

The Assassin

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The castle had been carved out of rock and overlooked what seemed like a bottomless ravine. Dafar knew that if he lost his footing, he'd join those said to have been plunged into oblivion from its windows over the years. But for the time being he was safe. Until the Provincaro of Sebastapol stepped outside his chamber and stared up to where Dafar was balanced perilously on a thin piece of granite that jutted out between the two balconies.

Dafar turned quickly to leap back towards the first chamber, but a girl stood there leaning against the trellis, carefully studying him.

"Sir Gargarin," she called out to the Provincaro, as if it was the most natural thing in the world for someone to be stuck onto the outer walls of the palace between their rooms. "You don't think he's one of those tiresome assassins sent to kill my father, do you?"

Before the Provincaro could reply, a knock sounded from both chambers and without a word, the Provincaro and the girl disappeared inside their rooms.

"Did I not say I was to be left in peace?" Dafar heard the Provincaro bark.

"An assassin on the loose, Sir," the guard explained.

"And where do you suppose he's hiding?" the girl asked her guard. "Do you think the fool is perched out on my balconette?"

"No Princess. Sorry Princess. Won't disturb you again."

The Provincaro and the Princess stepped back outside at the exact moment.

"So where were we?" they both asked Dafar but he was gone. Wind buffeting the wall where he had been. They both turned and looked up at the balcony above them, its grey underside hiding the assassin from their eyes.

Dafar was panting, on his back, lying on the floor. His desperate struggle to keep away from the Princess and the Provincaro had led to another chamber. He looked around quickly and stared straight at the King's face.

"Good evening," he said, with an amused gleam in his eye. "Are you the assassin who is trying to kill me?"

Dafar was on his feet in a flash. Heart pounding, he took out his knife and lunged towards the King.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," he said, his face breaking into a smile. "There are a dozen archers above me and, at my word, carve holes in you."

Dafar nervously glanced up. He saw nothing but then again, there might be archers stealthily hidden from his eyes. Realising he was trapped he said through gritted teeth, "What do you want?"

"A chat," the King answered warmly. "Come inside, you must be freezing in a night like this." He pulled open the drapes behind him and Dafar saw an expansive room lit by a fireplace on one side. On the other side sat the Princess and the Provincaro at a large wooden desk. He wondered how they had come up so quickly. Behind them were fabulous golden candle holders and extensive shelves filled with hundreds of books.

"I told you he was an assassin," the Princess said in a conversational tone to the Provincaro.

“Not a very good one,” he nodded. The Provincaro stood up and started murmuring with the King. Dafar felt fear swell in his body. His dagger grew slippery as he watched them talk. He stared at his dagger. Maybe if he moved quickly enough he could finish the job. He contemplated the idea but a thought occurred to him, what then? If he killed the king then the Provincaro would kill him. He thought for longer, thinking of a way out.

Once they stopped the Provincaro strode towards him, his face set in an emotionless mask. He quickly ripped the dagger out of his hands and pushed him into a small stool. The Princess giggled in the background but Dafar only stared at the Provincaro's face, rigid and unforgiving. Dafar started feeling nervous as the Provincaro sat down opposite.

“Who sent you here?” Dafar stared into space for a while, thinking quickly, and then answered in a hesitant tone.

“Baron Mendork. He was supposed to meet me at inn afterwoods.” The King nodded, as if confirming his suspicions then said,

“That greedy worm. No wonder he didn't hire a more professional assassin. He's so miserly that he hates even the thought of paying someone.” He mulled over his for a moment and then said bluntly, “Can you kill him?”

Dafar was slightly shocked. The King had seemed like a forgiving person. Dafar thought about for a moment then licked his lips. “The usual fee?”

“Naturally.” The king nodded. “He's a damn nuisance. Always evading taxes. He's more slippery than an eel and as ruthless as a shark. This kingdom would do better without him.”

Dafar saw this as the best way to stay alive. “Deal,” he said, holding out his hand.

“Deal,” the King said, shaking his hands.

When Dafar had gone the Provincaro muttered the King, "Sir was that wise?"

The King laughed chillingly, like a man sending another to death. "Oh yes, it is very wise. As soon as that assassin leaves the room my archers will kill them both."