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A Pair of Queens
by
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“This is the worst idea you’ve ever had,” Bren said, grasping the oilskin sacks strapped to his chest and adjusting them. Filled with the bread pudding they’d purloined from an inn several days past, the bags were serving as part of the best disguise Jaron had ever devised.

Painted from head to foot in verdigris, clothed in the finest textiles of Beggar’s Alley, and wearing the most tangled wigs they’d been able to find, the pair had managed to pass as female goblins for just over a full day. Despite the excellence of their costume, the performance had been taxing. A recent encounter with a small troupe of amorous males had left the adventurers feeling exhausted and in desperate need of bathing. It had left the true goblins in an unconscious pile down a back alley.

They had just about convinced themselves it was time to head home when their unwitting feminine wiles had attracted the attention of the unwelcome goblin party. Much to Jaron’s surprise, in the pocket of one of the unlucky goblin men had been an invitation to that evening’s private card party hosted by Prince Fingerwart, the very goblin who had the item they sought—the Dragon’s Egg Jewel.

“I dare say, things are looking up, friend.” Jaron waved the card in front of Bren’s face.

This quest was shaping up to be one of their least dangerous adventures yet. The journey to the goblin city of Boglin had been uneventful. Smuggling an obscene amount of dessert out of their last decent accommodation had been rather more entertaining than expected. Painting their selves green and dressing as women had caused them to almost lose consciousness with laughter. Even the uncommon level of focus they’d had to employ to sneak into the city and search for the jewel hadn’t been beyond their skill sets. Discovering where their prize was being kept hadn’t been difficult, and now, with the invitation, they had their way in.

“Stop touching them,” Jaron said, slapping Bren’s hands away from his false breasts. “Real women don’t grab their chests in public like that.”

“Goblins might,” Bren said, continuing to adjust himself as they passed over one of the city’s stone bridges spanning a narrow culvert. The city had hundreds of these little stone walkways spanning what seemed to be thousands of streams of every rank fluid and almost-fluid a goblin body could produce.

“This only has to work for a few hours more,” Jaron said as they continued on their way. He lowered his head, avoiding eye contact with several of the city’s enforcers, goblins wearing bits of armor and carrying weapons of various shape and metal. It didn’t appear that these patrol parties were actually organized by the city, but were instead made up of volunteers eager for violence. “Once we’re inside this party, we’ll find the jewel. Then it’s only a matter of creating a diversion, and making a very quiet get away.”

“And avoiding the mage,” Bren said. He lowered his head and sniffed at his chest.

“Well yes, that’s where the diversion comes in.”

“I think these are beginning to smell.”

“Would you focus?”

“I have a bad feeling about this one, Jaron,” Bren said. Despite the comedic green paint on his face, Bren’s dark eyes were full of concern.

Jaron paused and turned to his shorter, stockier friend. He set a hand on Bren’s shoulder.

“Have I ever steered you wrong before?”

“Yes.”

Jaron ran his tongue over his teeth. “Yeah, that’s fair enough. But, Bren,”—Jaron produced the invitation from his pocket and motioned down the street—“We’re this close.”

Bren looked unconvinced.

“Let’s just, go in. We’ll look around. If your bad feeling persists, we’ll walk away. Deal?”

Bren didn’t appear sold, but he was a loyal man. He nodded. Jaron swung an arm over his friend’s shoulder as they continued on their way.

“Besides, I think your bad feeling is just some stinky bread pudding.” Jaron poked the curve of Bren’s dessert-filled bosom.

Bren slapped his hand away. “A lady does not poke another lady’s chest!”

“A goblin might.”

They were still laughing when they passed into the small courtyard in front of the prince’s apartments. Two very large goblin warriors stepped into their path, their appearance stern though not aggressive. Immediately, Bren and Jaron fell into character.

“Stop playing around, Applerot. We’ve arrived.” Bren looked up at the warriors and smiled. “This is the prince’s address, isn’t it?”

Jaron held out the invitation. “Fungusflower has no sense of direction. We’ve already been to the wrong place once tonight. We’re here for the card game.”

The guards—tall and muscular for goblins—exchanged an unreadable expression. Bren nudged Jaron with his elbow and grabbed the taller man by the arm.

“I told you this was the wrong place,” Bren said, pulling his friend away.

“No. No. Right place,” one of the guards said, stepping forward to take the invitation and looking it over. He shrugged and turned, motioning for Bren and Jaron to follow.

“Bad feeling,” Bren murmured as they climbed the stairs. “Bad, bad feeling.”

Inside, the guard continued to guide them, glancing back to make sure they were still following. The prince's party was more opulent than the adventurers would have expected of goblins. The main hall was crammed full of round tables and games of *Queen, King, Kill* in progress. The game was the goblin version of a human game called *Heroine*, in which a pair of female warrior cards could overthrow the higher point male warrior card if played correctly.

"There is enough gold in here to fund a war," Bren said, staring at a stack of coins and jewelry on one of the tables as they passed. Nearby, someone bellowed in defeat, and an empty tankard sailed through the smoky air.

As they passed through the room, the general raucousness seemed to decrease until it was almost quiet as they approached a rather unremarkable goblin sitting on a cushioned chair at the end of the hall. Beside this goblin stood two very large, grey-skinned orcs with thick steel swords on their belts. Behind him stood a hooded figure and, on a golden pedestal shining as if it was lit from within, a golden gem the size of a man's head.

It took every ounce of courage within Jaron not to turn around and walk out of the apartment. He wiped the cold sweat on his palms onto his skirts and tore his eyes away from the guards, two orc mercenaries and a single human magician. It seemed Prince Fingerwart had nearly paid the gem's full value in foreign protection. Goblins—foul-tempered and quick to stab—were adversaries they could handle. But orcs were absolute brutes, notorious for their blood rage, and mages with no morals were enough to make the bravest of men think twice. This score was proving more trouble than it was worth.

"Prince Fingerwart," Jaron said, bowing as they came before the royal goblin. Jaron had to smack Bren's arm to draw his friend's eyes away from the Dragon's Egg Jewel.

"Females not invited," the prince said, waving away the invitation as the door guard tried to hand it to him "How did you get card? Why did you come?"

Jaron and Bren's eyes met as they turned slowly, finally noticing that, in appearance, they were the only women in the room.

"Well you see," Bren began as he turned back to the prince.

He lost his charming smile as he tripped, landing heavily with a peculiar popping noise. The goblins were quiet for a moment and then they laughed. They laughed until Bren rose. Then an uncomfortable, bizarre silence took the room. The front of Bren's costume was soaking wet. A sweet, rotten scent permeated the air.

"Did lady's lady bits burst?"

"Oh gods. Is that the insides?"

Somewhere in the room someone retched.

Prince Fingerwart leaned forward from his cushioned chair. An expression of intrigued disgust on his face. "Did she... is she wounded?"

Bren looked at Jaron, terror on his face.

There was movement in the corner of Jaron's eye. The mage, taking advantage of the distraction, had climbed up to the pedestal and lifted the gem from its base. During this feat, the mage's hood had fallen back to reveal a familiar face.

"Talía," Jaron snarled.

Nothing more than a common thief, Talía, currently in possession of the most valuable jewel in Minnea, was silently laughing so hard she was crying. Catching Jaron's eye, the mirth fell from her face. She shook her head as if to dissuade him from his next action.

"Oh, Prince Fingerwart," Jaron said, almost in sing-song "Your dragon jewel is being stolen."

Talía's eye's narrowed, but the corner of her mouth lifted in a smirk.

"Get ready," Jaron said, grabbing Bren's arm.

"For what?" Bren asked.

"Whatever she's about to do."

"Is that Talía?"

Just as Bren finished asking his question, Talía tossed something into the air that stole the light from the room. There was no smoke, no smell, just a sudden deep darkness. She had thrown a true magecraft charm.

"My egg!" The prince screamed. "The mage has taken my egg! Alert the guard!"

The room filled with the clatter of coins, screams of pain, and the deep thuds of heavy objects colliding with another. The charm didn't last long. The returning light revealed absolute chaos in the hall. Tables had been flipped on their sides. Goblins, wounded or worse, lay strewn over the floor. Gold glittered over and under everything.

Glancing at the prince, Jaron groaned. "Well, someone's taken advantage of that bit of mayhem."

Prince Fingerwart still sat in his chair, a gilded dagger through his chest. His orc mercenaries were nowhere to be seen.

"I hope we're not blamed for this," Bren said, frowning deeply.

Quickly and quietly, sticking to the edges of the room, the adventurers made their way back to the entrance.

Outside, Bren pointed at Jaron's face. "Your paint is running. We'll never make it out of the city like this."

Jaron ran his tongue over his teeth. Then he pointedly turned his head and looked toward the small stream that ran alongside the prince's property. The pungent stench, which they had done their best to ignore during their time in the city, seemed stronger when acknowledged.

"Oh, no," Bren said. "You can't be serious."

“We know exactly where Talia is going to take that egg. If we beat her out of the city, we have a good chance of taking it off her hands before she gets there,” Jaron said. “And all of these rivers run downhill.”

Bren reached behind his head and pulled off the now empty oilskin sacks he’d been wearing for two days. He dropped them on the ground.

“Alright,” he said. “But, when we get paid, I want a three day bath. Do you hear me Jaron? A three-day-bath. With bubbles. And candles. For three days...” The man was still talking as he disappeared over the edge of the stinking culvert. Holding his breath, and the image of the glowing jewel in his mind, Jaron followed.