

Chapter 1

Cajur perched atop a stool, squinting as he applied stroke after stroke of paint to a garden gnome. The problem was, it kept squirming and wouldn't shut up.

"Sit still! Every time you move, I get paint into bits where it doesn't belong."

"This is so humiliating!" said the surly gnome, pulling away from the sable brush as it moved towards his stony face again. "Do we really *need* to do the rosy cheeks?"

"Look, Grishank. Do you want to fit in with the others or not?"

"I thought I was taking one for the team when I took on this silly form in the first place. If any of my fellow gargoyles saw me like this, they'd think I look ridiculous."

"Well, the female gnome I'm putting you next to won't think so. She'll find your little suspenders and pointed shoes fetching." Cajur turned his head to hide a smirk, his wispy white beard trailing through the paint palette he held in his left hand. Grishank suddenly jerked to avoid Cajur's brush. A long line of red paint spread down his face.

"See what you made me do?" Cajur said. "Now I'll have to repaint your chin. Stay there while I get a cloth to wipe that off."

He leaned to one side as he got up. Time seemed to slow, stretching seconds into what felt like minutes. He heard a sound, like a stifled sneeze. Glass shattered. A bullet tore through his flesh. The impact propelled Cajur backward, knocking him to the cobblestone floor.

"*Odelvario!*" Cajur managed to spit out as he clutched his left shoulder, attempting to stop gushing blood. As soon as the command word left his mouth, the outside wall lit up in a web of crackling energy. The windows turned opaque black.

Blood saturated his flannel shirt. He began to feel light-headed. He was going into shock.

Grishank seized a towel from the table and jumped down to the floor. He forced Cajur's hand away from the wound and pressed the cloth hard to slow the bleeding.

"Help me get downstairs." Cajur pointed to an ironclad door across the room. The gnome's shape melted into the gargoyle's normal form, a rocky mass that bent in ways that stone couldn't. His painted features stretched into smears of color. Revealing incredible strength for his size, Grishank dragged his friend to the stairs, and then pulled the door shut behind him.

"Why not just call someone on the wall phone?" Grishank asked.

"All the electronics upstairs will be fried. I have a phone downstairs. I must warn Randy. They might come for my grandson to get to me."

"Got it, boss. Let's get you downstairs, then."

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Crouched behind a blackberry bush outside, the assassin saw a glowing web of energy wrap around Cajur's home, enveloping it like a protective womb. Eyes wide, she shook her head in disbelief.

"You've got to be kidding me! A protective field? Where did he find enough magic in this world to power *that*?"

She feared she wouldn't get another shot. Slinging her scoped rifle over her shoulder, she scanned around her for signs of motion. A dog barked a short distance away. She had to get farther from the house or risk detection. She gathered her gear and kept her head low as she flitted from bush to bush to stay out of sight. Her boots left deep prints in the moist ground, which slowly faded away. The earth flattened, broken twigs knit back together, leaving no trace of her passing.

She cast a long shadow in the early-morning light. She made her way up the hill where she had set up a camouflaged blind in a towering walnut tree. Leaping from branch to branch, she worked her way high into the ancient tree's masking branches. The rain-drenched leaves left her wet and shivering. It would be a long morning. She sighed a breath that hung in the still, frosty air.

I might as well get comfortable, she thought. It's not like I can return to Father before the job is done.

She unslung her rifle. She peered through its scope, watching the house, waiting for her mark to come out or for the windows to become transparent again so she could take another shot.

How did I get talked into this profession? she asked herself for the thousandth time. I wanted to be a painter.