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Family Man - Chap. 7
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Originally appeared in *The Secrets of Magic*

Dreaming, Virot stood on the endless plain of black rock once more. He waited silently, patiently listening to the wind howl and waiting for the moon to slip out from behind the cloud.

"You have returned," Kuberr's voice boomed. Virot looked up, and the bowing mountain of gold with Kuberr's outline was visible against the moonlit sky.

"The feud is over," Virot said. "Ockeed Ilyssa himself is coming tomorrow to prostrate himself at my mother's feet." He smiled thinly. "The cost to his family turned out to be greater than he was ready to pay. He will submit. For now."



"So you have conquered. You are victorious. Why then do you sound so unhappy?"

"You know why. This is not what I want," he said. "Mother intends to take complete control, as it was generations ago. The Ilyssa will become vassals of the Maglan. Their zombies will be put to work on our behalf, for our glory. And though my idea of exhibiting blood sports has proven quite profitable, I," he snarled in pure disgust, "am to become the general in some sort of zombie army."

"But your family will rule. You will be the undisputed masters of the entire city."

"Who wants to rule?" Virot spat. "Politics is all ebb and flow, compromise and concession. Let others wield power. I am content to improve my own position. Content to amass real wealth."

Kuberr chuckled. "Are you, now? So you have learned what the most valuable treasure of all is?"

"I have."

"And you are ready to pay the price for it."

"Any price."

"Tell me what you have learned, and then name your desire."

Virot grit his teeth. "Wealth is not property, or currency, or even power. These things are derived from true wealth. There is only one prize that can guarantee all the rest will follow."

Kuberr's mountain brought him closer, down to where Virot could see each individual massive eye. "And that is?"

"Time," Virot said. "I wish to live forever. I wish to serve you for a hundred lifetimes and beyond. A man could gorge himself to death on the crumbs from your table. I want a seat at that table, for all eternity."

"Immortality." Kuberr's smile thinned, then stretched wide. "The price is high. And those who serve me forever, serve me to the exclusion of all others."

"I understand. Have I not served you well so far? Tell me. What is the price?"

Kuberr spoke three words. Virot nodded. He had anticipated the cost of Kuberr's gift and was ready to pay it.

"Done," he said. "When?"

"Today. Tomorrow. It matters not, so long as it is done. And lest you think me a fool, remember this—my gift goes on forever. You cannot possibly receive it all at once. The longer you serve me, the longer you will live. If you renege on our deal, or fail to obey me in the future, our bargain is void."

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"I understand."

"There are details. Matters of form to be observed. Your name, for example. Cast it aside. I shall give you a new one. Are you ready?"

"I am."

Kuberr stretched out his massive arms, each as long as a river. "Then come to me, and be the first to join my family."

Virod closed his eyes and felt himself being swallowed up by a power so profound that it was indistinguishable from joy.

The Maglans stood in their manor's great hall, each of them clad in their finest clothes and most expensive jewelry.

"How much longer till they arrive?"

"Not long, Vinya." Mother's copper hair glowed with reflected candle light.

"I have something to say before they do," Virod said. "Something important."

"Of course you do," Vozama muttered. He was fidgeting and uneasy, unable to keep his eyes off the scepter in mother's lap.

"Hush," Lady Maglan said. "Make it quick, Virod. I don't want our guests to find us unready."

He tossed his cloak off his shoulders. "That's part of what I have to say, my dear. I am Virod Maglan no longer. I reject the name you have given me, as completely as I reject the role I have played. I am done. I am leaving."

Val gasped and Vinya's eyes grew wide. Vozama sputtered and fumed, struggling for words. Mother picked up her scepter and passed it back and forth from her left hand to her right.

"Leaving, my son? Where will you go? Your family needs you."

"This is a ploy, Mother," Vozama broke in. "He wants the scepter for himself. He's always wanted the scepter."

Virod's eyes never even flickered toward Vozama. He spoke only to the woman in the chair. "You're not listening. I am no longer your son."

Mother waved her scepter in annoyance. "This is ridiculous. You cannot simply declare yourself out of this family. We are blood. We are inseparable.

"But I do not have time to indulge you now, Virod. Go, if you must. We will accept the Ilyssa's surrender, and we will enjoy the fruits of our victory. You are invited to join us. And no matter what, in a year from now, or ten, you will come back to us. I know this to be true. There is nothing you can do to destroy the bonds between us."

"Come back soon, traitor," Vozama spat. "For if I hold the scepter when you come, you will not be welcome."

Virod stepped forward to the foot of his mother's chair, but he did not sit there. Instead, he bowed his head and waited.

"You are an irksome and troublesome boy, Virod," his mother said. She extended her hand, which he kissed. He held onto her for an extra moment, looking deep into her cold yellow eyes. Then he turned.

"Vozama," he said. "Will you bid me farewell? For all the time we've spent together." Vozama stepped forward and threw a wild slap at his brother's face. Virod caught the slap and stared hard at Vozama. Then he released him and faced the twins.

"Farewell," he said. He opened his arms, and Vinya leapt into them.

"I don't believe you're going," she whispered against his neck. "But when you get there, send for me. I'll come visit."

Val's mismatched eyes were wary as Virod took his hand and shook it.

"I've always been afraid of you," Val said. When Virod let go, Val rubbed his hand as if it'd been squeezing something sticky.

Virod walked to the entranceway of the great hall, then stopped. He turned, placed a hand on his saber, and cleared his throat.

"There is one last thing I have to say." His former family members watched him with a wide range of emotion. Anger and sadness, love and fear.

I understand, he had said in his dream. *What is the price?*

Kuberr had spoken three words, and Virot had nodded. Virot had anticipated the cost of Kuberr's gift and was ready to pay it.

What is the price? he had asked.

The Maglan family, Kuberr had replied.

"Suffer," Virot said to his family.

Vozama was the first to scream, a fact that surprised Virot. He had thought Val would buckle before the others. In fact, as they writhed ignobly on the floor, Vozama and Val were the only ones to cry out. Virot felt a new rush of respect for his mother and sister.

The Maglan women had always been tougher than anyone thought. Vinya herself would be very difficult to replace.

"Wither." Mother suffered the least dramatic effects, as her body was already dried and emaciated. Veins blackened, rose to the surface, and burst. Skin hardened and flaked away. Copper wire and white hair alike crumbled to dust.

There was a knock from outside the chamber. "The Ilyssa have arrived," called a servant's voice.

"Bring them in directly," Virot answered. He marched over to the throne of bone, past the wretched husks of his former family, and took up the scepter, the symbol of Maglan power for ten generations. He spared it but a single glance, then snapped the ancient hardwood across his knee. With both hands, he raised the splintered wood and the black crystal globe high over his head.

"Die," he said, and the sound of the glass globe shattering on the floor was loud enough to be heard at the farthest end of the city.



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