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## Family Man - Chap. 6 by Scott McGough

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"So you have finally learned," Kuberr said. "Life is the most precious treasure there is."

In his dream, Virot nodded. "I think I always knew. I just didn't understand."

"One's own life is to be savored. The lives of others are to be cultivated."

"You are wise, Kuberr. I have marked a score of my enemies but let them live. They serve me now, as I serve you."

"Then you are pleased with our bargain so far?"

"I am. And more, I am ready to extend it."

"Outstanding. What do you propose?"

Virot smiled. "To expand the family fortune, my personal power, the number of your followers. The best way to amass wealth is to generate it ourselves."

"I approve, Virot Maglan." Kuberr's multiple eyes flashed. "Do it."

In a converted warehouse on the edge of the waterfront, a small gathering had formed. People and monsters stood in small groups, muttering to themselves and glaring at each other. Some had been invited to attend. Most had been compelled.

A servant, hand-picked for his booming voice, walked to the center of the huge room and raised his hands for silence.

"Thank you for coming," he said. "You are among the select few who will witness something new. An entertainment not found in the taverns or the bawdy houses. And though it costs you nothing to watch, your attendance is not free. When we are done, you will go out and spread the word about what happened here. Your master expects to see you all again next week. And each with no less than three paying guests." There was a murmur through the small crowd, and the servant waited for it to subside.

"Place your bets. We are about to begin."

The servant introduced Vinya and Val Maglan as they came from a corner dressed in matching purple leather. The crowd muttered, and some even gasped. The twins were not often seen together outside the manor. Val looked confused and intimidated by the attention, but Vinya was calm and smiling. From his hidden seat high above the floor, Virot felt a rush of confidence. He had prepared the twins for a week beforehand, and he knew he could rely on his sister not to disappoint him.

"Friends," the servant called, "also welcome Cato Ilyssa and her . . . ah, pets . . . to this special inaugural event." Virot had caught the eldest Ilyssa daughter en route to a tryst. She was notoriously proud and haughty, but she had surrendered easily when she saw what Virot did to her bodyguards. Now she rode a huge black hound into the center of the room, a saw-beaked raven perched on her shoulder and a pair of zombified tigers trailing behind her.

Vinya turned to Virot's elevated chair. "For Kuberr," she said. She prodded Val, who echoed her words, then dropped lightly into a sitting position and began to meditate.

Cato Ilyssa raised her short sword. "For Kuberr," she spat. Virot had promised her freedom only if she was the last person standing at the close of the evening's entertainment.



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The servant announcer spread his arms wide. "When the horn sounds," he said, "begin." He bowed and quickly retreated from the center of the room.

Val was rocking and chanting on the floor, his eyes tightly shut. Vinya stood behind him with her hands on his shoulders, her chants forming a dialogue with her brother's. Their hair grew as they spoke, Val's climbing up and Vinya's trailing down until the ends met and intertwined. Cato Ilyssa spurred her giant dog forward a pace, then brought the two undead tigers up, so that they all stood in a straight line. She held her arm out, and the raven hopped from shoulder to elbow to wrist, waiting for the signal to take flight.

Virod leaned forward on his chair. His heart was racing, and he was grinning foolishly in anticipation. His voice rang out over the assembly.

"For Kuberr," he said. "Begin."

The horn sounded. Cato's bird and her tigers leaped forward, making straight for the twins. She glared witheringly at Virod and spat on the floor. Then she dug her heels into the dog's flank and she, too, sprang to attack.

The twins' chants had begun to overlap and combine, their voices rising. The raven reached them first and slashed Vinya across the face with its claws, but she did not break contact with her brother, and she did not interrupt her chant. Instead, she and Val both opened their eyes to reveal a terrible yellow glow from within. Val screamed and Vinya roared, and from their mouths poured a great cloud of gelatinous light. The formless blob engulfed the raven in midair, rose toward the ceiling, then slammed into the floor hard enough to crack the boards. The crowd fell back against the walls of the warehouse, but the doors had been barred, and there was no way out.

Cato's tigers plowed straight into the huge greenish blob and became stuck like insects in amber. They struggled and coughed, but the glob hunched up and over them like a thing alive. Once they were entirely within its mass, the glob contracted in on itself, and the horrified assembly watched as the raven and two tigers were crushed together at its center.

Cato struggled to control her dog and to keep it clear of the amoebic shape. Guided by its master, the dog bounded safely around the undulating heap and charged toward the twins. Val and Vinya continued to chant, arcane energy sparking from where they touched each other.

When it was a mere twenty feet long, the grisly mass shuddered and pseudopods lashed out from its front, rear, and top. Cato steered her dog away from the glob's new appendages as the thing itself began to roll together and stretch itself out. The lower pseudopods became burly arms and thick legs, and the ones on top began to flap like wings. The thing's newly sprouted head snapped at Cato, and her dog reared. Val and Vinya kept chanting.

The thing was now recognizably a winged quadruped, an unholy melding of tiger and raven. Its beaked, feline head screeched. Its tail lashed, and its wings fluttered as it padded forward. Cato's steed finally panicked and threw her off, bounding through the crowd and trampling some of the spectators. Cato herself cursed the dog, then cast a searing black bolt of light into the tiger-thing's face. Greenish flesh split where the light touched it, but the thing did not stop stalking.

"Hold," Vinya called, and the twins' monstrosity stopped with Cato Ilyssa between its paws. Virod nodded in satisfaction. Vinya had remembered his injunction to keep their foe alive if at all possible.

Vinya waved her hands, and the tiger-thing melted in a noisome wash of protoplasmic slime. Cato was carried back on the tide and slammed into the nearest wall. She rose, coughing the vile stuff from her lungs, and drew her sword.

"Kill you all," she croaked. "I'll kill each and every last one of you."

Val held his hands palm-up over his shoulders, and Vinya placed her hands on top of his. She helped him to his feet, and, still connected by their hair, the twins exhaled together. A stream of stinging flies poured out of their mouths, buzzing across the room and swarming around Cato's face. Hundreds of the savage insects tore into Cato's flesh, and she staggered, waving her sword feebly, before falling face-first onto the floor.

Half the crowd cheered. The other half was too stunned to speak. Vinya waved her hands, and the swarm of flies disappeared like smoke, leaving the ravaged and unconscious form of Cato Ilyssa lying in the slime.

At a signal from Virot, the announcer stepped forward.

"This concludes tonight's entertainment. Remember—next week, bring guests who like spectacle and have money."



**To be continued...**

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