



Sarin leapt from rooftop to rooftop in the dark, the glow of the moon granting just enough light for him to keep his footing. The tile roofs were worn by the elements and roughly patched; he nearly cut himself on a rusty gutter. The city used to be a real jewel, but its shine had long since faded and the mood of its citizens soured.

He much preferred recovering objects and people rather than the opposite. Business was business, but there was only so much theft and murder he could stomach. Fortunately, tonight he was to recover a family artifact stolen by the Mad King's cronies and being held in the city treasury. He glanced at the king's castle in the distance, using it as his main landmark to keep his bearings. The skyline had changed several times since the Echelon was *purged*. One tower burned to the ground, replaced by a new training facility to bolster his armies. A wall of thick black stone surrounding the inner city was nearing completion.

Breaking into the treasury was risky, but not nearly as risky as sneaking inside the king's castle—not even close. Even with most of the continent brought to heel, the king was a miserable bastard who lived in a cocoon of paranoia. His home was pretty much impenetrable. The treasury had standard guards on duty, but the castle had the dark knights of the Echelon—the king's personal attack dogs. Sarin had done that once before, and it was the closest brush with death he'd ever had.

He took his gaze off the keep and set his focus forward. Tonight's mission should go like clockwork, but he knew better than to become complacent. Decades of successful jobs for the Liquidation Guild taught him to never underestimate the task at hand.

As he landed on the roof of the treasury he heard a commotion from street level and peered over the gutter. An ogre of a man loomed in front of the building. A strange hood with slits for eyes sat on his head. He held a giant cleaver in his left hand, and something small in his right, a pouch, maybe an animal.

Big boy didn't appear to be doing anything hostile, but the guards were extremely agitated by his proximity to the treasury and appeared to be fully occupied by that fact. Sarin smiled under his hood. If the Gods were so kind as to grant him a distraction, he was going to take it.

He maneuvered over the edge and dropped to the small balcony below. The guards were yelling at the man, but he just looked at them without saying a word, almost looking confused as why he was there.

"Go on, get, *Executioner*." The rest of the guards called and jeered after him, but none of them seemed confident enough to approach. Then again, his arms were thicker round than Sarin's legs.



There was the tiniest crack between the window and the wooden sill. Sarin produced a thin strip of metal with a slight hook on the end, slid it through the gap, and worked the blade towards the latch. Once he felt the hook catch, he shifted the blade as parallel as possible with the window, pushed in, and waited. When the guards started yelling again, he yanked on the blade.

The latch clicked. He pulled the window out, climbed inside, and pulled the window back almost flush to make it appear closed.

A glance at the street made Sarin pause. He could've sworn he saw big boy staring right at his position. *With these shadows? Must be coincidence.*

Either way, the man didn't react, but something plucked at his instincts. He raised his guard another notch and started inside.

The upper floor was devoid of guards. His distraction was doing an excellent job. He found the stairs at the end of the hall nearer the center of the building.

He needed to get to the ground floor and find the requisition chamber. That was the main holding area before new goods would either be sold off or make their way to the castle. The item in question was some kind of rare and special coin. *People and their coins.*

The stairs fed into a central atrium. Carved stone columns supported a domed ceiling; glow crystals set in steel braziers eliminated most of the shadow. Five doors circled the perimeter, each leading off in a different direction. Above each door was a sign indicating what lay beyond. He spotted his goal across the room and slightly right of his position.

Still no guards. He could understand a detachment keeping watch outside, but the place was a ghost town. He checked the chain tucked into his cloth waistband and loosened the drawstring on a few pouches.

He slipped around the columns to the door and shimmied his lock pick into the keyhole. It wasn't a poorly made lock, but he'd faced tougher. A few clicks later, the latch turned, and he stepped into the room.

Three dark knights were waiting with swords drawn. They eyed him up and down as he rose from his crouch.

"Looks like the king was right to station us here boys."

Another knight cocked his head. "Thought you would be shorter...and greener."

Even with his cowl hiding most of his features, Sarin's face must have shown his confusion.



"The king said to inform you," the knight said, spitting at his feet, "that your friendship is officially over, especially considering you'll be dead momentarily."

Before they could say another word, Sarin threw the purple crystals in his hand. Black smoke clouds erupted from where they struck the ground and billowed through the room. He ducked to the floor. They shouted and coughed; he felt a sword brush overhead.

Sarin watched their feet shift from under the cloud then then threw his kusarigama. He struck the knight dead on. The man screamed in agony and fell to the ground clutching his broken and bleeding face. Sarin jammed a knife through his eye, silencing him.

The other two knights fumbled in the smoke. One of them managed to make it to the door and escape, but the other tripped over the first and fell flat on his face.

Sarin was waiting. He pounced on the knight and shoved his dagger into his neck with multiple thrusts. The knight twitched once, then went slack.

Sarin threw down a second, white crystal, and the smoke vanished. He was looking for a small wooden box with the letter G carved in the lid and the escaped knight meant he didn't have a lot of time. He ransacked the room, throwing open cabinets and spilling the contents of chests and drawers onto the floor.

On the third cabinet he opened, he found it sitting in the middle of the shelf. He flipped it open to find a gold and purple coin with a large G engraved in the center. The word Glory was printed on the opposite face.

He had never seen one personally, but Glory coins weren't unheard of. They were created decades ago by the Mad King (before he went mad) and his clever economic advisor to reward both regular citizens and the ruling class alike for contributions to the kingdom. It was so scarce that its value increased rapidly and outpaced standard gold coins in value. Unfortunately, after the king went *wrong*, he confiscated every coin and locked them in his castle.

The box itself was a carved case designed seemingly to hold the single coin. He checked it over to be safe and discovered a folded slip of paper tucked under the lid. That would have to wait. He replaced the coin, stuffed the box into his cloak, and ran out across the atrium and back to the stairs.

As his feet hit the first step he heard a chorus of shouts. The surviving knight and a half dozen guards ran towards him. They did not look happy. An arrow snapped against the wall ahead of him as he vaulted up the stairs 4 at a time. He tossed a red crystal over his shoulder; a ball of rotating fire consumed the middle landing. The guards came to a noisy halt on the stairs. Sarin heard the knight cursing after him.



He made it back to the window, jumped onto the balcony, slammed the window shut, and pulled himself to the roof. After he felt he had gotten far enough away he stopped to catch his breath and take a seat. He wasn't sure what just happened, but it wasn't what he expected and that was concerning. He did have a lead on that lack of information, so he opened the box and opened the paper.

Congratulations! You have just received one of the rarest coins on the entire planet. Meet me at the Unlucky Soldier at dawn so we can discuss our future partnership.

-G

Sarin had no idea how anyone knew he would recover this box—aside from the person requesting the job—but he was certainly in some sort of muck, and truth be told, a bit intrigued. He turned his cloak inside out to switch from purple and black to a brown with dark maroon trim, located a spot safe from prying eyes, and dropped to the street. Dawn was only a few hours off—might as well case the meeting spot first.

The Unlucky Soldier was a dive with watered-down beer and moldy food, but known for being open all night. He'd had more than a few meetings there. It used to be something back in the heyday, a local hotspot for city guard and military stationed locally, but some former owner long past offended one of the dark knights. He and his family were killed. Both decent and politically expedient people started avoiding the place, and a poor change of management sent it on a quick downhill slide.

The way the king usually operated, though, it was lucky the building was still standing. He took a table in a corner, plied a flat-voiced waitress for one of their crappy ales, and set to watching the door.

It must be someone of means to be able to get the guild to utilize him specifically. He'd just finished a job and should have some downtime. Whoever was up next on the list was always the tradition of the Liquidation Guild; the arbitrary method helped eliminate competition between guilders. More importantly, the guild always acted as the middleman between jobber and jobbee. Anyone that went out of line or around the line to avoid the guild's cut didn't last long.

The door opened again. Sarin cast an eye over and—there was no mistaking that man. Big boy clever meandered around the crowded tables with an unexpected grace, heading right for him.

He heard a couple of muted plops come from behind the man. A figure hopped into view right behind him—a short green creature with no pants, a fine jacket, and a feather in his cap. On his shoulder sat a very small reptilian looking creature with a blindfold over his eyes smoking some strange smelling concoction out of an oversized pipe. Sarin eyed the big man and the way he seemingly unintentionally blocked several possible escape routes.

The frog spoke with a guttural but jovial tone. "I see you managed to find my note, Liquidator."



"Mind lowering your voice a little?"

"Sorry." The creature swept his hat in a bow. "My name is Ghert Lambe."

"You wrote this?" Sarin tossed the note on the table.

"Indeed I did. Oh, and this is my bodyguard Georgie. I believe you met him tonight already, so to speak." The hooded man nodded once. "And my faithful companion Oof. Say hello Oof." The little dragon didn't respond, but instead puffed a smoke ring in the assassin's face. Ghert rubbed his hands and looked over the bar with short nods of approval, as if he enjoyed the smell of stale ale and rotten floorboards. "I do love to get out amongst the people. So many refreshing faces, so many wonderful opportunities."

"I'm a busy man," Sarin said, "and the guild expects me to check in. So get to the part where you explain what this is."

"Not to worry," Ghert said, flapping a webbed hand. "I have an understanding with the Liquidators—we go way back. I myself specialize in many unusual, ah, industries." The pipe smoking lizard guffawed as if a joke had been told, then choked on his own smoke inhalation. Sarin could now see what Georgie was holding, aside from the cleaver—a stuffed rabbit. He looked to be consoling it.

"And what is your name?" Ghert asked.

"You can call me Sarin."

"Well then. Would you be so kind as to order my companions and I a drink? I require a constant stream of liquid libation, keeps me young and in good spirits." Ghert drew his hands along his amphibian face. "Hydration is key."

Sarin lifted his hand toward the bar and gestured to his new drinking companions. A few seconds later, the waitress set a large glass of water on the table and a small shot glass of water. Ghert's eyes went wide at the glass and he licked his lips before catching the server. "Pardon my dear—not to be rude, but is this local water?"

The server rolled her eyes and returned to the bar. He watched her leave, shrugged, then downed the glass in one messy gulp that spilled a little water on his fancy jacket and a little more on Oof. "Oops."

Oof turned and punched him in the side of the face with his tiny claw.

"Hey!"

"Dripping water can eat through stone," Oof said matter-of-factly, and then sipped his own water out of the shot glass. Ghert side-eyed him.



"This is less enjoyable than I thought it would be," Sarin said. "Let's get to it. What do you need?"

"I've always believed that if you can afford to pay someone else to do the rug pulling, then do it. I have a problem, you take care of problems, so let's come to an agreement. Consider that coin a down payment."

Sarin controlled his surprise. The coin was probably worth ten or fifteen typical jobs—if he could move it. But if this was just the down payment...early retirement might be in the cards. "Go on then."

"I need you to get someone off my back so I can get my coins back." The assassin looked at Oof. "No, not him." Ghert chuckled, then stopped. "Well, maybe him."

Oof, looking in no particular direction, spoke with chest-puffed confidence. "All men can see these tactics whereby I conquer, but what none can see is the strategy out of which victory is evolved."

Sarin looked at Ghert. The frog flapped his hand again. "He does that. Anyway...an old friend of mine had me imprisoned for finishing what he asked me to do. I have a score to settle. More importantly, he owes me a substantial debt."

"And I'm to settle the account. Seems simple enough."

"It isn't, but I will say that this is quite an opportunity. Your name—you and your guild—will go down in history. Bards will sing of your deeds and you'll be rich beyond your wildest dreams." Sarin sat with his arms folded, unimpressed. Ghert cleared his throat and leaned in. "I need you to kill the Mad King so I can recover the Glory coins."

Sarin sat for a moment, dumbfounded, then slapped the table. "You're out of your mind."

"A little," Ghert said, nodding sagely, "but only insofar as it serves my purposes. You're the best in the Liquidators. I want you fighting on my side before the wrong side snatches you away."

"I'm not going to participate in your suicide mission. Good day." Sarin moved to leave.

"Are you so certain?" Ghert's eyes sharpened, and three more Glory coins appeared between his fingers. He flicked them about, vanishing and reappearing them in his palms. Sarin had seen his share of slight of hand, but something about this seemed different. Eventually, Ghert plunked the coins back into his pocket. "The pay is good. More than good. That part, I didn't exaggerate. With the right plan, anything is possible."

Sarin hesitated. "I want to know more about this plan first."

Assassin Backstory

“All in due time. We aren’t going to do the deed right away. We need to build our teamwork a bit, gather some capital, make a few investments in the right...personnel. You’ve heard of the call to the island in the south?”

“Mmm,” Sarin said. “The orcs are invading, but anyone with any sense knows the Mad King’s behind it. The local monarch is paying well for mercenaries to fend them off.”

“Exactly. I’ve got a sense for these sorts of things. It smells like opportunity.” Ghert closed his eyes and inhaled. “We start there, make some money, build ourselves out first. With the right people, the right timing...”

“And an obscene amount of good fortune,” Sarin said flatly.

“Ah, well, that’s no trouble at all.” Ghert grinned, thin-lipped and with teeth like tombstones. “Good fortune is my specialty.”

