

# The Power of a Kiss

Part 7

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Alicia was glad her armor was made of leathers and silk and not heavy metals. She wondered, as she tried to climb out of the oversized garments, how anyone could lift such heavy pieces of armor at such a small size. If someone were trapped inside a mail prison, would they ever escape?

The battlefield had grown silent, which could either be a good or bad thing. On one hand, it meant the fighting was over—a clear victor had come forth. On the other hand, it didn't bode well for the losers. If Alicia were still alive, then perhaps so was the rest of her shrunken friends.

It was hard being upset when she knew Scott was okay. Sure, he was the captive of Empress Noire but she'd figured he'd died when the world upended. Somehow, she would find him. Somehow, she'd get back at Empress Noire.

As she exhumed herself out of her clothes, she looked around the battlefield for signs of movement. At the very least, she should've been hearing Empress Noire's giant feet but the big lady was nowhere to be found. Most likely,

she'd reduced back to normal size. Alicia was sure the dark elf hadn't been beaten.

The grass was a grazing field, so luckily it wasn't too high for a six-inch elf to manage. She should've heard *something*, even if it was just crickets—which would've been half the size of her current body. But she grew worried that none of her friends were crying out. Did Empress Noire, or one of her skeletal minions, flatten all the shrunken people?

Among them—Alicia, Hima, Maeve, and a host of light and high elves, including their queen. She looked across the dark battlefield and found no spots of blood, but several puddles of clothing. Noire's magic had stretched far and wide, shrinking all her adversaries. The Hill Steeds, now without riders, galloped back to the only place they knew, the kingdom.

From here, it looked normal. If Empress Noire had sacked it, she had done so quietly. No toppled towers, no broken gates, no plumes of smoke. It was as if she showed up

long enough to shrink her enemies, then disappeared. Where were the others? Eir, Kamari, the wolf girl, and Maza?

And where were the rest of Alicia's friends?

She heard a sound to the left and squinted her eyes. The moonlight caught on a piece of metal, once again making her consider how someone could push their way out. It was indeed an iron boot and it was rattling back and forth while the inhabitant desperately tried to escape.

Judging by the mound of armor, she knew it was a light elf—but which one, she had no idea. Quickly, she raced across the battlefield, now hearing the pecks of a tiny body slamming against the inside of the boot. It didn't matter how much strength the tiny elf used—whoever it was, stood on the inside of the boot, making it difficult to turn over. Alicia would have better luck.

“Hello?” said Alicia, sounding silly at once.

“Help me out of this blasted boot!” said a voice from within. She recognized it at once as Vannya.

“Hang on,” said Alicia, then climbed atop the toes of the boot so she could reach the rim up top. It took a jump but she managed to snag her fingers across it. Swinging out, her weight toppled the boot onto its side.

Out came a beautiful, naked light elf. Vannya’s hair spilled down across her shoulders, as every piece of ceremonial braids and clips had remained the same size. She turned a full circle, appraising the battlefield.

“We have to see to the queen!” she said, then took off running toward the south, away from the city.

“Wait!” Alicia said. “How do you know where to find her?”

“There!” said Vannya, and she pointed to the headdress on the ground, lightly blowing in the wind. This was probably a good idea, as Alicia figured the queen would

be the best egress spot for all those who'd been shrunken down.

The elves ran on, stopping at another pile of clothes halfway there. Quickly, Alicia helped to tug the garments away from a writhing shape within. After one particularly heavy pull, Maeve tumbled out and held her fist back, ready to strike.

“Oh, thank Dinnin,” she said, relaxing at once.

“Where’s Hima?”

“We’re looking,” Alicia said, “C’mon.”

They reached the mound of regal battle attire belonging to Queen Trita. She was already outside, sitting on a plump ball of silk. She had a resigned look in her eyes, as if she knew all along that the battle was lost forever. She was also the size of Alicia and the others, as if she’d been stripped of her golem status in the shrinking.

“My queen,” said Vannya. “We must—”

But then they heard an awful sound far off.

Alicia turned her attention to the west and saw the warrioress Kamari, tall as a mountain, casually strolling into the battlefield. The others were with her—Eir and the wolf girl by her side.

Kamari stepped up to a pile of clothes, jostled it with her foot, then sank her blade into it. Alicia's heart froze. She wasn't sure if there was a tiny elf in there or not, but it was still devastating to watch. After Kamari was finished, she moved to the next pile.

“We can't stay here,” said the queen. “Come.”

“I'm not leaving Hima,” said Alicia, and without waiting to see if they were following, turned and ran toward the giants.

But she soon heard footsteps to the left and right. None of the present company understood retreat and she grinned knowing they would die to protect their friends.



Along the way, they picked up a few more light and high elves. Most everyone had survived, as the battle swept past them the moment they were shrunken down. None of them had weapons and were little more than battlefield fodder should the Noirite forces find them.

They came across a flattened suit of armor—it reminded Alicia of dinnerware. Empress Noire must have stepped on it as she traipsed through, unleashing her wicked magic. If there was a shrunken, pulverized elf beneath it, they couldn't see it.

While it was easy to avoid detection from Maza and Eir, neither who were adamantly looking at the piles, it was a different story with Kamari and Kiva. The swordswoman looked to be enjoying the tiny deaths while the wolf-girl, in her animal form, could easily root out the scent of elves.

Behind Maza came a contingent of prisoners, the rest of Alicia's friends—and the dark elf assassins who were only

vile in name. She had to figure out a way to help them, but it was difficult right now at a mere six inches high.

They found Kynina not much further ahead but they stopped in the short grass as soon as the group made eyes with her. She was still inside her armor—half of it was smashed, but she'd been lucky enough to dodge the damage. Kiva was bounding close by, her snout to the ground, her ears folded back.

The wolf-girl's head lifted and her fur bristled as if she'd heard something. Alicia made herself flat as she could against the ground but it was difficult for all of them to hide—their white, porcelain skin was quite noticeable against the drab ground. If Kiva even looked in their direction, she would see them.

But then she went back to sniffing the grass, luckily moving in the opposite direction.

“C'mon,” Maeve whispered.

They joined up with Kynina who seemed belligerent at once. “What in the bloody hell was that? She *sbrank* us!”

“We’ll worry about that later,” said Vannya. “We’re looking for their friend first.”

“I see it,” said Alicia. She checked to make sure the giants were occupied elsewhere, then stepped upon Kynina’s half-crushed armor.

Across the field, probably a hundred yards—relative to their size—was Hima’s armor. It was blowing in the wind and she figured it had been carried away on it, luckily out of reach of Noire’s stamping feet. Hima had to be inside, waiting for an opportunity to escape.

“We won’t make it,” said Maeve. Kiva was circling back around, and it was likely she’d come in their direction. The rest of the giants had moved off, toward the city.

“I’m getting us out of here,” said Vannya. She placed her fingers in her mouth, raised her head, and blew out her

jaws. Alicia was expecting to hear a long, piercing whistle but there was no sound at all. The whole time, the light elf's throat vibrated, as if she were conveying an intricate song on the wind.

“That didn't do anything,” said Maeve once she was finished.

“Yes it did,” said Vannya.

They hurried across the expanse in single-file, keeping a watchful eye on the giants. Kiva had either run off toward the castle or was hidden on the other side of the distant bushes. Either way, she wasn't in sight, so hopefully she wouldn't return.

Alicia rushed into the pile of cloth and metal. She didn't have to go far before she found a wadded piece of silk—a drawstring—that had managed to wrap around the tiny elf.

“Thanks,” said Hima. “So we're all small, huh?”

“Yep,” Alicia said. “But I saw Scott. He’s alive, and so are the rest of our friends.”

“That’s good news,” said Hima once Alicia managed to undo the string. Her tiny body was marked with red and white lines where it had cut off her blood.

“Hush!” said Kynina, sticking her head into the tent-sized armor. “The wolf is back.”

The rest of them—Maeve, Vannya, Queen Trita, and three light elves, entered and waited. Their shrunken, naked bodies huddled together, feeling marvelously warm in the confines of the armor. If Kiva were to sniff this particular mound, it would be over. Alicia couldn’t hope to mask the scent of this many hidden creatures.

But again, Kiva seemed more interested in the other side of the battlefield and she moved off. Vannya looked out, then turned to her group with a big smile on her face.

“C’mon. We’re getting back to the castle.”

Alicia followed her out and nearly jumped out of her skin by the wall of brown fur in front of her.

Vannya was petting a hamster—probably a larger specimen than most of its brethren, and certainly at the elves' current size. Behind the hamster was a white rabbit, its ears tucked back, watching the miniature girls exit the tent of armor.

“What is this?” Maeve asked.

“It's Casper,” said Vannya, as if the answer should be obvious. “And her friend Harriet.”

“Why are they here?” Alicia asked.

Vannya said, “Because I called them. They're going to take us back to the castle.”

Vannya climbed atop Casper's back, then helped her queen to sit behind her. Then, Kynina joined them. The hamster seemed fine with a trio of riders.

After that, the bunny flattened itself on the ground as if it were about to take a nap but it was only offering its back to the remaining elves. It was larger, which was good since three high elves and three light elves climbed on its back. Alicia didn't know what to do, as there was no saddle, no stirrups. She grabbed handfuls of its fur and held on.

“Now, Casper,” said Vannya. “Get us back to the castle!” She drove her heel into its side and the little rodent galloped away, heading back to the towering white wall of the city. The bunny followed, its rhythm so choppy that Alicia worried she'd be sick before they even made it there.

The wall seemed so far away but Alicia reminded herself that they were incredibly tiny. It was galloping distance for the Hill Steeds, to say nothing of a hamster and rabbit's small legs.

Every few seconds, the hamster would stop, either to get its bearings or to give those on the back of the chaotic

rabbit a chance to rest. On the third break, she could finally see the castle gates, but they were still so far away.

Before Vannya steered her pet toward it, Alicia felt the rabbit's fur suddenly bristle. She watched it ripple across its back. Its ears folded down and it sniffed the air.

A hush had fallen across the battlefield. Vannya directed the hamster to do a full circle, for her mount was also agitated. When she turned back to face the sea of discarded, giant clothing, her face paled and her eyes widened.

Alicia turned to see Kiva about a hundred yards back, her legs splayed in attack position. The fur along her back rippled like a brown fan. Her tail was down, ears back. Even from this distance and at this size, Alicia could see the fire dancing in her eyes. A low snarl wiggled her lips.

And then, she launched herself forward.



“Go!” Alicia said, unsure of who she was talking to—  
either her rabbit or Vannya or both.

The hamster lurched forward with the rabbit hopping behind. They were making good speed as the wolf didn't seem to be at full strength just yet. Still, it galloped at a fast pace and would close the distance before they ever reached the castle gate.

Perhaps sensing this, Vannya veered to the left, running toward the outcropping of towering white walls. Alicia wasn't sure where they'd go—this entire place was boxed in, as it was the south wall of the keep. There was no foliage, no hiding spots, nowhere to lose the ever-closer wolf.

The group of shrunken elves narrowly dodged a blade as it came right at them—both mounts hopped over it and continued on. Alicia cast a glance over her shoulder and found Maza had joined the battle, racing ahead of Kamari, Eir and the tethered prisoners.

Finally, Vannya turned the hamster directly for the wall. Alicia's rabbit followed and she was certain this was the end. Running headlong into the wall must have been preferable to being eaten by an angry wolf girl or skewered at the end of a thick rapier.

She could see a small square of darkness along the bottom of the wall. It was nearly overgrown with weeds and had the brick not been so starkly white, she would've missed it. Just ten feet away, she could see metal bars within the hole.

Kiva and Maza were almost at them. If not for the bunny's deft movements, the wolf would've already snapped her jaws around a tasty morsel. She jumped too high, tried to overcorrect, and tumbled onto her side. Now angrier than ever, she recovered and darted right at the bunny. Maza was running at a full tilt but she couldn't keep up with her four-legged companion.

“Hold on tight!” said Vannya. “Bit of a drop!”

Alicia watched the hamster slip through the bars, then disappear into the darkness. The bunny was barely thin enough to make it, but luckily the momentum pushed it through. Alicia didn't have time to worry about the snapping jaws behind her.

As Vannya had said, it *was* a drop off. And Alicia fell into the blackness for what felt like a hundred feet.

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She left behind empty piles of clothes and scattered pieces of armor.

As Empress Noire approached the walls of Ivorella, the light elves on the other side attempted a frontal assault. Sitting atop battlements around the city were trebuchets, all primed with flaming pitch, ready to hit her.

“I hope you have a plan!” said the little man in the locket on her neck. He was completely bound with only his head showing. He eyed the readying siege weapons with a

fearful grimace. Noire could feel his legs kicking frantically inside the locket.

“Hush,” she told him, and gently stroked his head. He tensed, but eventually settled down—at least until the elves launched their first volley.

The dark sky lit up with a dozen flaming balls of pitch. Empress Noire called upon the power of the Echo Auger again, coating herself in a thin layer of magic. Most of the projectiles hit her thighs and chest, but a few hit her face. None hurt, as the magical barrier absorbed them—the heat, the impact, and noise.

In fact, the only noise she *could* hear was the frantic screams of the tiny man. It had to be difficult for someone to come from a non-magic world to the Cloud Dominion. She wagered there were lots of strange things he’d seen in his tenure since slipping through the portal.

“Calm down,” she told him, more of a scolding than a gentle reminder. “You can’t be harmed when you’re with me.”

“Let me go. I’ll take my chances without you.”

It made her chuckle, for surely he wouldn’t survive without her help.

Empress Noire didn’t have to spill a single drop of blood to take over this place. She raised her hands just as the trebuchets were winding up for their second volley. With just a thought, she channeled the magic of the Echo Auger. The night filled with screams but it wasn’t pain—it was fear and confusion.

She watched the elves at the nearest trebuchet as they began to dwindle. Two were wearing plate armor and it was satisfying to see the individual pieces fall off, revealing smooth, white skin beneath. They fell over, ultimately unable to hold up such heavy metal.

Another elf in a silk robe, seemingly roused from sleep when Noire attacked, stepped away from the loading mechanism. Her hand couldn't grip the lever, as it had disappeared into the sleeve. She took a step back and looked at her billowing clothes, confused over what was happening to her body. Then, she dwindled so small that she fell into the mound like so many others.

Noire's reach was astounding, as even the trebuchets on the far wall suddenly went silent, their pitch waiting to be lit. She could shrink anything within a half mile radius, or so she calculated.

Looking back, she couldn't even see her brethren, nor her prisoners. It didn't matter. With a power like this, she didn't need anyone but the Echo Auger.

Right now, he was fearful. His power was probably stunted because of it. If she were to form a more natural bond, wouldn't it reason that his power would amplify? She

was certain of it. And if not, maybe he could be coaxed by other methods . . .

She easily stepped over the wall and then looked around the courtyard. This was a quaint little kingdom and she fought the urge to lay it to waste. Noire had to push back centuries' worth of oppression in her mind. Right now, she had control of the battlefield. These common people would bow to her in the end.

More light elves flooded out of the keep. They were dressed in the finest armor Noire had ever seen, and she was certain it was from precious metals not found below the surface. They shot at her ankles with bows and raised their weapons as if they would stab her.

She lifted her foot, ready to stomp them flat. They cowered together, yet their swords didn't drop. Even with certain death on their doorstep, they were still ready to fight to the end.

But at the last minute, she lowered her foot and held out her hand. The little elves twisted and contracted, becoming even smaller. When it was over, there was a pile of weapons and armor between her feet. She squinted to see them writhing around but at this size, they may as well have been fleas.

She had a mind to topple the keep. It would've been merely a statement, but as she stood there in the inner courtyard, she realized that she held all the cards. No statement was needed. They already saw how swift her power had ended the battle—again, without a single drop of blood.

She stood and waited for more elves to rush out of the keep but there were none. Noire realized just how cold it had grown—much different than the cold she experienced beneath the surface. It made her nipples hard and a tingle race down her spine. As she moved to the front of the massive doorway, she could feel wonderful heat coming from within.



Empress Noire willed herself to shrink. It was a difficult task, as she had to make sure the tiny man remained at the right scale as she dwindled. She made the process slow, as the feeling of her body compacting was quite nice and she didn't want it to rush by without enjoying it.

Back to normal size, she entered the keep and willed the massive doors to close behind her. It felt wonderfully nice inside, the air warm and dry. She walked down a hallway that reminded her of a church's transept, then approached the throne.

It was the most gaudy, but massive chair she'd ever seen. Noire had to lift herself up to sit on it, but when she did, she felt a strange sense of power. Clearly, it was all in her head, as it was mere suggestion, but she *did* feel more mighty than ever.

"I suppose this will do," she said, and flipped around until her head rested on one armrest and her feet draped across the other. "What do you say, little man?"

“I say you’re crazy,” he said.

She chuckled again, then stroked the top of his head. “You’ll warm up to me, I promise. How about I give you . . . a little bit of your size back?”

She could feel him stiffen inside the locket, but he was listening, nonetheless. “Go on.”

She giggled and left him without an answer, then slid off the throne.

As she ventured deeper into the castle, she found many cowering elves—either guards or servants. The first few she shrunk where they stood, watching with great pleasure as they dwindled inside metal and cloth. But after that, she simply let them escape with their lives, preferring the silence of the keep.

The place was massive and she planned to explore it all, for she had every intention of ruling this place, whether it was atop the high and light elves, or atop a pile of ash. But in

this place, she felt a tug, a draw to power she'd never experienced. Something was hidden here and she'd find it.

After passing the largest, most beautifully maintained library she'd ever seen, she found the ruler's private quarters. Beyond a massive bed meant for a golem, she found an equally massive bathtub with magical heatstones to keep the water warm.

She took off the locket and placed it on the sink basin, then stripped out of her robes in front of the tiny human. Even if he wouldn't admit it, he admired her body—it was difficult for males *not* to admire it.

She placed her hands on the basin to the left and right of him, then willed herself a little bigger. Making sure her breasts were close to him, she enjoyed the way he licked his lips as he watched them swell larger. When she was roughly twelve feet tall, she stopped growing.

“Behave,” she told him, and opened the locket with her oversized fingers. She let him stand on the sink basin. Then, she kissed his body, feeling the tug of his power seep into her. Scott shrunk, but only a little.

After drawing a deep, steaming bath, she leaned over and scooped up the little man, then dropped him on the rim of the tub. She placed her feet to the left and right of him, marveling over the size difference. He was barely half the size of her smallest toe. Right now, he didn’t seem so concerned with falling off the tub. It was hard to look at anything else when there was such a giant, beautiful body stretched across the horizon of the tub.

“About my size,” he said.

She giggled and slid her feet down until just her toes were above the rim of the tub, then moved them in front of him.

“You have to earn that,” she said. “But I think you know how to do that.”

He rolled his eyes, then gripped the top of her toe. He bent over and kissed it, then spread his arms across it. Naturally, this made her giggle, but it was a struggle to keep from knocking him onto the floor.

“This isn’t really what I want,” she purred, then dragged her feet into the tub. He was on his hands and knees, looking down at them as if they were elusive sea monsters.

“Then what?”

“You’ll need a bit more size for what I want, dear. And I think you know what that is.”

She slid down the tub and bent her legs until her knees surfaced. Then, her fingers drifted down until she was tweaking her sweet spot. He couldn’t see it, but he knew what she was doing.

“Oh,” he said, and his face turned red.

She laughed again, then decided to impart a few inches to the tiny man. In a moment, he would need them. Scott covered himself, as if they hadn't been through everything naughty already. He threw out one hand to keep himself balanced on the rim of the tub as he stretched larger.

At roughly a foot tall—with Noire still standing at a *dozen* feet tall, he was big enough to wrap fingers around. She gently held him in her hand while she stood, then placed him on the sink basin.

There were magically heated towels that she used to dry her body. She took her time, making sure the little man could appreciate all her bending and rubbing. When she was finished, she took him back to the bedroom where she lay on the bed—currently scaled to match her towering body.

She shrank herself back to normal so that she could experience the oversized bed in all its majesty. The tug of the satin sheets on her skin felt wonderful. Now, the little man

appeared twice as big, yet still small enough for her to wrap both her hands around.

For a moment, she simply lay there and let him rest on her chest, just above her breasts with his feet between them. He was listening to her heartbeat just as she was listening to him breathe. It steadied after a few minutes of silence and she was almost convinced he was asleep—but then she felt his little cock and knew he was very much awake.

She wrapped her fingers around his calf and dragged him down until his face was across her nipple. At once, it began to harden and she felt a tingle run through her body—perhaps it was his warmth or his gentle touch—but she was finding herself aroused by tiny things more than anything of equal size.

He lifted himself on her areola just as the goosebumps spread across her chest. She took a deep, ragged

breath and felt her body heat rising. The little man was in for a rough ride.

With two fingers, she pushed down on his head until he was mouthing her nipple. He fought her but only a moment, then relaxed at once. She moved her hand down his body, lightly gripping his torso, and let him work.

Empress Noire willed her breasts a little larger, watching as the tiny man slid backwards to accommodate the changing angle. The nipple grew longer, forcing him to reposition his efforts. It made her giggle, which in turn made him bounce up and down.

Outside the windows, the rumble of thunder. She could feel a change in the air pressure and when the lightning flashed, could also see the skeletal trees swaying sharply. A massive storm was coming.

By the time she moved him to her other breast, rain was pelting the ground just outside. This time, he needed no



coaxing, no fingers on the back of his head. He went right to her nipple and played with it until the goosebumps spread even further.

Growing hotter by the moment, Noire took him by the ankle and gently dragged him down her body. She looked between her breasts and saw him there, arms spread wide across her lower stomach. His face was nearly at her clit, so she raised an eyebrow and nodded, for it should've been simple what she wanted next.

When he finally figured it out, she felt like her body had been electrified. The storm raged outside, lightning flashing, rain pelting the window. A colossal boom made her jump. Scott's body now lay across her labia, his face and hands working her clit. Noire's toes clenched and relaxed, riding the edge of an immense orgasm.

“Need you . . . in . . . there,” she managed through deep breaths.

He stopped for a moment and looked up, his body already drenched in her juices. “I’m too big for that.”

“Try.”

The little man nodded, then paused to consider. She closed her eyes because she wanted all her other senses on fire.

The boom outside the window, the lashing rain. His little hands dragging down her body, his face pushing against her labia. Her entire body was trembling—it was a rare occurrence for Empress Noire to allow herself to be so vulnerable.

Scott’s head pushed in but his shoulders were too broad. He certainly wasn’t going to be going any further, at least not at this size. Despite this, he tried to reposition himself sideways, but this only gave him another inch worth of depth.

With a shudder, he began to dwindle again. She placed her fingers on his ass and gently shoved him. Given her wetness and how much she relaxed, it wasn't difficult. At ten inches tall, he was still painful. She shrunk him until he was eight inches, small enough to fit, big enough to make her feel it.

And just like before, he knew exactly what to do. She grabbed the bedsheets and squeezed. Her toes curled and she fought to keep from growing—it would only lessen the experience. Empress Noire's mouth fell open as the rain lashed the windows. The storm mirrored her insatiable appetite.

The little man kicked and punched and did flips until he rode her orgasm out, a torrent of juices that left him hot, sticky, and gulping breath like a beached fish. And once both their heartbeats settled, she dragged him up her body, placed him on her left breast, and fell asleep.

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By the time the wolf girl and Maza ran off chasing a rabbit and what Audra thought resembled a giant hamster, she'd already managed to slip out of her bonds. While Kamari and Eir were busy looking at the piles of clothes, Audra was moving her hands to the back, to her secret pouch that no one had known to inspect.

Her finger wrapped around the cold metal ring that Renalla had summoned—the one that allowed her to shrink and slip into a city without being spotted. She didn't know how, after all this time, she'd managed to hold onto it. But she wondered if Carina, now rebirthed, still had *her* ring . . .

She waited until the captors were faced away, then moved up the line of the tether and put a hand on Carina's back. She began to tap out a message, a silent code they called *Mutescript*.

*Do you still have the shrinking ring in your pocket?*

And of course, Carina, good assassin that she was, had already slipped out of her bonds, as well. She carefully felt for her pack, then offered a silent nod that it was still there. Technically, it was a *different* ring, as Audra had taken her original one after she died.

*I have a plan, now listen. We have to do this before the other two get back from their goose hunt.*

Audra explained what they needed to do and after she was certain Carina understood, she backed away and lingered near Eir. The other captives, Nym and Shizare, simply kept their heads down. Neither of them knew what was about to happen—she just hoped they didn't get in the way.

Just then, thunder boomed. The lightning that followed was enough to tell that Maza and Kiva were far away, just little frantic dots on the horizon near the walls.

*Wait till the next boom,* Audra mouthed to Carina. The girl nodded and stepped close to Kamari.

When the crack of thunder finally came, only a few seconds later, Audra chopped her hand across the back of Eir's neck. The spellcaster stumbled for a moment, no doubt seeing stars across her vision. At first, Audra thought blood had been spilled, but it was only the rain beginning to fall.

At the same time she attacked Eir, Carina did the same to Kamari, only attacking a swordmaster required a different approach. She lassoed the rope that had been binding her hands around the elf's throat and pulled, a hard tug that sent the warrioress toppling over Carina's shoulder and landing on the ground. With a mix of briefly losing air and also the hard thump on the ground, Kamari's eyes rolled back into her head.

With Eir on her back, Audra knew that it was important to keep the spellcaster's hands apart so she couldn't summon magic. As fast as she could work in the dark and in the rain, Audra used the rope to tie Eir's hands in a Murderer's Knot, something assassins did to other assassins

to keep their fingers apart—and unable to pick locks or hold blades. In this case, it kept a caster from firing off a spell.

Carina was doing the same thing to Kamari, only she'd flipped the swordswoman onto her stomach and bound her hands behind her back. When it was over, both elves lay on the ground, their hands together, fingers spread apart.

And then, Carina slipped a ring on Kamari's finger while Audra did the same for Eir.

"You two are amazing," said Nym, watching as their captors began to shrink. Kamari let out a rattled cry that softened the smaller she became.

"Thanks," said Carina, and she unraveled the ropes that tied Nym to Shizare.

They watched the elves dwindle until they were no more than six inches tall. With the Murderer's Knots, it was impossible to wiggle their fingers or use them to slide off the rings.

“What should we do with them?” Shizare asked, and she used her foot to roll Kamari onto her back. When the miniature swordswoman looked up, her eyes went wide and fearful. “Stomp them flat?”

“No,” said Audra. “We bring them with us.”

“We have to help our friends,” said Nym.

Audra nodded. “We will. But we can’t take on Maza and Kiva without weapons.”

“We should’ve removed them before they shrunk,” said Shizare, now hovering a foot over Eir.

“Yeah,” Audra said. “C’mon. We need to give the castle a wide berth and circle around.”

And just as she said it, the lightning flashed and they could see Maza and Kiva coming back. By the way they walked, it was clear they’d lost the bounce in their step—their chase had been a failure.



By the time they got back, the group was gone, leaving only a length of rope on the ground.

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Lucky for them, the drop wasn't as severe as it looked from outside. It was likely only ten feet but the hamster and rabbit were adept at jumping such distances, and landed with no trouble. The riders pitched forward but luckily, it was against soft, furry backs.

“Where the hell are we?” said Alicia.

“The dungeons,” said Vannya. “I don't know if our situation has improved.”

Beyond lay a stretch of dark, grimy stones. The ground was shiny and wet but there was no light, aside from what came through the window. Judging by the way the clouds were gathering in the sky, Alicia assumed a storm was hastily approaching.

“C’mon, we can get out of here,” said Trita. “I’ll show you the way.”

Alicia smiled. “I’m guessing you have a passage right into the throne room, yes?”

Trita turned to her and nodded. “That’s right. How would you know that?”

Maeve said, “Because your daughter built Hilltop Keep with the same design. Which, actually, became our downfall. I’d brick it up immediately.”

“Is Adelheid in the castle?” Alicia asked.

Trita shook her head. “No. She plays with a few kids belonging to members of my queensguard. Unless that giant dark elf went smashing through the common areas of Ivorella, she’ll be fine.”

They rode down the dark hallway and could hear the first booms of thunder. It rattled the foundation, hastening a drip in the corner. Alicia didn’t like this place one bit—but

that was the point. Dungeons weren't meant to be hospitable. The whole place left her skin feeling clammy, her mouth feeling dry.

Around the corner, they found their first signs of prisoners. Most were dark elves, their bodies almost invisible in the darkness and against the black walls. Some were high elves—recognizable to Alicia as soldiers from her time. They probably explained themselves to Ivorella's guards and were promptly thrown into the dungeons for being raving liars.

The energy in the room was low. Alicia wondered how often they were fed, given water, a chance to stand up and stretch their legs. Most were chained to the walls where they lay in heaps, sleeping from lack of food or perhaps simply boredom.

The bunny and hamster moved right down the middle of a large room, elf bodies lying to the left and right. Alicia wondered why they weren't fighting—the high elves

and dark elves were uncomfortably close together. A little further on, she found the reason.

Thunder cracked and by the time lightning illuminated the room from a pair of high windows, she could see a mounting fight.

Ahead, a plate of what looked like chicken was being tugged from two different directions—a high elf on one side and a dark elf on the other. Both were lying on their sides, their ankles shackled to the wall.

“It’s mine, you milkskin!” said the dark elf. Her fingers could barely grace the plate but she was hanging on, just the same.

“You ate your fill yesterday! This is mine!” And finally, the favor tipped in her direction and the dark elf lost the grip. The chicken sailed through the air where it landed amongst the high elves. They tore into it ravenously.

But the dark elf wanted to fight and so did the high elf. They stood and rushed each other. Just as lightning flashed across the dungeon, they reached their chains' end. They were within inches of swiping distance, yet neither could bridge the gap. Every single soul here was tethered at just enough length to stay angry, but do no harm.

With the tension in the room, Alicia prayed to Dinnin that the lightning wouldn't give away their position. If the captives were fighting over a day-old chicken, they would probably jump at the chance to eat fresh bunny or hamster—maybe even the exotic six-inch elves.

They passed through another series of turns, sometimes having to jump over legs or arms. Many of these captives had been here a long time—Alicia could see it in their sunken eyes and cheekbones, and the deep crevices in their ribcages. Some, if not for the haphazard breathing, she would've thought dead.

The dungeon opened into a wider area with more windows at the top of the smooth, slick walls. Ahead, a staircase that went down and terminated at a metal gate. Beyond, another slick hallway.

“Is that the way out?” Alicia asked.

“That’s to the next level of the dungeon,” Kynina said.

“How big *is* this place?” Hima asked.

Trita said, “We’re on the top of six floors of dungeons. We had quite the dark elf problem in the beginning.”

“Sounds like it,” said Alicia, and then they traveled down the steps and slipped through the bars at the end.

Now, there was no windows to light the darkened halls. But elf vision was a remarkable thing. Unlike humans, elves could see multiple spectrums of light. It made it easier to navigate the darker places of the world and that’s why after

giving their eyes a moment to adjust, they saw the large room before them.

And it was full of free-roaming dark elves.

These had been given reign of the floor, as the gate kept them away from the chained prisoners above. They were less gaunt, more active, and had probably been imprisoned a much shorter time.

“How are we going to get through here?” Alicia asked.

Just then, they saw a fight break out halfway across the room. A pair of dark elves had launched themselves at a third, both wrestling her to the ground and beating her senseless with their fists.

“To the left side,” Trita said. “In the gutter.”

None of them were happy about that—the hamster and bunny jumped right in, the muck coming up so high that the elves pulled their feet up top. It kept them hidden—

mostly, at least. If any elf looked their way, they'd probably see Harriet's head bobbing up and down.

When they had another descending staircase in sight, one of the dark elves spoke up.

"I smell something!" she said, and her head jerked around, frantically trying to pinpoint it.

"Your upper lip," said another. The first one slammed her fist into the girl's head in response.

"No. This is fresh meat. I can taste it on the air."

The mention of food piqued the interest of the others. A few of them stood and began searching the room, as if a platter of delicacies had magically appeared.

"There's a few coming this way!" said Vannya, and she directed Casper out of the gutter and back into the middle of the room.

Just before the elf who'd found their scent saw them, the little people hurried under an old table. It had thick legs



and was thankfully able to hide them beneath a running board just a few inches off the ground.

“What do we do now?” asked Maeve, watching as several large feet shuffled by, attempting to pinpoint the scent.

“We wait,” said Trita. She hopped off her mount and gave her legs a stretch. The rest of the elves followed suit, taking the time to enjoy their little hidden alcove.

Alicia felt like her legs were on fire from all the squeezing. But the bouncing was the worst of it. She’d probably lose the contents of her stomach before the evening was out.

For ten minutes, they waited. The dark elves circled their hiding spot like ravenous wolves. One of them even dropped to her knees and tried to look under the table but it was so low, the running board so thick, that she couldn’t see

anything. Unless the table moved, this should keep the tiny elves hidden until the prisoners settled back down.

And just when all the shuffling died down to a quiet din, Alicia felt a strange knot in her stomach, followed by a barrage of tingles.

“Do any of you feel . . . weird?” When she turned around, she saw Maeve balling her hands into fists. She looked up curiously and nodded.

“Yes,” Trita said. “What . . . is it?”

A moment later, they had their answer.

Hima subtly began to inch taller, followed by the trio of light elves. Alicia went next, followed by Maeve, Vannya, and Kynina. Harriet and Casper backed away and chided disapprovingly.

“Dammit, why now?” Maeve said.

“Noire’s magic was temporary,” said Alicia. “C’mon, we have to move. We can’t allow ourselves to be stuck here.”

As far as Alicia could tell, the change was slow. She'd only gained about an inch in the last two minutes but that could certainly speed up. The Echo Auger magic could be so unpredictable.

“You two, follow me,” said Vannya, and Alicia thought she was talking to her and Maeve, but was actually addressing the pets. Now that they'd grown a little, the hamster and bunny didn't have the backs to support them.

The elves shuffled their way from beneath the table, then darted toward the steps. They didn't know what they'd find on the next floor, but figured it couldn't be much worse than the free-roaming dark elves.

By the time they'd reached the third floor, they each had doubled in size, all with the exception of Trita who was growing at twice the rate to accommodate her natural height.

Alicia said, “Must we venture all the way down? How are we getting into the castle by going even deeper in the dungeons?”

Trita chuckled. “It would seem my system works better than your . . . Hilltop. Come. We access the castle through this floor, but it’s not going to be easy.”

She led the group on, still growing, yet less than two feet tall. When she rounded the corner, she shrieked out, as someone had lifted her right off the ground.

“What do we have here?” said a familiar voice.

Alicia’s blood went cold when she stared up at the giant woman—Gwynevere. She was holding Trita by the shoulders, the golem kicking wildly.

“Let her go!” Alicia said, although it was laughable.

“You’re all so small!” said the dark elf. She dropped Trita onto the ground, then held her down with a foot. “Are

you *growing?*” It was clear she could feel the golem swelling beneath her.

Alicia and Maeve charged, unsure of what they could possibly do at just a foot tall. Before coming close, Gwynevere reached down and plucked them from the floor, holding one in each hand.

“My, my. You’re *all* growing!”

“Let us go!” Maeve shouted.

Gwynevere kicked out, her leg coming up only halfway since her ankle was shackled to the wall. But Alicia watched as the trio of light elves—whom she’d never even learned the names of—went flying away into the darkness. Hima was on the ground, somehow escaping the giantess’s wrath. Kynina and Vannya desperately tried to pull their queen from beneath the giantess’s foot.

“I don’t think I’ll be letting you go anywhere,” she said. “And seeing as how you’re all growing back to normal, it won’t be a fair fight once you’re big.”

Alicia didn’t know what she meant, but suddenly felt an intense pain as Gwynevere began to squeeze. Maeve screamed and so did Trita from the ground as the dark elf put pressure on the golem’s chest.

“It’s time for payback,” said Gwynevere. “You’re never going to leave this place alive.”

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Audra had no clue where they were going, only that they couldn’t reach the gates in time without Kiva and Maza seeing them. So, they walked the perimeter on the other side of the castle, skirting the towering white wall, and found a drainage pipe that led right into the dungeons.

Unbeknownst to them, they were just a floor below the other group who were currently realizing they were starting to grow back in size.

They came upon a gate and the four heroes—with three rings between them, used them to shrink down and pass through. After Carina started to grow back on the other side, she passed Nym her still-enlarging ring through the bars.

“So why didn’t you use the rings while we were roped?” said Nym.

“Our hands were bound so we couldn’t cast spells,” said Audra. “So we couldn’t grab the rings from our pockets.”

“And where did you get a second one?” Carina asked Audra.

*It’s your old one, she thought. The one you have is a new creation . . . apparently, just like you.*

“I think . . . maybe Renalla.”

“Nice trick,” Shizare said. “We could do a lot with these.”

Once the four girls were through the bars, it didn’t take them long to come upon their companions. Both Renalla and Tayte were chained to a wall amongst a collection of high elves. Their eyes lit up when they saw their friends approach.

“We’re so glad to see you,” said Renalla.

Quickly, Audra tapped a message in *Mutescript* on Renalla’s shoulder, asking if she still had the shrinking ring. The dark elf nodded.

It didn’t matter, anyway. The ones who threw the girls into the dungeon assumed they were full of dark magic, so their hands had been covered with silk and wrapped at the wrists. Just like Audra and Carina, Renalla and Tayte couldn’t have used the ring even if they wanted.



*Carina still doesn't know she died*, Audra tapped. *We need to keep it that way until we can properly explain.* Again, Renalla nodded.

Using the same trick as before, Audra uncovered the girls' hands, then slipped the rings on their fingers. Quickly, they dwindled out of their shackles, then removed the rings and enlarged back again. Audra grabbed a scrap of material from Renalla's frayed robe, then used her magic to weave it into metal armor.

Shizare used her spells to duplicate it until all six of the elves were outfitted with armor and jagged blades. They were about to set off to find their friends when they heard a horrid shriek coming from somewhere above them.

"That sounded like Alicia!" said Nym, although the moment she said it, she didn't seem sure. The voice sounded high and tinny, but that was probably the distortion caused by the massive dungeon. Quickly, they raced down the hallway, now given a wide berth because of their gear and weapons.

Another gate barred their path but rather than wait for the rings to shrink them down, they threw their shoulders against it. With so many girls wearing metal armor, the rusty bars easily sprang from the hinges. Audra pulled in front and followed the noise.

She couldn't believe what she was seeing—  
Gwynevere was holding a miniature Alicia in one hand and a miniature Maeve in the other. On the floor, a child-sized golem with a pair of smaller elves beating on the giantess's foot. All three seemed to be getting bigger but Gwynevere was squeezing them all, intent on killing them in the most brutal way possible.

Around her ankle was Hima and a pair of agitated rodents. The elf had wrapped her arms and legs around Gwynevere's leg—futile as it was, she was trying to provide a distraction, or at least a delay in the killing of her friends.

Without thinking, Audra rushed the dark elf.  
Gwynevere didn't see her coming and suffered the full brunt

of her shoulder. She stumbled back, losing her grip on Maeve but not Alicia—the tiny elf screamed out.

Renalla and Carina were on her in a flash, prying her fingers open until Alicia slipped out of her grasp, gasping and sputtering. She crawled to safety where Hima took her by the arm and pulled her away.

“No!” Gwynevere screamed, and she tried to wrestle her way out but couldn’t. In addition to being shackled to the floor, Shizare conjured manacles to hold her wrists.

“She’s going to need a Murderer’s Knot,” said Audra, struggling to keep the feral elf from escaping. Shizare nodded, wiggled her fingers, then augmented the spectral cuffs until they slithered up Gwynevere’s wrists and twisted around her fingers, spreading them apart in a wide fan.

Then, Audra slipped on a ring.

Gwynevere stopped struggling for only a moment, probably because she sensed how her body was starting to change. Then, she grew even more chaotic.

“No! No!” she screamed, but her struggles became easier to contain because she was shrinking. Her legs kicked out, the shackle flying away, but it didn’t matter. Eventually, Audra grabbed both her arms and shoved her against the dingy floor until she’d finished dwindling.

“I’ll kill you!” she cried. “I’ll kill you all!”

Alicia, rubbing her sore ribs, approached the tiny woman who now stood only as tall as her knees. As her giant form approached, Gwynevere tried to run off but Alicia kicked her on the backside, sending her straight onto her face.

“Let’s end her now,” said Trita, now large enough to stomp her flat. She raised her foot but Alicia shoved her off-balance.

“No. Empress Noire trusts her and we may need her as leverage.”

“We need no leverage,” said Trita, and now she was becoming so big that the low hallway couldn’t support her height. She stooped, and in this darkness, it made her look twice as old.

“Yes, we do,” said Alicia, grinding her heel into Gwynevere’s back. “If you recall, we were all shrunken down with just a thought.”

“Then what do you suggest?” Vannya asked.

“A subtle approach,” said Audra. “Noire thinks we’re out there. She would never assume we’re inside the castle.”

“And, we have the rings,” said Carina.

Alicia nodded. “You’re the assassins, so we’ll follow your lead. We have to find Scott. If we can get him away from Noire, then her powers will eventually fade.”

“Fine,” said Trita. She looked at the shrunken Gwynevere. “But if push comes to shove, I’ll killing that little one first.”

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The storm was still raging when Noire woke an hour later. She lifted Scott from her chest, then carried him over to the tall armoire. He was barely conscious when she planted her lips on his body and began to work him over with her tongue. When he struggled, she held him down with her mouth and waited for him to dwindle. By the time he was no more than an inch tall, she could feel his power coursing through her veins. This time, it wasn’t actually about the power—she just didn’t want to carry him around and thought being a mere inch tall would keep him from escaping.

She padded her way down the steps—unaware that an escape was being hatched in the dungeons below—and entered the vast library. Again, she could feel something tugging at her. As she moved around the room, her fingers

glided across the spines of several old books. At once, she knew their histories. It was part of her own divination power—she was good at it, always had been. But also the Echo Auger lent her strength. In just a few moments of circling the bookcases on the bottom floor, she learned many great things.

Most of the library had come from the west, carted here on wagons to escape a massive book burning. While most of them contained great spells—spells long forgotten, along with the ability to read them, there were also historical texts. She learned of countless wars fought in places she never knew existed.

But one book spoke extensively about Echo Augers.

As she already knew, there were many of them a long time ago. One for every elf. But when unions couldn't be formed, the elves suffered. There was nothing worse than devoting your affection to a tiny man, only to have him prefer someone else. It didn't matter what kind of sexual prowess

Noire possessed—Scott would never truly be hers. She had to cheat.

She had to use old magic.

Noire carried the heavy tome over to the table and settled into the chair. The storm still raged outside but she shoved it out of her mind. She was interested in the book, and when she found a particular spell that just might come in handy, her eyes lit up.

She was so enthralled that she didn't see the contingent of elves slip past the door.

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They were quite a sight—like a group of adult elves herding children down the hallway. Alicia had almost arrived at her normal size. The only one in the group who might cause them trouble was Trita, who had no way of hiding her size, nor the sounds of her enormous feet slapping the tile.



By the time they thought to give her one of the shrinking rings, her fingers had grown too large to wear one.

“She bathed in my tub,” said Trita as they gingerly passed the door of the library. The entire group of elves—and one golem—hid in the bedroom of the queen’s personal servant. “I can smell my bath oils on her. I bet she’s been in my bed, too.”

“I didn’t see the locket around her neck,” said Audra.  
“The little man isn’t with her.”

“Maybe he’s in the bedroom,” Alicia said excitedly.  
Before she could walk out, Carina stopped her.

“You are being led by emotion. Let one of us find him. You wait here and keep quiet.”

She was a little put off by the comment, but nodded nonetheless.

Carina and Audra volunteered. They stepped out of the bedroom and peeked into the library again—Noire was

sitting at a table, completely naked, pouring over a large tome. They should've just slit her throat but Audra didn't think it would be that easy—she no doubt had magic keeping her safeguarded.

They padded up the steps and found the double doors to Trita's ornate bedroom—closed, and of course locked.

“Shrink,” said Audra, slipping on the ring.

Both she and Carina put their backs to the door and rode the tingles all the way down. When they were no more than six inches tall, they attempted to crawl under the crack but were still too big.

“Okay, give me yours,” Carina said. “I'll go under the door, grow back, and unlock it.”

“Okay,” said Audra, and quickly removed the ring and placed it on Carina's finger before it became too big for her. The size change seemed much faster since they were

splitting the difference—Carina dwindling while Audra grew back.

When the tiny elf was standing no bigger than one of Audra's toes, she deftly rolled under the door. And just before she pulled off her rings, she heard Audra say, "Don't grow back! Hide." And then, her shadow ran off.

Quickly, Carina rushed into the corner and hid beneath an armoire—the same one, unbeknownst to her, where Scott sat on the other end.

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Noire opened the doors to the bedroom, never seeing the assassin elf scurry off and hide in the alcove down the hall. She picked up Scott from the armoire, her toes coming within inches of a shrunken Carina.

"Where did you go?" Scott asked.

She placed him on her fingertip—he'd barely grown back since the time she'd been downstairs. She carried him

over to the bed and dabbed him atop her nipple, then laid her head on the pillow.

“Seeing to a bit of magic. You and I have a lot of work to do in the morning.”

“Such as?”

“We will be casting a very intricate spell. It’ll take a sacrifice. Luckily, I have a few captives running around somewhere. And then . . . a bit of your blood.”

At this, he stiffened. She tried not to laugh.

“You can’t do this to me.”

And then, she couldn’t help the laughter. It made her breasts bob up and down. She kissed her finger, then dabbed his little body.

“When we’re finished tomorrow,” she said with a devious grin, “you won’t care one bit what I do.”

At this, he had no response.

She grinned again, then said, “But for now, let’s sleep.  
We’ve a busy day tomorrow.”