

Magra headed toward the great hall, a broad smile on his face. Without a doubt, today would be a wonderful day, a day when everything would go right, a day when everything would align with his ambitions. This unfamiliar frame of mind made him almost forget his habitual cruelty. Thus, when his path was blocked by the old slave scrubbing the floor on hands and knees, Magra merely shoved him aside with his foot, whereas on any other day he would have beaten him mercilessly.

"Move it, you old bastard, I'm in a hurry!"

Magra quickly forgot him, and as the old man writhed on the ground, moaning, he continued on his way, buoyant and cheerful, to plant himself before the ornate mirror in the great hall.

His sharp features, combined with a twisted smile, gave his face the look of a sadist reveling in his own delight. He experimented with different expressions, pursing his lips, then hollowing his cheeks, before opening his mouth wide to feign surprise, much like a leaden actor. His bony hands adjusted his headdress and brushed the sand from his loose-fitting robes.

Though he tried to control them, his gaze kept drifting, against his will, toward the heavy wooden door a few meters to his right. His efforts were in vain, yet he persisted in trying to drag his eyes back to his reflection in the mirror, over and over again.

Finally, he closed them.

He knew that, in just a few moments, his life would change forever behind that luxurious panel.

"House Red. What a ridiculous name! That's the very first thing I'll change."

Magra had been waiting for this moment for years; his patience and perseverance were finally about to pay off. His elderly father, may he finally return to Earth, had summoned him for a formal meeting. He only ever did that with his two agents, and only to discuss matters of great importance.

But never with Magra.

It could mean only one thing: he was handing over the reins. He was finally passing the management of the merchant house to his son. His legitimate son, at least. It was a pity the other bastard—yet another one!—wasn't there to witness it.

Magra smiled again at the thought of his "brother" and the look on his face when he saw him at the head of the house. He was so jubilant he felt a sudden urge to relieve his bladder.

He pushed the thought aside, took a deep breath, and knocked on the door.

Today, Magra would reign.

* * * * *

"Magra must never rule, do you hear me? Never!"

"Cruel, arrogant, sadistic, and incompetent—he has nothing but flaws. If he weren't my son, I would have dismissed him long ago." Alek's voice echoed through the vast room.

The shadowed figure he was addressing remained silent but nodded. His shoulders slumped as he listened to the old man's long speech and grasped its implications. He wasn't ready for any of this. Not at all.

Alek caught his breath after an outburst unlike any before. He leaned against the back of a chair, trying to pierce the darkness to find the eyes of the person he was addressing. In a voice that had grown quavering—almost hesitant—he whispered:

"Rest assured, he will understand..."

As if in response to his tirade, three sharp knocks rang out at the study door, like three warning shots.

* * * * *

"Right, now he had to think. And fast! "

As he vigorously washed his hands, Magra racked his brain for a solid solution—a "valid" excuse, as he used to call them when he was a child.

This time, he was angry with himself. Truly angry. His impulsive nature had landed him in a mess yet again, and now he had to convince the locals that...

"Master?"

Although the sun was already high in the sky, the room was dark—a nasty habit of his father's, keeping the windows covered to keep the place cool. But for once, that would work to his advantage. And for once, that old slave would come in handy, too.

* * * * *

Ozak slowly entered the office. His back stooped by the weight of ages, he moved forward with measured steps, knowing full well that something was amiss. His hearing had often betrayed him of late, but not his instinct, not his old reflexes, and certainly not the sixth sense that had pulled him out of countless dangers in his youth. The shouts

had been brief, yet it was unmistakably the Master's voice he had heard—a man who never raised his voice.

"Master?"

The room was shrouded in semi-darkness, but his greatest burden at least had the advantage of granting him keen vision. He allowed his infravision to adjust to the faint ambient light and scanned the room for his master.

"Ah, there you are! Here, take this."

He instantly recognized that nasal tone, that grating rasp issuing from the throat of Magra, Alek's eldest son. As unpleasant as a taut rope on the verge of snapping, the guttural sound took him by surprise; then, emerging from the shadows of a side alcove, the sadist's face appeared, a terrifying smile playing on his lips.

Upon hearing the threat, Ozak instinctively raised an arm to shield his face against an impending blow, only to be surprised when Magra seized his wrist and slipped an object into his hand.

"Drop that thing, you're going to hurt yourself," Kalaar scolded, grabbing the crate's handles and lifting it unaided. Veloss smiled back, shaking his head with a crestfallen look; he was resigned to the fact that he would never match the Mul's strength. Still, unwilling to lose face too easily, he attempted a retort that was doomed from the start.

"I'll just keep an eye on you from the shade. To each their own job..."

An observer might have thought the two were friends working side by side. However, once Veloss walked away to retrieve his bone spear and resumed his post, there was no longer any doubt about their respective roles: guard and slave.

Now seated in the warehouse's shade, Veloss kept watch over the only slave assigned to him that day—a slave who, he knew full well, could escape at any moment without him being able to stop it, weapon and endless training notwithstanding. Fortunately for him, within House Red—under Alek's rule—no slave had ever escaped, and this had nothing to do with the guards' numbers or skills. To some, being a slave here seemed irrational; to others, sheer madness.

A mass of muscle, Kalaar was a one-man war machine—a weapon capable of shattering the meager defenses of the entire household. As he moved, his body—scarred from a past life of servitude and combat—recalled the tagsters encountered in the desert along trade routes or near herds in the surrounding pastures; creatures whose agility and

power made their every attack unpredictable. The guard often reflected that the natural order seemed wrong, that the roles ought to be reversed. He scowled slightly at the thought—though ultimately content with his own lot—and wondered who else could lift those crates with such ease, or how many men it would take to match the mul's endurance.

While the guard was lost in thought, Kalaar was just finishing his labor. Sweat beaded across his hairless body, yet he showed no signs of fatigue. A broad smile lit up his face at the sight of the completed work; the pleasure he took in carefully stacking each crate and arranging every sack in precise order gave Veloss the impression that the mul had made the task his own—as if he had chosen it himself, and his status as a slave were merely a trivial detail.

Suddenly, Kalaar straightened to his full height, ears pricked and brows furrowed. Veloss knew the signs; the mul's posture made him shudder instantly. Something was afoot.

"Did you hear that?" Kalaar approached quickly, muscles tense and face stern.

Relieved and casting aside his earlier thoughts, Veloss strained to listen as well. Life within the House was usually bustling, but at this midday hour—when the sun beat down most fiercely—the courtyard lay deserted; everyone sought the shade of the buildings, waiting for cooler times. He quickly scanned the key locations where his fellow guards ought to be. All were at their respective posts, and none appeared alarmed. So, no attack from the outside. Kalaar cut his observations short, grabbing his arm and pointing toward the main building.

"Shouting! Over there!"

Without waiting for a reply—let alone an order—he rushed toward the imposing red-brick edifice that gave the merchant house its name. Veloss had no choice but to follow, unsure of how to act in this bizarre situation where a slave was taking the initiative without waiting for commands.

Upon entering the Red House, Veloss finally heard the cries. He instantly recognized Magra's voice, unmistakable thanks to its unique timbre. The sound grew louder as he approached the office, its heavy door standing open.

He saw Kalaar, who was ahead of him, stop instinctively as he recalled the strict rules imposed on everyone joining the Red House. The prohibition was absolute, handed down by Alek himself: no one was to enter the office without his consent. His hesitation, however, was short-lived, for the calls for help brooked no delay.

The interior was too dark for him to see clearly, yet the light spilling in from the great hall provided enough illumination for Veloss to make out a room in total disarray. A bench lay overturned before him; its cushions, scattered across the floor, mingled with the shards of vases that had shattered when the nearby table toppled over. He moved forward

warily, searching for the combatants—for that was surely what they were. Veloss had witnessed enough wrestling matches to harbor no doubt about the nature of the struggle taking place nearby. He could hear the sounds of bodies rolling on the floor and crashing against the furniture. The opponents' ragged breathing and the gasps of their struggle grew louder as he advanced further into the room. When he finally located them, his eyes narrowed instinctively in a futile attempt to distinguish the two adversaries. As he did so, he tightened his grip on his spear—now held in both hands—pointing its tip toward the rivals.

"Help me! He's armed!" Magra shouted, breathless.

Just as Veloss hesitated over the best course of action, light suddenly flooded the study. Warm yet blinding, it washed over the room so intensely that, for a fleeting moment, everyone froze. The sun's power acted as a judgment to which all were compelled to submit. Silhouetted against the light like an executioner, Kalaar—who had pulled back the heavy curtains—was advancing rapidly to stop Magra's attacker. Yet, as he stepped in to intervene, he realized the fight had already ceased. At his feet, Magra—flat on his back, his face flushed from exertion—was pinning his opponent down from behind. With one hand, he pinned the man's right arm—which wielded a blood-stained dagger—while his other hand gripped the man's throat. Their legs were tangled in a clumsy grapple that a true fighter would have easily escaped, yet his opponent was no longer struggling. Kalaar recognized him instantly, and his heart raced, swept up in a mixture of surprise and emotion.

Ozak did not struggle. Tears streamed down his pain-ravaged face, and his open mouth could not give voice to the howl of sorrow consuming him. He reached out his free arm—not to break free from Magra's grip, but to grasp at something: an unattainable dream, a dream collapsing and lost forever. Kalaar turned his head toward whatever had so devastated his old companion and froze in turn. A few meters ahead lay Alek's lifeless body, sprawled face-down in a pool of blood. Beside him, slumped against the wall, was Dhalim—his second son—his throat slit.

"No! No!" Veloss shouted, his voice ragged with emotion. "Hold him back; I'm going to get Elya."

Kalaar snapped out of his stupor at the guard's orders and refocused on Ozak and Magra. The old man was still weeping bitterly, while Magra was catching his breath. The mul's keen eye—honed by countless life-or-death battles—quickly picked up details that didn't fit the scene. Something was wrong. His gaze lingered on the hand holding the dagger, and he realized it remained in Ozak's grasp only because Magra was pressing Ozak's fingers around it—as if forcing him to hold the weapon, rather than trying to take it away. He also sensed the depth of Ozak's grief—the way he had crumbled at the death of his beloved master. A master so dear to his heart that he praised his virtues every day; so dear that he would tell anyone who cared to listen that, even if granted his freedom,

he would never leave Alek's service. Finally, he caught a glimpse—however fleeting—of the faint smile on Magra's lips. It was a triumphant smile, one he had seen the man wear countless times during his petty, daily acts of spite.

Then Kalaar understood. He saw through the entire charade—the cunning, the treachery, and the horror brewing in the twisted mind of that vile bastard.

The two men studied each other for a long moment, and Magra clumsily tried to turn the situation to his advantage.

"Come on, slave! Disarm him so I can finally get up."

Magra's expression shifted drastically when he read the determination in the former gladiator's eyes. Fear contorted his face as the other man stepped closer.

* * * * *

"I was there when Kalaar killed Magra. I was there when the whip tore into his body, carving indelible furrows into his battered flesh. I was there when the citizens sought to make an example of his through a hasty trial and a hanging. And I was there, finally, when the House's own guards defended him against a furious mob. Some might deem this story utterly impossible—and anywhere else, I would have called you liars myself. But you were there too, and I can guarantee that what happens here cannot happen anywhere else."

Elya could not suppress the emotion making her voice tremble, yet she did not stop arguing her case. She had remained silent for too long; now, everyone needed to know the truth.

For nearly an hour, she had been striving to lift her companions' spirits, for they had all sunk into deep despondency following the events that had shaken House Red six months earlier. They all wondered whom they would serve now—and, above all, under what circumstances. Would they be resold like mere objects? How would they be treated elsewhere? What would their new masters, their new duties, and their new lives be like? They were all well aware that House Red was exceptional; and though none of them could explain why Alek was so benevolent toward his slaves, they all bitterly mourned his loss.

Elya resumed her speech, growing more confident as her passion ignited, and gaining strength as she convinced herself. She wanted to believe it, too.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the purple hanging that concealed the small room's entrance stir. The timing was perfect—worthy of a bard's precise performance—and her final argument was destined to change the history of House Red forever.

She looked each of her friends in the eye, in turn: Ozak the Elder, whose face still bore the marks of the murder of Alek—a crime Magra had tried to pin on him; Déi, the youngest, whose habitual silence had deepened since the old master's death; and Kalaar, whose psychological wounds were far more apparent than the bruises on his body.

She played her trump card by pulling back the hanging. Veloss entered the room, supporting a man whose face was masked by a scarf and whose body appeared frail and unsteady. This entrance sparked both curiosity and suspicion among the group, as none of them was accustomed to welcoming newcomers into their tight-knit circle of slaves.

Sand, still warm from the desert, trickled onto the packed-earth floor as Dhalim removed his veil. His long black hair cascaded over his shoulders, but the deep gash across his throat was clearly visible to the stunned onlookers—a testament to Elya's healing prowess. All eyes turned to her, and she flashed them a wide smile.

"From this moment on, anything is possible, my friends."

For hours, the small group pieced the puzzle together, seeking to resolve inconsistencies and shed light on the dark omens that had befallen them. They finally understood why Kalaar and Ozak had been spared. House Red had an heir, and no citizen had the right to pass judgment on its slaves—or so Veloss had declared before the bloodthirsty crowd.

In a voice that was hoarse, slow, and pained, Alek's last son finally revealed his father's wishes—his mad plans for the future of House Red.

"Look at yourselves," he said. "What do you see?"

Stunned into silence, no one dared answer, fearing they might look foolish at such a solemn moment. Only Elya, confident in her knowledge, knew the answer but kept it to herself. Then Dhalim, with an unsteady hand, brushed his hair back behind his ears.

"Then look at us," he said.

Half-breeds. They were all the offspring of unions between different races. Kalaar, a mul, was born of a dwarf and a human, though he knew neither of them. All the others were the product of unions between humans and elves.

Dhalim recounted the brief romance his father had shared with an elf, years after his first wife's death. Deemed illegitimate, the child had been handed over to Alek by the elven tribe to be rid of the problem.

"We all share the same story, really," Elya added. "Rejected by one parent, disowned by the other—or by both. Sold into slavery just to get rid of us, or to make money and escape the burden."

"So what? What difference does that make?" Kalaar interjected cynically. "What do you want to become? Queen of the Bastards?" The word was out, piercing their hearts as sharply as an arrow.

"And why not?" she challenged him.

The task would be arduous, but Dhalim had sworn to see it through. He had promised his father, and he would not fail.

"You are all free," he called out. "It was His will, and I am putting it into effect right now. You may leave this instant—go wherever you please and do whatever you wish. But you can also take part in Alek's project—a dream he began building the day I was born, and one I am now carrying forward. House Red is merely a front for this project; we shall be its pillars."