mouth was arrayed with sharp teeth, its neck was serpentine, and its long, winding tail ended in a spade-shaped club. The smoke quickly cleared from the other towers, revealing five more dragons.

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For what seemed like days and days they walked in the darkness of the interminable cavern with not even a single speck of starlight to warm their spirits

or guide them towards a route of escape. Despite this, remarkably the elves did not lose their health, as would have been expected, given the lack of starlight. They did, however, lose most of their spirits and perhaps some of their sanity with nothing to see but black rock and nothing to hear but the ceaseless drip, drip, drip of the trickling water.

Santa, it seemed, knew where he was going, and led them farther and farther along. Finally, when they thought they could go no more, they heard another sound.

Soft and gentle, piercing the impenetrable darkness with profound loveliness and grace, were youthful female voices. They sang in faultless harmony, their words inscrutable and yet alluring, their melody haunting and yet beautiful.

Then, out of the black void came a spot of light—like an oasis in a desert. Colors of lavender, turquoise, and crimson shimmered and danced on the ceiling of the cavern, a spellbinding display in the dark. Like moths to a flame, the elves were drawn to it and soon realized that its source was an iridescent pool nestled

in a fissure of sheer, smooth, walls. As they drew near it, the song became more insistent and more intense, drawing them into irresistible longing, as if they were in a trance. They leaned over the edge of the cleft and gazed into the glistening, crystal pool. There, reflected underneath his face, each elf saw an image of himself as he rushed down the steps to escape the billowing dragon flames.

At this moment, Santa raised his head and warned, “Watch no longer!”

But the elves heeded him not because they heard him not, so mesmerized were they. The images changed, now displaying each elf as he walked through the cavern. Again, the vision changed, now showing the silhouettes of the elves as they gazed up at the dancing lights from the pool. The images followed them from behind as they stepped up to the pool. Finally, they saw themselves hunched over the pool, looking down into its surface. Then, reflected on the surface, they saw behind them faces with glinting eyes and mouths opening to reveal sharp teeth. The song terminated in a terrible chorus of shrieking, and

the elves found themselves falling into the pool, shoved from behind by their unseen watchers.

The elves splashed into the cold water and, as soon as they righted themselves, looked up to see who or what had pushed them. But nothing was to be seen but the ceiling of the cavern, the light now flickering wildly with the agitation of the pool surface they caused. The shrieking had ceased, now replaced by echoes of their own splashes and coughs. And splashing they were, because this water was enchanted. They were unable to stand upon it as they normally would, but struggled to stay afloat. Desperately, they slapped the black wall of the fissure, but found it to be so smooth and so steep that it was impossible to gain a handhold.

For some time, they continued to thrash and splash, panic having set in at the realization of their plight. Santa, having been pushed in as well, was not as panicked as the others, though he had just as much difficulty keeping his head above water. At length, their energy waned and they were still, moving only enough to stay afloat, which took considerable

effort since they had never learned to swim. And that is when several crystalline figures with long legs, long arms, and narrow waists stepped to the edge of the cleft and stared down at the helpless elves. They had glassy, blue skin, and their eyes were large and round, feminine and beautiful. Their lips parted as they eagerly licked them, their tongues long and curling, their teeth razor-like and brilliantly white.

“Who are you?” Myckel demanded.

One of the figures answered, her voice dancing off her tongue like chimes in a soft breeze, “We are nymphs of the underground waters.”

Kintel, quite frightened, politely inquired, “What are you going to do to us?”

“We will wait,” the first nymph said softly. “We have patience.”

“Wait for what?” Kintel said.

Jaylit exclaimed with annoyance, “Wait for us to drown so they can eat us, of course!”

Hoping to improve matters, Kintel said, “We are not very tasty, I am afraid!”

“Oh, but you are, or soon shall be,” she said, and

she eagerly caressed her lips with her tongue.

“Pray,” Kintel said, “once we’re dead, how will you fish us out of the pool?”

Her eyes flashed and she said, “Your questions probe too deeply.”

“Please forgive me! I am impudent, I know. But, just one question. Do you jump in after us? But if you did that, I should think you would have just as hard a time getting out as we would.”

The nymphs laughed from above them, a delightful ring in a condescending sort of way. The first said, “You know nothing.”

“What?” Kintel nervously asked, “What do I not know?”

The nymphs did not answer, but watched keenly, their eyes widening as they saw that the elves were having more difficulty staying afloat, their pointed chins bobbing in and out of the water.

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On the side of the marketplace was a large



classically-styled building coated in a layer of white plaster that had stripped away in places, revealing the mud bricks beneath. Several skewed, cracked columns supported a roof that had been, at one time, etched with designs of the kind seen on the goblin fabrics, but was now crumbling with age. The goblins pushed their prized elven prisoners under the vestibule and through a pair of heavy wooden doors that sagged on their hinges.

Once inside, a weary Santa cast off the yokes and dropped the barrels to the floor. They were in a hall with wood-paneled walls that, though at one time were doubtless polished and fine, were now grimy and pocked. Marble busts of eminent goblin magistrates sat on top of small columns against the walls. Ornate candelabras held candles both lit and extinguished, and piles of wax had built up from the floor beneath them like stalagmites in a cave. The ceiling was whitewashed plaster, with bits and pieces of it having fallen away where water dripped, revealing moldy stone underneath. A great stained glass window overlooked the hall from the far side. It was dark and

inscrutable until the flashes of lightning outside illuminated the image of a goblin reaching up to touch the hand of a man wearing a crown. Below this, on a high wooden platform behind a tall wooden balustrade, on a little brass stool sat a plump goblin fast asleep. His warty face was rather severe, even in slumber, and he wore a black robe that was so much too big for him that folds of it were heaped upon the floor around his stool. A white wig graced his head, the curls of which were parted around his especially broad, pointed ears. He wore no jewelry, save for a single ring with a big, black diamond. He was leaning back against the wood-paneled wall and snoring shrilly through his miniature nostrils. To his left sat a very small goblin at a writing desk. He held a large feather in his hand. A goblin dressed as a butler stood in a corner near a table with a decanter, and several goblins in armor stood at attention at the front and back of the hall.

The goblin chieftain cleared his throat and, in a strident voice, shouted, "Your worship, Magistrate Ruthorspat!" As soon as this was said, the small

goblin began to scribble furiously, the feather flitting about at such a pace it appeared it could have flown away.

The magistrate's bulging eyes fluttered open and his stool tipped precariously before he righted himself, his head twitching back and forth as he sleepily took in his surroundings. He groggily blustered, "Who comes before the king's court this day and for what inauspicious purpose?" A piece of the ceiling suddenly dropped down and landed before him with a crash, but he seemed to take no notice of it for the floor was already littered with plaster.

## Chapter Thirteen

The goblin chieftain sniveled to the magistrate, “We ’ave apprehended these criminal vagrants, your worship, for wielding lethal as well as very unsafe weapons, for thieveryin’ the king’s water, for being in possession of a generally suspicious nature, for invading the king’s property, and—” the goblin frowned. He snapped his fingers, “There were quite so many offenses methinks I’ve neglected to commit the last one to me memory.”

His absentmindedness seemed to matter little, however, for, while he had listed out the crimes he did recall, he had been rewarded by increasingly aghast expressions of disbelief, as well as snorts of disapproval from the magistrate. Another of the goblins volunteered, “I know what it was, your worship! They was spying upon the king’s men—unawares!” he smiled, his pointy teeth exposed quite charmingly.

“Ah, yes of course. They was spying upon us without we having the slightest inclination that they was there!”

Magistrate Ruthorspat said, “This is a grave list of crimes, indeed. Is there no longer any respect for the rule of law among the human rabble?”

The goblin chieftain bowed, “’Tis a fleeting sentiment, indeed it is, your worship!”

## Preview of *Paradeisia:* *Origin of Paradise*

Wesley woke up, his heart pounding. He was wet and his sheets were soaked from a cold sweat. A shatter on tile broke the dark stillness. He reached for her, but she wasn’t beside him. “Sienna!”

There was no reply, but he thought he heard panting and a whimper. The panting was heavy and strong. The whimper was his Sienna.

His pulse was throbbing in his neck as he quickly

drew his handgun from the nightstand drawer. A surge of adrenaline sent tremors through his hands as he tried to load it. He couldn't get the magazine to slide into the well. He tried to force it until he realized a round was protruding from the top. He slipped it in with its brothers, jammed up the mag, and cocked the slide to chamber the bullet.

He tracked toward the partly open door of the bathroom, feeling the sickening sensation of sticky-wet carpet under his feet.

He dashed his fingers inside the door frame to flip on the light and flung the door open, aiming inside. It took a second for his eyes to adjust, but what he saw made him stagger backwards.

His young wife was alone, spread-eagled on the floor in a pool of blood. He moved down to help her, but she pointed behind him and let loose a nothing-held-back, bloodcurdling scream. He spun around to where she was pointing, expecting to face an intruder, but there was no one there.

"Please look! She could be alive on the bed!" she

screamed. Turning back to her, he saw that she had knocked a vase off the tile surrounding the bathtub. His heart sank with a sudden realization: her stomach was conspicuously flat.

There was no intruder. She had lost the baby. After all they had been through, he couldn't believe it. As he stepped back toward the bed, he thought about the last maternity checkup. Doctor Angel said everything was progressing just fine. That was four days ago.

So what had happened?

Wesley approached the bed and was sick at the sight of a little lump under the white comforter.

It definitely wasn't moving. Then again, he didn't expect it to be; he was pretty sure a baby couldn't survive a miscarriage at eighteen weeks. The duvet was draped off the side of the mattress and was dripping blood. Wesley had never felt so sickened in all his life. He didn't want to uncover the lump in the

covers. He didn't want to see their baby like this. He wondered if it would be best just to call 911.

"Wes?" Sienna cried weakly. "Is she . . . . Is she alive?"

Wesley closed his eyes and jerked the cover off the lump. Slowly, his stomach in a knot, he allowed his eyelids to open.

Nothing.

There was no baby; the lump under the duvet was a sheet wad.

Wesley checked the path back to the bathroom again. There was no fetus on the floor, only blood. He checked through all the covers, searched under the bed. Nothing. He went back to the bathroom and looked at his wife's surroundings. The fetus wasn't there. He opened the lid of the toilet, just in case.

"What are you doing?" his wife asked.

"It's gone. There's no fetus."

"Don't call her a fetus."



"Did you go anywhere else but the bathroom?"

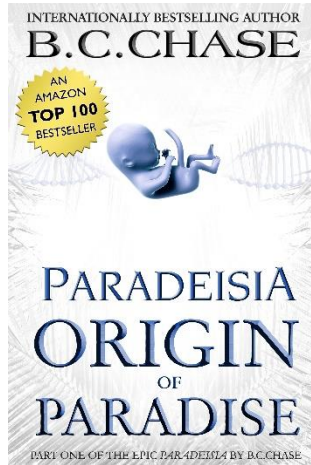
"No, I . . . I came right here." She was pale and looked weak. Then she gasped, clutching her stomach, where the baby bump had clearly disappeared.

"Bad pain?" Wesley asked.

She nodded, her eyes squeezed shut.

"I'm calling 911," Wesley said, concerned that she had lost so much blood.

But as he walked out into the living room to retrieve his cell, something told him that he should also be worried by the fact that their baby had totally and completely vanished.



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