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Family Man - Chap. 8
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Ockeed Ilyssa wore a beard even bigger and blacker than his second-born son's. He came at the head of a procession of ten, mostly distant relatives with a handful of trusted retainers. They all coughed and gagged as they came into the Maglan great hall.

"Nine hells, what's that stench?" Ockeed peered at the tall man standing at the far end of the room. "Maglan?" he said. The man wore a black cloak, and his eyes were clouded over by a ghastly white film. He stood beside a pile of bleached and broken shards of bone that had once been a chair. "What is the meaning of this? Where is Lady Maglan?"



"There are no more Maglans," the tall man said. He gestured. "Come forward, Ockeed Ilyssa."

Ockeed slowly approached with his hand on his dagger. "Who are you?"

"My new name is a secret. But you may call me Pater."

Ockeed sneered. "My father died long ago, boy, and you're half my age. I'll call you 'fool' until you tell me your name."

"That's Virot Maglan," Danske, Ockeed's eldest son hissed. "Their pet killer. I recognize the sword."

"Where's your mother, boy? What sort of game are you playing?"

"There are no more Maglans," the tall man repeated. "Just as there will soon be no more Ilyssa. Or any other family but Kuberr's."

"Look, I've come to discuss terms. I expect to be humiliated, but I will not be ignored." He turned to his entourage. "We're leaving."

The tall man sprang across the room before Ockeed Ilyssa could take a single step. He clamped onto the bearded man's face with both hands, and with a terrifying expression of calm, turned a two-hundred pound man into a pile of ashes and grit before any of his fellows could so much as draw a blade.

"What's your name?" the tall man barked at Ockeed's son. His saber was out and at the younger man's throat. The entire delegation found themselves unable to move, pinned to the floor by a spell they never saw their tormentor cast.

"I am heir to the Ilyssa fortune," Danske said. His eyes were wide and his face damp with fear as he looked at the remains of his father. "And there is no need—"

"Your name."

"Danske Ilyssa," the man blurted, and the tall man ran him through.

"What's your name?" He oriented on a new target, not caring who it was. The woman hesitated, then said, "Whatever you say it is, Pater."

He lowered his sword. "Very good." He pointed the sword again. "And you?" In turn, each of the defeated Ilyssa rejected their given names in favor of whatever the madman with the saber chose to call them.

"Outstanding," the tall man said. "Again, there is only one family left in this city. I am currently its only member. You will all join me shortly.

"There will be no more feuds. There will only be the docks, and the gambling houses, and the blood-sport pits. We will serve Kuberr, the god of wealth, and he will make us strong and rich beyond our wildest dreams."

"How will we serve him, Pater?" The woman was fast, he realized. He would find the best place to put her quick mind to work.

"I will teach you. There are forms to be observed." He smiled, remembering the words Kuberr spoke in his dream. "And we shall observe them. To start, you all need names. Line up," he pointed to the woman, "behind her. There are a few simple rituals and oaths you will perform.

"And then—" he smiled broadly—"we will visit the other noble houses in the city and explain the benefits of joining our new family. And they will join us or die. Is that not wise, my children?"

"Yes, Pater." Others were starting to follow the woman's lead, answering correctly.

"Then tell me so. The First is wise."

"The First is wise," they all chanted.

The man who had been Virod Maglan sheathed his sword. He felt the familiar rush of a well-won victory, but it was paler, muted compared to the anticipation of the greatness that lie before him.

Though he grew closer and closer to his god each day and dreamed of him often, the First only had one dream of Kuberr, over and over, for the next three hundred years. In it, he was on the field of black rock once more, sitting on a throne of bones in the moonlight. Kuberr's mountain of wealth was a short march away, but it had grown so high that its peak was out of sight, beyond even the moon. Thousands, perhaps millions of beings walked past the throne in a single file toward the mountain's base. Humans, non-humans, spirits, and beasts alike all paused at his throne and bowed. Then they scratched the tiniest fleck of black rock from the ground and held it tight between both hands.

When they rose, their eyes were hollow sockets weeping ebon tears.

He shifted uncomfortably in his seat. The ulna bone that served as his armrest had a hairline crack near the wrist, right where adolescent Valdim Maglan's arm had been broken during a particularly violent seizure. But for that crack, the matching ulna on the other side was a mirror opposite, smooth and slender like the bone from a vivacious and mysterious lady. The legs of the chair were bowed slightly, as Vozama's had been, and the headrest was the small but durable skull of a wizened old woman.

The line of supplicants continued to file past. He peered down the line toward the mountain. Though the figures were tiny in the distance, he could see each folding, melting, and reforming around their bit of rock, shrinking and hardening until they were indistinguishable from the coins they approached. With each transformation, the hoard became incrementally larger.

The first member of Kuberr's community looked in the opposite direction, down the line that stretched past the horizon. There was no end in sight, but he knew that when the last adherent came and contributed to the pile, he would see Kuberr again. The god would call his secret name and praise the work he had done.

And then Kuberr would force him to rise from his throne, scratch a bit of rock from the plain, and join the rest of the cabal he had created. The wealth god feasted on life, after all, and the First knew that he must either feed Kuberr or become his food.

In his dreams, and in every waking hour, he vowed to keep the line of cabalists going for as long as possible.



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