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**Family Man - Chap. 5**  
by Scott McGough

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Over the next few weeks Virot was busier than he had been in years. Threats and angry exchanges flew between the Maglan and Ilyssa manors, and an escalating series of assaults rocked both families and their retainers. A squadron of zombies forced their way into a Maglan moneylender's office, murdered the staff, and burned the building to the ground. An Ilyssa grave-robbing team was eaten alive when they cracked open a mausoleum and found Virot had left a thousand trained Maglan rats in place of the fresh corpses they sought. He enjoyed the privilege of beheading an Ilyssa courier bearing an offer to end the feud when the twins pointed out that he was also bearing a dormant strain of plague that would burst forth as soon as he set foot inside the manor. Ockeed, the head of the Ilyssa clan, narrowly avoided blindness and death when his daughter-in-law impulsively opened a cursed communiqué that appeared to be from his only surviving son.

Virot had never felt more alive. His face was unknown to most of the city, and it was relatively easy for him to move among the network of taverns, gambling dens, and docks that the two families were feuding over. If anyone confronted him or asked too many questions, he simply touched the nearest part of that person's body, whispered his incantation, and left them dead where they stood. He left Ilyssa corpses in his wakelike footprints.

On this night, he brought Vinya with him when he slipped out through his secret passage. She hated being apart from Val, who nearly wept as he watched them go from his window, but there was no other option. The twins required a very specific person for a very specific augury, and she needed to identify the victim herself.

"Is this what you do at night?" Vinya asked. Virot thought she sounded more lucid and focused on her own.

"I've become something of a student of human nature," Virot said. They were well clear of the manor and had reached the edge of Docketown, the epicenter of the feud.

"Really? What for? Is it part of a new ritual?"

"Something like that. I'm trying to understand what people value most."

"So you can take it from them." Vinya smiled slyly.

"So I can obtain it for myself. There's a slight difference."

"Bosh. You just want to find out what hurts the most when you take it away. Oooh!" she squealed suddenly and pointed to a street vendor. "Buy me a snack, little brother. I'm famished, and I haven't any money."

The pair went over to the vendor's booth, and Virot pointed to a roasted meat kebab. "Two." He put a gold coin on the counter. Virot handed one to his sister, and the Maglans strolled on. Vinya eagerly tore into her food, but Virot carried his at arm's length as if he found it distasteful.

"If you're not learning how to hurt people on these little jaunts," Vinya said through a mouthful of meat, "what are you learning?"

"I thought you'd never ask. Come this way."

He led his sister closer to the docks, where the street lights were fewer and the dangers more numerous. There were more people there, not less, as anyone who wanted to survive traveled in packs for protection. Burly stevedores and enslaved brutes lugged huge crates on their shoulders. Rodentlike men with valises skulked



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nervously between armed bodyguards. Gangs of thugs loitered on corners, looking for a fight or a whipping boy to pass the time.

Virod turned down a narrow alley and motioned for his sister to follow. She tore the last bit off her kebab and tossed the stick aside. Virod pointed to one of the semiconscious street people propped up against the dirty bricks. The man was malnourished, ragged, and filthy. Vinya wrinkled her nose.

"A starving person," Virod said, "will beg for food." He waved his kebab down in front of the transient's face, and the man's rheumy eyes creaked open.

"Please," he croaked. Virod dropped the kebab onto the man's lap and ushered his sister back out to the street. His charity had not gone unnoticed, and a handful of other street denizens groveled up to him.

"Alms, sir," one of them said. "Enough for some bread? I've got a sick child. . . ."

"A poor person," Virod scattered a handful of gold onto the street, and the shabby group fell on them, "will beg for coins."

Vinya paid no attention to the scabbling bodies at their feet. "You've been thinking about this a lot, haven't you?"

Virod nodded. He tilted his head and flicked his eyes, and Vinya turned to see what he was looking at. A tall, elegant man with dark skin and braided hair walked proudly beside a beautiful canary-skinned woman atop a huge black dog. Behind the couple walked a cold-eyed man with at least a dozen knives belted across his chest, and a seven-foot-tall insectoid with spiked limbs and serrated mandibles.

"A rich man begs for power," Virod said. "That handsome fool can't protect himself or his woman, but he hires those who can. And then he parades himself through Docktown to prove that he is not afraid, that he controls his own destiny."

Vinya yawned. "Are you going somewhere with this, little brother?"

"I am. In fact, I think we've already arrived." They had come to the porch outside an Ilyssa tavern. The zombie makers' standard hung over the door, and some of the toughs lounging outside also wore the standard on their shoulders. "My errand for the evening," he explained.

Vinya's boredom vanished. Now she glared angrily at her brother. "I've had enough sightseeing for one night, Virod. Take me home now."

"Hey," one of the toughs said. "Isn't that the Maglan bitch who sees the future?" Some of the others grunted in reply, and one of the group dashed indoors, presumably to tell the owner. The toughs rose and began to move toward Virod and Vinya, drawing their knives as they came.

"What does a powerful man beg for?" Virod was caught up in his lecture, seemingly oblivious to the approaching danger. "It seems that no matter how much one has, there is always something more. Something one wants. Something one treasures above all else. I think I've figured out what that is."

Vinya stepped away from him. The toughs now had them partially surrounded. "Can't you tell me what it is after we get home?"

"You've made your last mistake, Maglan." The owner of the tavern stood in the doorway. "Kill them both." Virod recognized him as a nephew to the Ilyssa patriarch, and he smiled. Perfect, he thought.



In a flash, Virod drew his sword and lopped off the nearest tough's arm. He shoved the maimed man toward his sister and said, "Defend yourself for a moment while I make my point." The other toughs sprang forward at Virod, but his sword kept the gang at bay, parrying a blow here and slashing a torso there. As he fought, Virod made sure to touch each one of his attackers.

Vinya, meanwhile, had sunk her long black nails into the wounded man's neck. Her eyes rolled back in her head, she bunched up her fists, then screeched like a brace of banshees. Her hair stood on end as she wailed, and then each strand erupted

from her head, doubling, tripling, quadrupling in length. Guided by Vinya, spikes of her hair skewered the two toughs closest to her, pinning them to the brick wall then withdrawing in the blink of an eye. The toughs gurgled and fell with only the vaguest notion of what had killed them.

"Bravo!" Virot cheered. Then, without speaking, he thought the words of Kuberr's spell. All around the Ilyssa tavern owner, his toughs staggered, clutched their throats, and crumpled painfully to the ground. It's getting easier and easier, Virot thought. Soon I won't need the words at all.

The tavern owner found himself alone and facing two sworn enemies over the broken bodies of the men he had just sent to kill them. He turned to flee back into the tavern. A coiled strand of Vinya's hair speared through his shoulder, spinning him around and dropping him heavily onto his rump.

"Don't kill me," he cowered and held his good arm in front of his face. "Please, Maglan. Please!"

"Let me guess," Vinya said. She was mopping the gore from her hair with her red silk sash. "A powerful man begs for his life."

"Correct," Virot said. "Listen closely, corpse-grinder." The man whimpered and tried to staunch the flow of blood from his shoulder. "Your life is mine. I've killed so many of you over the last few days that I'm losing count. Do you want to survive?"

"I do," the man bawled. "Anything, I'll do anything, please!"

Virot leaned down and whispered in the man's ear. "Renounce your family," he said. He traced a finger across the man's damp forehead. "You belong to me, now. When I call, you will answer. When I beckon, you will come. Agree now or disappear forever."

The tavern owner choked, glanced frantically at Vinya, then let his face fall. "I am yours," he said.

Virot tapped the man on the head and stood up. "I have marked you, so I can kill you with a word," he said. "With the merest thought, really. If you ever displease me, I will."

"Yes, Master."

"Oh, there's no need for that. Just remember whom you serve. Now. Get up and get out of my sight. You will hear from me shortly."

As the man ran off, Vinya smoothed her hair back into shape. "Why did you let him live?"

"Because it's time for us to change our thinking. Mother was right about the Ilyssa. They can't risk destroying us all at once, and they can't kill us one by one so long as I'm around. Dead, they're of no further use to us. Alive and fearful, there is no limit to what we can make them do."

"You sound like you have a plan. That's not like you."

"It's more like me than you realize. I plan to create a community of people who think like I do. A society of shared concern. Mutual obedience, mutual benefits. Care to be a part of it?"

Vinya considered. "Not without Val."

Virot gallantly offered his elbow. "My plan has always included you and Val both."

Vinya took her brother's arm, and they walked together through city streets that became deserted as they approached.

**To be continued...**

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