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# 1

## The Dark Hour

The Royal Council of Madria was gathered around the long table, a table that occupied most of the room. They waited quietly, and Dethenor, Head of the Royal Council, was the quietest of all.

Dethenor was a thin man with long silver hair and gray eyes. The only sign of his high office was the round golden medallion that dangled from a gold chain about his neck. He fingered the medallion now as he glanced around the table, fixing his eyes briefly on each face.

All of the Council members were men of age and experience, and Dethenor trusted most of them. But things were going badly in Madria, and a trace of apprehension shot through him even now as he considered the perils that lay before the kingdom.

At the other end of the table sat Count Ferrod, nephew of King Alquin. Ferrod was a short man, heavy, with close-set brown eyes and thinning brown hair. Dethenor noticed that Count Ferrod's gaze too was moving from face to face, and Dethenor knew very well what was happening.

*He's thinking of how to influence the Council again. And I must not let him do it. Once again he found himself thinking, After Prince Alexander, Ferrod is next in line for the throne—and little could be worse than to have him become king of our land!*

The doors at the far end of the council room swung open, and two guards clad in green uniforms trimmed in gold held them back. The first to enter was

Alcindor, the young military aide and right-hand man to the king. Alcindor was almost like a son to the king—*perhaps even more of a son than Prince Alexander himself*, Dethenor thought.

Alcindor's eyes swept the room quickly, and his hand rested on the sword hilt at his side. He was always careful with the king's life, even in the apparent safety of the council room. Dethenor knew a moment of relief, because here was one loyal subject at least.

All stood, and every eye turned to the man who entered now. King Alquin had always been a strong, healthy, athletic man, skilled in all the arts of war. Now, however, the muscles of his body were shrunken, and he was bent over in an unnatural slump. His hair was gray, and lines were etched across his face. He painfully crossed the stone floor to the table only with the help of his wife.

Queen Lenore, in contrast, was a beautiful woman, tall and statuesque and strong. She too was older, but her auburn hair was still free from gray, and her eyes were bright and watchful as she too surveyed the Council.

She helped the king make his way to the heavily carved oak chair at the head of the table, and Dethenor, who would sit next to him, said quietly, "Welcome to the Council, Your Majesty."

King Alquin sat down, holding onto the massive arms of the chair. He moved slowly and carefully as a man who had been terribly wounded and had learned to adapt himself to the pain. He nodded to Dethenor, saying in a strained voice, "I am glad to see you, Chancellor."

Queen Lenore took a seat on the opposite side of the king, and the aide moved to his accustomed position immediately behind him. The young man's eyes

still moved restlessly, and not for one moment did he relax his vigilance.

King Alquin drew himself up in the chair, and his gaze traveled from face to face. The king knew these men well, Dethenor thought. He himself had chosen all of them for his counselors. There was only one empty chair at the table, and pain came to Alquin's expression when he looked at it.

Dethenor knew instantly what was occurring in his mind. *He's grieving that Prince Alexander is not here, Dethenor thought, and so am I. It's the prince's place, and again he has not seen fit to attend.*

"I think we will dispense with the ordinary business today," King Alquin said in a shaky voice. He shifted uncomfortably, and Queen Lenore leaned forward and put a hand on his arm. He gave her a brief smile, then his face turned very solemn. "What is the word from Zor?"

"It is not good, I'm afraid, Your Majesty," Ferrod answered. The count's eyelids drooped, giving him almost a sleepy expression. His garment was encrusted with jewels and gold, and he wore a magnificent stone on the middle finger of his right hand.

"The news from Zor is never good," King Alquin said wearily. "Then, what is the word from my army?"

"I have just received a message from Captain Asimov."

Dethenor watched Ferrod take a sheaf of parchment from his inner pocket.

The count began to read it aloud.

"The armies of Zor are pressing us heavily at every position. We must have reinforcements at once, or all will be lost. Numbers of our men have been

killed or wounded, and a detailed report follows. I recommend that we pull back and give up our present position.”

Alcindor snorted. “He always recommends that we pull back!”

“He is the captain of our army!” Count Ferrod said angrily. “We must trust his expertise!”

“I agree with Alcindor.”

Dethenor—indeed everyone—looked at the queen. Queen Lenore seldom spoke in council. But she spoke now, quietly. Her voice was clear and steady, though quite low. “We must hold the lines where they are. Once we begin to retreat—there is only one end to that.”

“But, Queen Lenore, we *cannot* hold the lines!” Ferrod protested. “Every day we are losing men, while the enemy grows stronger.”

The debate went on for some time. The king listened for a while, saying nothing. Finally he looked over at the chancellor. “Lord Dethenor, what say you?”

“I agree with the queen.” He fixed his gaze on Count Ferrod and waited for him to object, but the count was silent. “We must hold our lines. We must protect our kingdom!” He looked up at the aide. “Alcindor, what would you advise?”

Alcindor had grown up as a soldier. Though he was young, he and the king had been in many battles together, and now that the king was too feeble to go out to fight, he still knew the king’s heart. Dethenor was sure of that.

Alcindor stepped over to a map that was pinned to the wall and said, “Here is our kingdom of Madria.” His fingers swept in a circle. “Here are the Madrian Mountains that encircle us. They are a natural protection. As

long as we hold the mountain passes, we can keep the Zorians out. But once they break through, there is nothing to stop them from sweeping in on us. I say we send every available man and hold the mountain passes at all cost.”

Ferrod shouted, “It’s impossible! We only have a limited number of men. We are already heavily outnumbered.”

Dethenor listened for a time as Ferrod argued on. Finally he glanced at the king and interrupted. “Enough, Count! So what do you say, Your Majesty? What are your commands?”

King Alquin replied immediately, “Alcindor is correct. We must hold the mountain passes.”

“But, Your Majesty,” Count Ferrod protested, “be reasonable. Valor is one thing, but throwing away our lives for nothing—that is something else.”

“Would you have us to just give up our country?” the king demanded. His eyes flashed, and he sat up straighter in the carved oak chair. There was a hint of kingliness and power in him still as he said, “We will *never* surrender to Zor!”

“It’s not a matter of surrender, sire,” Count Ferrod kept on. Now he lowered his voice like a conspirator and leaned forward. “All that the Zorians ask is that we pay tribute to them once a year.”

“And we all know where that will end,” Dethenor said grimly. “The Zorians are not to be trusted. If we give them one inch, they’ll take another—and then another—until finally they will rule over us entirely.”

“You are correct, Dethenor. They would make slaves of us,” the king said. “Send orders to Captain Asimov to hold the lines. We will send him what reinforcements we can. This Council is dismissed.”

All except the king, the queen, Alcindor, and Dethenor rose and left the council chamber.

Dethenor waited until the door was closed. Then he said, "Your Majesty, I must say it again. Prince Alexander must cease his ways and join us. The people must have a prince to look to in times such as these."

"I know. I know. You are right, Dethenor. I am too frail to go out and fight, and the people need to see a prince fighting for them. Otherwise *they* will not fight."

The room grew quiet, as everyone was probably thinking the same thing.

Finally Alcindor spoke his thoughts aloud. "The prince must be urged to assume his rightful role, Your Majesty. There is no other way."

"Alcindor is right," Dethenor agreed quickly.

The king looked at his wife, and a silent message seemed to pass between them. "We have spoiled him, Lenore," he said quietly. "We gave him everything—and now he has become a wastrel."

"Perhaps it is not too late, my husband," Queen Lenore said. "I know he has taken a wrong path, but there is good in him. He is of your bloodline. We must do whatever is necessary to bring him to what he should be."

King Alquin's gaze met that of Alcindor then. "Go," he said. "Summon the prince."

"What if he refuses to come?"

"Bring him here in chains if you must!" And a steely note had crept into the king's voice.

Alcindor's eyes glinted. "Yes, sire. It shall be as you say."

Grenda, Ferrod's wife, was waiting at the council chamber door. They spoke in whispers as they started down the hall.

Briefly he told her what had happened. “He is set on continuing the war.”

“Foolishness! Insanity!” Grenda spat. She was an attractive woman with black hair and black eyes, but the eyes were angry. Abruptly, she murmured, “You are the next in line for the throne.”

“Be quiet, Grenda! It is treason to even speak aloud of that.”

“It is only wisdom. The king may die soon. Indeed, everyone thinks he will. His wounds will not heal. That leaves only Prince Alexander, and he is a worthless young scoundrel.”

“He is still the prince.”

Grenda’s eyes glittered. “Many things may happen to a young man—sickness, accidents. Perhaps he will even go to fight in the war. If he dies, and Alquin is gone, you will be the king.”

Ferrod hesitated. Then he nodded. “And you,” he said, “will be the queen.” He saw the approval in her eyes.





## 2

### The Dark Stranger

The small ballroom was packed to capacity. In one corner a group of four musicians plied their instruments, spilling music into the room. The friends of Prince Alexander were gathered to find whatever pleasure was available.

“Prince Alex, drink up!”

The speaker was a beautiful girl. She carried a tray of golden goblets filled with wine and held it out to the prince.

Young Prince Alex took a cup, then said, “You always bring me luck, Sophie. Stand by me while I win the money of all these so-called gamblers.”

The prince was seated at a table with four men. As they continued to play, the gold began to flow from the prince to those who sat around him.

“Your good luck is bad today, Prince Alex,” one of the players said. He was a small man with bright brown eyes and pale skin. Like the others, he was richly dressed. He wagged his head in mock sadness. “If you were not the prince, you would have been bankrupt long before now.”

“Vain, that’s one of the advantages of being a prince.”

Laughter went up around the table.

The man Vain had just said, “I propose a toast,” when the door swung open, and everyone turned to look. The prince—and probably all the others—expected to see another of his friends.

The newcomer was Alcindor.

Vain suddenly grew very watchful. "Hello, Alcindor," he said loudly. "Don't tell me you've come to join our party."

Alcindor was wearing the green-and-gold uniform of the royal guard. His sword was at his side, and a leather strap crossed his breast.

"No, I have not come to join your gambling party, Vain. I am here on assignment from the king."

The room fell silent, and Alexander thought Vain's face paled a little.

Vain started to speak, but the prince interrupted him.

"Oh, sit down, Alcindor!" he said. "You never have any fun! Don't you have anything to do but play soldier?"

Alcindor's eyes swept the room in a look of disgust.

The prince well knew that his father's aide had never had any patience with Alexander's friends. He always claimed they followed after the prince for what they could get out of him. But Alex did not believe that.

Alcindor ignored the others and spoke directly to the prince. "You are summoned to appear before the king, Prince Alexander."

Alexander blinked rather stupidly. It took a moment for the meaning of the tall soldier's words to become clear. He glanced across the table at Vain, who winked at him and said, "My, it sounds as if you're going to get a spanking from your papa."

"Enough of that, Vain!" Alcindor said almost fiercely.

"Now you wait a minute!" the prince said. "Don't talk to my friends that way, Alcindor."

"I didn't come to talk to your friends. I came to escort you to the king."

Alexander was aware that everyone was watching. They had teased him before about being brought to heel by his parents, and he felt his face flush.

"I'll be along after a time, Alcindor," he muttered. He turned back to the table. "Now, let's play cards."

Alcindor's voice cut through the room like a sharp knife. "The king commands me to bring you now, Prince!"

"I said I would come later! Now, get out of here!"

Alcindor's lips grew tight, and his eyes glinted. "My prince, you force me to do this. You will either come peaceably, or I will take you forcibly."

"You cannot force me to do anything!"

"I am the servant of King Alquin, the monarch of this kingdom," Alcindor said. He stepped forward and towered over Alexander. "His orders are to bring you at once! And, specifically, if you will not come of your own will, I am to bring you under guard."

Alexander pushed back his chair and stood up. He glared at the aide. "You wouldn't dare touch me!"

Alcindor took another step forward and gripped his arm. "I'm sorry that you will have it no other way, but you are going to see the king. Now."

Vain suddenly lunged out of his chair. "Turn him loose!" he shouted. "This is treason!"

Alcindor's fist moved swiftly, and the prince saw Vain fly backward. He crashed into a table loaded with silver trays and dishes and cups of wine, and a tremendous clatter followed.

"Do any of the rest of you care to protest?" Alcindor asked quietly. He looked about almost hopefully, but the sudden and absolute devastation of Vain apparently stopped them. Nobody moved to help the fallen man, who was lying as still as if he had been struck with a mace.

“I didn’t think so,” Alcindor said. “Come, Prince Alexander. The king awaits you.”

“Wait a minute—”

But Alexander had no choice. The powerful hold on his arm was enough, and he felt himself dragged from the room, stumbling and almost losing his balance.

“Take the prince’s arms and follow me!” Alcindor ordered the two soldiers who waited at the door. The command was curt. “If he falls, pick him up and carry him!”

The soldiers’ strong grip dragged Prince Alexander against his will out of the tavern and into the street. He was unhappily aware that people were watching. “Alcindor, I’ll go with you. You don’t have to drag me.”

“Release the prince,” the aide said at once. He fixed his cold gaze on Prince Alexander and said, “The king is waiting. I am glad you have seen fit to listen to reason—for once.”

In their private quarters, King Alquin and Queen Lenore listened to Dethenor as he spoke urgently.

“I know that we are apprehensive about the armies of Zor,” Dethenor said.

“We are,” the king answered. “Do you truly think we can hold them back?”

“For a time. But only for a time. They have many men, and only the excellence of our archers at the passes has kept us safe thus far.”

“A long time ago,” King Alquin said, “I realized that good archers would be our only protection from the Zorians—since we are so outnumbered. Fortunately, we have the finest archers in NuWorld.”

“That is true, Your Majesty, and until now they

have been our salvation. But I must tell you that there are rumors . . .” He paused at that point and looked worried.

“What kind of rumors?” the king demanded.

“They are very vague. But we have heard that the Zorians have developed some sort of secret offense. A weapon, you could call it—perhaps under the direction of the Dark Lord. That would not surprise me.”

“A better kind of bow? Our bows are the best that can be made.”

“I do not know, Your Majesty. I simply have heard from one of our reliable agents that they have developed *something* that will be difficult for our archers to defend against. I think what we must—” Dethenor broke off as a knock came at the door.

“Come in!” the king called.

It opened, and Alcindor entered, accompanied by an unusually subdued-appearing prince.

“Did he come willingly, Alcindor?” the king asked.

The aide hesitated, and then a small smile turned up the corners of his mouth. “Yes, after he understood the situation, Your Majesty.”

“What does this mean, Father?” Alexander asked peevishly. “Why have you had me brought here like a criminal?”

“My orders to Alcindor were to let you know that I wished your presence. If you had obeyed of your own free will, that would have been very simple,” the king said sternly.

Alex dropped his head, and Alquin thought a look of shame briefly swept across his son’s face.

“Well,” the prince muttered, “I’m here. What’s the purpose of your summons?”

King Alquin studied his son. He loved the boy

dearly but was afraid that he had failed him as a father. He had been gone to the wars most of Alexander's childhood and had not given him the example he should have. He regretted that now, but there was no way to change what had already happened.

"You are eighteen years old, Alex," the king said. "And I have decided that your life is worthless."

Alexander flushed and straightened up as though he had never been talked to like this before. "I resent that, Father!" he said furiously.

"And I resent the life that you lead! You are a prince, and the kingdom is in grave danger. I have brought you here to tell you that from this point on your life will be different."

"Different! And what does that mean?" Alex demanded.

"There will be no more drinking, no more gambling, no more parties. That bunch of leeches that follows you around, and whom you cannot see for what they are, will be dismissed from the capital. You will become a soldier and endure all the hardness of a soldier."

Alquin saw the rebellion flaring in his son's eyes and was not surprised. The queen herself was silent, but the king continued talking, and he did not soften his words. "You are a disgrace to the royal family, Alex! I am ashamed of you! You are no son of mine until you prove yourself so!"

Prince Alexander might have been wise to bow his head and surrender to the king's demands. But it appeared that a lifetime of getting his own way was going to prevent that. He stood straight and said angrily, "I will do exactly as I please, and you will not treat me as if I were a commoner!"

"Is that your final answer?"

“Yes!”

“Alcindor,” King Alquin said, “the prince will be confined to his quarters until further notice. Take him there now. He will receive no visitors; he will not be allowed to leave.”

“Wait! You can’t do that to me!”

“You will see what a king can do. Take him, Alcindor!”

Alcindor escorted the prince out as Alexander attempted to fight him off. His strength was no match, however, for the strength of the stalwart soldier. The prince’s angry voice was still echoing from the hall after the door closed.

Queen Lenore arose then and went to her husband. She stood behind him and put both hands on his shoulders. “Try not to feel too bad, Alquin. It is my fault as much as yours. We both have spoiled him.”

Heavily the king nodded. “And what are we to do now?”

The queen hesitated. Then she said firmly, “I think we must send for help.”

“Military help? There is none.”

“I think our problem is not mostly a military one. It is something else. I think we should send for Goél.”

King Alquin lifted his eyes. Thoughts raced through his head. He was heartbroken over the rebellion of his only child. He truly wanted help. And now he whispered, “Yes. Send a courier at once and ask Goél if he will come and help us.”

“What sort of visitor are you talking about?”

The servant of Count Ferrod did not answer for a moment. He was a thin man with pale, shifty eyes. “I do not know how to describe him. He is not from here. He



has come on a long journey, he says, and he demands to see you.”

“What name did he give?”

“He gave no name, but he said Count Ferrod would want to see him.”

“Well, show him in.”

Ferrod leaned back in his chair and glanced over at his wife. “Who do you suppose *this* is?”

Countess Grenda said, “Probably someone wanting a favor. We get plenty of those.”

However, when the door opened and the visitor entered, the count knew that this man had not come to beg favors. He was tall and powerfully built, and the hood that was thrown back from his black cloak revealed a thin, dark, strong face. He gave them a brief time to study him before saying, “My name is Rondel.”

“What is your purpose with us—Rondel?”

“I have come to do you a great favor.” Rondel had a black mustache and neat black beard. His skin was dead white in contrast, and there was something even dangerous looking about him. Count Ferrod found himself becoming a little uneasy. “Is your business political or personal?”

“Both,” Rondel said at once.

“It must be one or the other,” the countess snapped. When the man turned his cold gaze on her, she appeared to have a moment of fear. But she quickly recovered and said, “State your purpose or leave us.”

“I will indeed do so, Countess.” Rondel moved closer, and his voice dropped. “What I have to say is for your ears only. Not even your closest friends or servants must know.”

“What can be this mysterious business you have with us?” Ferrod asked curiously.

“The kingdom of Madria is doomed.”

“That is treason to speak so!” the count gasped.  
“You cannot say that!”

“You said as much in the Council this morning, did you not?”

“How did you know what I said in Council?”

“I know many things, but it is not necessary to share with you how I know. What is my purpose? I have come to give you an opportunity to save yourself and to rise above your present position.”

Ferrod and his wife exchanged quick glances.  
“What are you saying, Rondel?”

“I will tell you the truth. I serve the Dark Lord.”

A chill passed over the count. He had heard of the Dark Lord of NuWorld. He knew the Dark Lord’s power was creeping over the land. He also had heard of the one called Goél, who fought against it. And he knew that the king and queen had, in fact, put their trust in Goél.

“I will not listen to you. It is treason.”

“It is wisdom,” Rondel said. “The kingdom of Madria cannot stand. Your powers shrink every day, while those of the Dark Lord grow. His shadow is long, and it will grow longer. Soon the mountain passes will be taken. You will look out that window one day and see in the streets the soldiers of Zor, wearing the sign of the Dark Lord on their breasts. Then all will be lost.”

“I do not believe it,” Ferrod said, but his voice was weak.

“Yes, you do believe it. And I have come to make you an offer from the Dark Lord himself.” The dark man smiled suddenly. “I see that interests you. Do you think that he does not know what is in your heart?”

“No one knows what is in my heart.”

“No? What about this? If the king dies of his old

wounds and then the prince dies of sickness or disease or in the war, who would be the next king of Madria?”

A silence fell over the room.

“Do not be alarmed. I realize that to speak so would be treason as things now stand, but things will not remain as they are. Give your allegiance to the Dark Lord, and you two will rule over the kingdom. You will be regents of the Dark Lord and have all power—under him.”

Rondel talked on. His voice grew soft and steady and tempting. For some time the count and the countess listened to him.

Suddenly the dark stranger asked, “What is your decision?”

Count Ferrod swallowed hard. A question troubled him. “But what of the prince?”

“The prince must not stand in the way of your greatness. He is a fool, and everyone in the kingdom knows it. You are not a fool, Count Ferrod. Neither are you, Countess. You will not throw away what is being offered you on a worthless boy whose only talent is drinking and gambling and partying. Quick! Your answer. I will have it now. For once I leave this room, there will be no chance to change your mind.”

At that moment Grenda proved herself to be the stronger of the two. She took her husband’s arm, and she whispered, “We must do it, Ferrod. There is no other sensible choice.”

Count Ferrod studied his wife’s expression, then turned back to their visitor. “All right, Rondel. We accept your offer.”

Rondel laughed. “You would be a fool not to. Now, this is what you must do . . .”