



After the Dragon (Excerpt)

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Chapter 1

The inn is almost empty, for Dragons mate in the sunset sky over Port Told and humans may never see such a wonder again. Even the barmaid loiters in the doorway to watch and the barkeep must face his DarkElvish customer alone.

'Poor stuff, this,' says the DarkElf in perfect Bouchian. She pushes her glass back across the bar.

'The strongest we have,' the barkeep says, his voice threatening to fail him. 'Imported from Livania.'

Expensive, that means, and his face says he does not expect her to pay. But she tosses a gold coin onto the polished wood of the bar. The coin spins and spins and he cannot tear his eyes away.

'A room,' says the DarkElf.

'Yes.' He raises his voice. 'Marle.'

The barmaid at the door twitches and backs into the room. 'Not now, Joshe,' she says, still craning to stare out at the sky. 'Dragons.'

'And Elves,' says the DarkElf. The coin has never stopped spinning.

Marle turns but the DarkElf stares over her shoulder. The two humans follow her gaze.

A LightElf stands in the doorway, gold hair and one goldflecked eye shining in the red light of the dying day. The other eye is covered with a patch, giving him a rakishness at odds with his stern demeanour. He folds a parchment and puts in his pocket but he does not look away from the DarkElf.

Her coin stops spinning. The clink as it falls flat echoes in the hush.

'Cheap trick, goblin.' The LightElf speaks Ancient. 'This is what you are reduced to.'

'It speaks,' the DarkElf says, still in Bouchian. She does not move as the LightElf puts hand to sword hilt and stalks towards her. 'It speaks of *reduction* and yet DarkElves do not feel the need to consort with humans.'

'Scoff,' says the LightElf, softly, standing before her, his sword half drawn. 'You will learn.'

'You propose to teach me?' She insinuates with a silken tone to her voice and a sinuous twist to her body, and still insists on Burchian.

The LightElf takes a breath, recoiling from her allure. He rallies. 'I need teach you nothing. Our treaty with the humans heralds your end.' He says this in Burchian, her tiny victory.

'Ah,' says the DarkElf. 'You give over half of Wyvern and think an alliance with these short-lived creatures will help you?'

'Your words come from rancour.'

'You have allowed the humans to establish a foothold, their little kingdom Ardmore – they will drive you out and cut down the trees and dam the rivers.' She turns suddenly and her look sends Marle scurrying up the stairs, presumably to prepare her room.

The LightElf leans forward. 'This is why they ally with us. They fear you.'

'Peace,' the DarkElf says then. 'I am Jacoby NightSword, here for rest and recovery. I wish no trouble.'

The LightElf sits at the bar a few stools from her, still fingering his sword. But he replies. 'I am Kintore OneEyed, once SureBlade.'

The scar snaking from behind his eyepatch is red and fresh. Jacoby's gaze flicks over it but she says nothing.

He half-turns his back and calls Joshe over. 'I will hire a room.'

Joshe's gaze darts between the two Elves. 'Yes, sir.'

'I am not here with that creature.' He is vehement.

'No, sir.' Joshe takes a step back.

'He is confused,' Jacoby says from behind her glass. 'I also take lodging here. Such a glamour of Elves he has never seen.'

Joshe flushes.

'Give me water,' says Kintore.

'Myself the same.' Jacoby puts her empty glass upside down on the bar in the traditional Burchian manner. 'But make mine your alcoholic variety.'

The two Elves drink almost in unison. Kintore puts his cup down, shaking his head. 'Another,' he says, leaning on the bar, hair hanging in his face.

Jacoby holds her glass out too. Again they drink together. The cup falls from Kintore's hand. Jacoby catches it as it rolls across the bar and sets it upright and inverted. 'We will take that room now.'

Kintore makes an incoherent sound. If Joshe has misgivings, he does not voice them to the DarkElf.

Trick held his sword lengthwise against his leg and kept walking. He knew he was being followed. He even knew who was following. This had been coming for a long time.

First I'll be slammed against the wall, he thought. Then they'll say something clever, and then—

They took him from behind and spun him into the wall. He went off it lightly but Randulf grabbed his shoulders and shoved him back against it.

'Don't you know it ain't safe to walk the streets alone at night?' Randulf said.

Not particularly clever after all. He rolled his eyes and got his head thumped into the wall. A bright explosion of light behind his eyes blinded him.

'We're sick of you thinking you're too good for us, mate.' Randulf looked behind him and the pack of men made a mutter of agreement.

Trick looked over at them as well and brought his sword up between Randulf's legs. He saw them recoil, felt the bigger man freeze and suppressed a vicious surge of triumph.

'Where did you get the idea I'm the *victim* of bullies?' he asked, the blade of his sword sharp and hard in his attacker's groin. Their eyes met. 'You need to back up, soldier.'

Randulf eased backwards until he could get off his toes. Trick waited, knowing he should have castrated the man. Red in the face and breathing hard, Randulf drew his own sword. His little gang shuffled into a circle enclosing them.

Trick sighed and pushed off the wall. His first swing glanced off the other man's blade and he danced away. He had given Randulf his chance and now he wanted to end it quickly. He dropped his sword back beside his leg and raised his left arm defensively in front of him. In the dim lamplight he looked unarmed, though Randulf knew intimately that wasn't so.

If he had underestimated the man, he would lose the arm.

He had taken worse bets and won.

Randulf went for his upraised arm—too tempting a target. Trick turned with the blade, coming under and past the swing, and then chopped his own sword at Randulf's defenceless back. A great gush of blood spurted out and Randulf shrieked.

Trick turned on the other men, but they grabbed their leader and ran down the street, clattering on the cobblestones and splashing through

puddles. When the noise faded, Trick sat down in the empty, blood-splattered street, holding his sword loosely between his knees. His head hurt where it had bounced off the wall. He touched the spot, finding a lump and maybe blood.

'You're just not a nice man, are you, Trick?' he said. His words hung in front of him. He might have used the flat of the sword rather than trying for a kill. But then he'd still be fighting, and who knew when the others would have joined in. He had done the right thing. It didn't make him feel any better.

Footsteps disturbed him, echoing in the quiet street. He was not alarmed. It was late, but Port Told never slept and it was only one set of footsteps. Not alarmed, he still took a tighter hold of the sword hilt.

They stepped out of an alley a little way down the street. He had been wrong—there were two of them, a man and a woman. The woman was almost as tall as the man and wore a heavy black hooded cloak covering her body and face. But he knew she was a woman, from the fall of the cloak over her body and the way she moved. She walked so quietly that the steps of the man beside her drowned any noise she might have made.

The man watched him as they walked towards him. He looked familiar and Trick for a moment thought he knew him. He realised his feeling of recognition came from the man's pale and icy blue eyes and blue-black hair. He was an Ullwyn.

Trick turned his head, closed his eyes and pushed the tips of his fingers into his eyelids, taking his hands from the sword until he choked back the impulse to cut the Ullwyn's throat.

'Let it go, Trick, let it go,' he said under his breath, willing calm.

'Hello, cousin.'

Trick uncovered his eyes and looked up at him. The man was plainly suicidal. 'You're no cousin of mine, lordling.' *Don't touch the sword, Trick.*

'Your mother misses you, Patrick.'

He bounced to his feet, sword at the Ullwyn's throat before he knew what he was doing.

The Ullwyn went ashen and the woman leant over and pushed the blade away. Her fingers were long and pale. Trick followed them up to her cloaked face. 'Are you another one of them?'

She pushed back the hood. Trick froze, his mind a dichotomy. One voice, rimmed in panic, said, *That's a DarkElf, that's a DarkElf female.* The other voice said, *She can't be, you would already be dead.*

He lowered his sword and stared at her, barely aware he *was* staring. Black hair like silk streamed down her back, and her silver eyes were startling in her white face. Like all Elves, her eyes were all iris, no whites. The pupils were like black cracks in two mirrors. She looked back at him, silent and aloof from anything human. He felt it, the powerful attraction that made these creatures so dangerous.

Then the Ullwyn pulled him away, though not deliberately. 'What was all that about?'

Trick forced himself to look at the Ullwyn and away from the DarkElf. He thought this reputed cousin might just have saved his soul.

'Other soldiers.' He shook his head, stole a glance at her and then set himself once and for all not to look at her again. 'They don't like me.'

'I wonder why?'

Trick's eyes narrowed but there was no real hostility in the Ullwyn's voice. 'You think you're going to get some points by bringing home the maverick cousin?' He thought he'd better sheath his sword.

'Guess again, Patrick.' The Ullwyn smiled at him. 'You're going to help us get down to Ardmore.'

Trick clasped his hand together, knowing it made him look stupidly demure and also knowing he wanted to throttle this man. He let a sly smile slip over his face, the one that had made Randulf and his friends so angry with him. 'Don't tell me you're eloping? Maybe I misjudged you.'

That wiped the self-satisfied look off the Ullwyn's face. He looked scared instead. Trick watched him glance aside at the DarkElf but didn't follow that temptation.

'Don't be ridiculous,' said the Ullwyn, his voice sharpening. '*She* wants to go to Wyvern Forest.'

Trick felt her watching him and it made his stomach twist. 'Does she? And is she assassin or spy?' He expected her to strike him down but he saw no movement from the corner of his eye. Maybe you never saw movement when they struck.

The cousin said, 'Shut your mouth, Patrick.'

Good, thought Trick. *Got to him*. 'Name's Trick.' He rubbed at his eyes. Her gaze made him more and more unsettled and his head hurt badly now.

He turned, dazed, and started to walk away. As always when he was tired or stressed, the ghost of his dead wife tried to wrap him in her arms.

He shook off the sudden wish to throw himself on the blades of the DarkElf. 'Time enough for that later.'

He didn't know he had spoken aloud until the Ullwyn said, 'What?'

They were following him. 'Look—' He stopped and looked at the other man.

'Faustus,' said the Ullwyn. 'And this is—' It was his turn to falter on the edge of words.

The DarkElf spoke for the first time. 'Mizuasobi—' She hesitated, then added, 'DarkChild.'

Her voice was honey and cream and smoke. Trick saw the way Faustus stared helplessly at her and realised no one had been around to save *his* soul.

For his own soul, Trick still wouldn't look directly at her. He caught moonlight glinting off her hair—*like silk*, another part of him continued to insist.

'Mizzle.' It wasn't right but it was as close as he could come. He addressed her but did not quite look at her. The very traditional personal name was a clue, but her clan name betrayed her entirely. 'Child of the Dark, and you're running away from Daddy, is that it?' He thought it more likely she acted under orders from the Dark, leader of the DarkElves.

'Patrick.' Faustus breathed the word, hugely upset.

'And you've settled on poor besotted Faustie to take you off to Wyvern Forest where the LightElves will slaughter you.'

Mizzle said nothing. Faustus said, 'Nonsense. She picked me because I'm Ullwyn—All Friend. They'll listen to me.'

'You were All Friend two hundred years ago, cousin,' said Trick.

'Now you're just a pack of inbred overfed soon-dead nobles who the Elves don't remember and don't give two—' He contained himself. 'They're not going to fall on their knees to you while she acts against them.'

'You know nothing.' Faustus was coldly furious but Mizzle remained impassive.

'You know less,' said Trick, temper threatening, keeping his hand well away from his sword. 'Ask yourself why, by the blue eyes of Fortune, a DarkElf would want to go to Wyvern?'

The DarkElf moved suddenly, catching his eye. 'My reasons,' she said, 'are not your business. You will do as your cousin asks.'

He looked away sharply. 'Look, both of you—' but speaking entirely to Faustus. 'I don't know what you're doing but I'm not getting involved. So go find yourself another puppy to play with.'

'Patrick.' Faustus was apparently regaining his composure. 'You help us or you'll be conducting tomorrow's morning service.'

'Big threat, Ullwyn,' said Trick, pleased to hear only scorn in his voice. The thought of being made High Priest of Fortune gave him the night sweats but Faustus didn't need to know that. 'What're you going to do, drag me back to the manor yourself? Try, I'd like that.' Faustus had seen the blood on his sword when he had held it to the arrogant bastard's throat. 'Or run and fetch some house guards, Faustie. I'll wait, I'm sure.'

'You're not hard to find, Patrick.'

Trick turned his back and kept walking. Faustus was smug about it, and so Trick *was* concerned about how they'd found him. He suspected they might have been shadowing him since he had left the inn, hidden by Randulf's noisier gang. As to how they found him at the inn, a few judicious questions at the barracks, perhaps. It didn't matter. He could be damn hard to find and damn harder to hold on to. Just ask older and wiser Ullwyns.

They trailed along behind him. He felt the DarkElf's eyes on the back of his neck and it made the skin between his shoulder blades itchy.

'It was clever, cousin,' called Faustus. 'Hiding under our noses like this. We've been looking in Livania for you. Who knew you'd join the Bouchian army?'

Trick smiled, knowing they could not see his face. Even *he* had not known he'd join the Bouchian army. He had come to himself some time after Linnet had died—*was murdered*, said the whisper of his dead wife—and found himself in the Port Told barracks. His smile faded. Faustus was being *very* smug about finding him. Fine. He asked at the barracks and found him at the inn. But—

'How did *you* find out I'd joined the army?' he asked, turning. Did not want to enter into further conversation but had to know.

Faustus gave him an insufferable smile and Trick's hand twitched on the hilt of his sword. 'Fortune told me.'

'Fortune?' Trick did not hide his disbelief.

'Yes.'

'The *Goddess* Fortune appeared to you in a vision just to tell you where I am.'

'Yes.'

Trick looked at his boots and back up. Fortune was an important part of the power and influence of the Ullwyn dynasty but She did not pop up to share gossip with minor twigs in the family tree.

'Right.' He walked on, thinking.

The city gates were closed but he knew of other ways out. It would be difficult to take Bet and Skye with him, but he could get another horse on the road if he had to leave them behind. Was it worth returning to the barracks at all? He had his sword and a few coins, and—he was Lucky but it never hurt to give Fortune a nudge—his marked cards and loaded dice in his pocket. What else did a soldier and a thief need?

A hand on his shoulder stopped him dead. He started to turn, instantly enraged at Faustus, and came face to face with Mizzle just as he noticed how cold that hand was. Their eyes met and locked. He could not look away. He found himself not really wanting to try.

‘Stop it,’ he said while he could still speak.

‘You will help me,’ she said, all smoke and mirrors.

His intent was to say *No* but his mouth said, ‘I will help you.’

She let go of his shoulder and his mind. He stepped back, stumbling, taking a quick glance at Faustus, whose face was a picture of fear and awe.

A sudden rush of fury at the Ullwyn overwhelmed him—that the man had deliberately sought him out to drag him into this. And then at Fortune, for apparently telling him to. He had no anger for the DarkElf, though. He didn’t think that was possible. The only thing he could hold in his mind in respect to her was a desperate need to help her. Although that was her doing, his mind skittered away from blaming her.

‘Damn it,’ he said. And, ‘Cousin,’ spitting the word like an insult at the Ullwyn’s feet. ‘What am I supposed to do for you?’

‘You’re a thief, aren’t you? Used to furtive activities.’ Faustus was calm again but Trick wasn’t going to forget the look on his face. ‘Take us out of the city and down to Wyvern without being caught.’

‘By who?’ This, Trick felt, was an important question. The thought of other DarkElves on their trail made him shudder.

‘By anyone.’ Faustus looked around the dim street as if expecting enemies to fall on them.

You blind, impotent little fool. But he didn’t want them to see the coiling anger in him. He kept his voice light and insolent. ‘You don’t know, do you?’

‘Let’s get moving and we’ll never find out.’

Trick shrugged it off. It was more important to run than to quibble about the pursuer. ‘Do you have horses?’

Faustus hesitated, looking uncertain. ‘One.’

‘You ran out of the manor with your pet horse and a handful of pocket money.’ He kept his tone flat and neutral.

Not neutral enough, for Faustus flared up. 'Look, Patrick, unlike you, I've got sense of chivalry and—'

Mizzle gestured sharply and he went silent.

Trick sighed to see his complete slavery. 'I've got two more horses, but then we have to get them out the gate. So we're going to be quiet and we're going to listen to me and do exactly what I say.'

Faustus was reluctant to reply but Mizzle gave one curt nod, expressionless.

That blank face, so still and so very beautiful, chilled him but he let the need to help her swallow him and did not surface again until they reached the barracks.

Trick recognised the man on duty at the gate. 'Evening, Walton.' It was well after curfew and he waited.

The other soldier scowled at him. 'You just about killed him, you know.'

'I should've tried harder, then,' Trick said, deadpan. Let them think he was too dangerous to cross. Fortune alone knew it was almost the truth.

Walton fidgeted with his pike, eyes hard, but he turned and shoved the gate open. '*They* can't come in.'

Walton couldn't know Trick was coming back out. He turned and looked at the two standing behind him. Belatedly, he remembered the elvish aversion to iron. No sign of pain or fear marred Mizzle's smooth face but he guessed she might be relieved at an excuse not to go in to this iron-weaponed stronghold. If she could feel something so human as relief.

'That would be a good idea,' he said, making it not quite a question.

And Mizzle crossed her arms and nodded. Faustus made not a sound of protest. Trick suspected he would not have left Mizzle's side even if he had known Trick was going out the back way.

He crossed the yard. Noise spilled out of the mess hall as he went soft-footed past, but the stables were almost deserted. One young stableboy slept in an empty stall, sweet with the smell of hay. Trick did not wake him. New recruits were assigned to the stables but the boys seemed to do most of the work.

He greeted his two horses, rubbing their noses as they nuzzled him over the stall doors. They were yet another source of conflict between the other soldiers and him, when only officers owned horses and no common soldier was allowed to keep theirs. They could not accept that he cared for big Bet for a friend, and that the pretty mare Skye and the special treatment he received was simply a stroke of Fortune like many of

the events of his Goddess-blessed life. This latest affair was not one of those blessings.

Perhaps Fortune had finally grown tired of him and was granting his wish to join his wife.

He was still undecided. Mizzle's willingness to wait outside gave him the chance to get away but he was reluctant to leave the horses. He would have to wait a long time before the Ullwyns stopped watching the walls and the barracks and he could safely return to the city.

'Curse Fortune and her stupid—' Trick cut himself off, not wanting to wake the stableboy. Stupid Fortuna, stubborn Goddess, insisting that he be Her next High Priest. He had been on the run from the Ullwyns since he was twelve, since the night the old priest had died. He couldn't count the number of times they had dragged him back.

Not again. And no matter how he longed for his dead wife's embrace, he wasn't going to throw his life away following the DarkElf around. 'I could wish for a cleaner death.'

He headed towards the rear of the stables, where a narrow window would let him out against the back wall of the barracks compound, an easy climb. Instantly, his chest constricted and his legs went weak. He went over, clutching at his throat and heaving for breath.

When his vision cleared, he found the stableboy leaning over him, wide-eyed. He pushed the boy away and got up. No wonder Mizzle hadn't blinked about letting him come alone. Her influence had caught him deeper than he suspected, throwing his body into utter panic at the thought of deserting her even as his mind planned escape.

Trick looked to the boy, who stood silent and staring. He remembered this one now. He had arrived a quarter-moon ago and had never said a word. 'Go back to sleep, Mouse.'

The boy nodded, but went and perched himself on one of barrels against the wall, watching. Trick dismissed him. Mouse had no voice to call for help, and if he tried to stop him or run for the guard, Trick would incapacitate him.

He saddled Skye, then Bet. Mouse brought over the tackle while he tried to decide what to do. The hypnotic effect of the DarkElf's eyes had long-lasting effects but surely he would not be imprisoned forever. The feeling would fade and he would be able to escape.

'I just have to be patient,' he told Mouse, who nodded wisely. Trick was surprised into a laugh. 'All right, Mouse. Don't tell anyone.'

He led the horses out of the stables. The boy followed him to the door and came trailing after him as he went towards the gate. Trick glanced askance at him but he seemed harmless enough.

He expected Walton to be sullen and suspicious when he got back to the gate, and hoped Faustus would respond to whatever ruse he had to use to get out of the barracks again. But the guard wore the same expression that he suspected he did.

He looked from Walton's glazed eyes to Mizzle's blank face. 'What did he do to deserve that?'

'She didn't do anything,' said Faustus. 'What's that boy doing?'

Trick turned. Mouse stood by Bet's side, stupidly small against the bulk of the big horse. 'What harm is he?'

'We must go.' Mizzle turned away from them. Trick sensed great impatience behind the mask of impassivity.

Faustus was already following her when Trick had a spark of an idea. 'Just wait a little longer.' He ran back into the compound.

On the other side, apart from the mess hall and sleeping quarters, were the officers' quarters. In the darkness, Trick slipped inside and went up the stairs to Field Marshal Gowan's office.

A few days ago he had been called in here to be given another mild dressing-down, ending in utter leniency. He had read the contents of her desk upside down. A map of the continent had lain open, showing various strategic locations in Bourchia, Livania and Ardmore. Though Trick knew ways across the borders that weren't on this map, he had seen routes into Wyvern Forest marked on it. These were certainly speculative but could be useful, even if he insisted to himself that he would be gone long before they got near Ardmore.

He eased open the door, holding his breath. Sometimes the Field Marshal worked late into the night. He had seen lamplight spilling from her window as he crept into the barracks, out after curfew again. But the office was dark and deserted and the map still on the desk. A moment later, it was folded and tucked into his tunic and he was down the stairs.

Halfway to the gate, he detoured again, this time to the kitchen.

Troops were moving tomorrow to reinforce the border against what were euphemistically called threats to Bourchia's north—DarkElves. They were more likely to trade for what they wanted than raid for it now but Bourchians had long memories. In the kitchen, sacks of food were ready to be packed in the morning. He took two, heavy and hard to carry.

Mouse still stood at the gate. Trick looked hard at him before shaking his head and brushing past him. 'We can go now,' he said without a moment of regret for the comrades he was leaving behind.

Mizzle nodded and they walked away from the barracks with never a murmur of protest from Walton. Trick slung his sacks over Bet's saddle and took the reins from Faustus. He looked around once and saw that Mouse trailed along behind. Again, he shook his head, unable to fathom what the boy was playing at. Again, he considered chasing him off. Again, he could not see the harm. If Mouse wanted to turn him in for desertion he had had ample opportunity.

Faustus led them away from the city gates and towards the river. After one turn, Trick noticed Mouse was gone. He wished he could flee too. 'Faustie, you think I'm going to the manor?'

'I need to get my horse,' said Faustus. 'Don't be such a coward, Patrick.'

'And is your horse in the manor?' Faustus could insult him all he liked but he wasn't putting himself into the hands of the Ullwyns.

'I've got him in a stable nearby.' Faustus looked at him with practiced contempt. 'I paid a stablehand to wait up for us to let him out again tonight.'

True enough, they stopped a few streets away from the Ullwyn Manor at a well-appointed livery stable. Faustus went in and came back with a large black stallion that laid its ears back at the other horses.

'Keep Blackie under control, cousin.'

'Blackie?'

'That's the name of your horse, isn't it?' Trick shot him a deliberately insolent grin.

'No,' said Faustus, sounding annoyed. 'It's Coal.'

'Ah,' said Trick, still grinning. 'That's different, then. Keep him under control.'

They set off again, to Trick's relief, away from the manor and towards the city gates.

'The gates are shut for the night. How are you planning on getting out?' He already suspected Mizzle would play her hypnosis game again.

Faustus looked at him. 'That's why *you're* with us, Patrick.'

Trick stopped. 'What do you expect me to do?'

'What? You're a thief, aren't you?' The Ullwyn's voice rose.

Mizzle watched them both.

'Which doesn't include walking up to the city gates and demanding to be let out.'

'Think of something.'

Trick couldn't help himself. He turned to Mizzle. 'Why don't *you* do something?'

She looked back with her cat's eyes. 'There is more than one, yes?'

He took a moment to get what she was asking. 'More than one guard on the city gate? Yes.'

'Then I can do little.'

Trick looked at her a moment longer. So she had an honest streak, to admit such a weakness to someone she had to know was not her friend. And while he stared at her he remembered he was no threat to her at all. He shook his head and looked away so he could think. They needed a way out the gate. Now, what had he heard? What had he heard?

'Cousin?'

'Shut up, Faustus.' Something was coming to him. In the inn scant hours ago, he had overheard a conversation between two men. One of them was telling a long convoluted story which ended with the obscure punchline, 'And I'll be damned if the password hasn't been changed to *catsbane*.' Both of them had found this immensely funny.

Trick frowned. Why had that come to him? Because Catsbane was the name of Field Marshal Gowan's dog and the man in the inn was wearing the uniform of the army messenger service.

Messengers for the army camps on the Bouchian-Livanian border and up north watching for—Trick looked at Mizzle again—*northern threats* were allowed out the gates at any time.

'Right,' he said. 'Right. Let's go to the gate.'

Trick had to knock on the sentinel box repeatedly before a guard stuck his head out. 'What?'

'Got a message for General Tradder.' The map he had stolen showed that the General was commanding the southern border.

The guard looked him up and down and past him at Mizzle and Faustus. 'You ain't wearing the uniform and I ain't seen you before.'

'Well, you wouldn't have,' said Trick reasonably. 'The password's catsbane.'

The guard hesitated. Trick could almost follow his thoughts. This stranger knew the password, wore an army uniform if not the messenger one, the night was cold, and his stewed ale was getting cold while the other guards were peeking at his cards. 'All right.'

He pushed the door open the rest of the way. 'Come on, mates, let's get this nipple-hugging gate open.'

He and three other soldiers came out. Two turned the wheel that raised the portcullis, while the other two got the heavy wooden bar up and pushed ajar one half of the great gates.

The travellers led their horses out. Trick shivered in the cold breeze as the gate slammed shut behind him. He felt a pang. He couldn't come back to Port Told, not after deserting the army, not after the Ullwyns found out he had been hiding there—he had no doubt Faustus would let it slip if he hadn't already. They always looked in the last place he had been, as if they supposed he was as stupid as they were.

There were other cities. He turned to Mizzle and offered her Skye's reins. 'She's faster, Miz. For when your family catch up with us.'

Mizzle didn't blink. She took the reins and swung up. From under her cloak she unhooked a small bag and put it into one of the saddlebags.

Her every movement captured the eye. Trick was never so glad for the distraction of his wife's ghost. He forced himself to turn away and mount, looking back once more as they rode away from the gates. They followed the road through the rough peasant huts that had grown up around the walls. King Fillip occasionally ordered them cleared but he was, if not actively benevolent, at least indifferently non-interventionistic and so the temporary town was always allowed to grow back.

They reached open ground with no more disturbance than a few barking dogs. At the crossroads beyond, Trick kept them going west. He wanted to move them away from the coast and into farmland where there was more shelter before he turned them south for the border.

After a couple of miles, he glanced back. Faustus was muffled into his cloak but the cold wind off the sea did not seem to bother Mizzle. Neither made any response to his glance. Trick wished he had thought to bring a change of clothes and a warmer cloak for himself.

Facing forward again, he hunched down in the saddle and tried to doze. DarkElves were nocturnal so he suspected they would be traveling by night from now on. He wouldn't object, if only because it lessened the chance of being spat on. DarkElf females led the raiding parties and these people held grudges, no matter that no raid had reached this far south in living memory.

Hundreds of years ago, the northerners had borne pillage and burning and worse. There was good reason many Burchians were darkhaired even though Burchia had once been a province of fair Livania. Port Told had never been touched. Neither had the southern parts of Burchia, who were more likely to curse Livanians than the DarkElves. But the males had some of the same glamour that made the females so damn

dangerous. Not all dark-haired children from those times had been products of rape.

Trick shivered and told himself it was the wind. It wasn't as if he'd never met a DarkElf. The northern border might be patrolled but DarkElves visiting in Port Told weren't unheard of. He had even grown up on a pirate ship that had had a DarkElf crewman.

A *male* DarkElf who had admitted how deadly the females were.

Trick shivered again and swore under his breath. He was tired and letting fairy tales and rumours get the better of his superstitious Livanian side. He was not frightened of her—he would not let himself be frightened of her. Bet tossed her head and plodded on.

The thought of his father's ship made him consider turning back to the coast to buy sea passage. But pirates off Livanian waters made merchants loath to sail south and the cost would be offensive. Perhaps, once in Livania, he could get them onto one of those pirate ships—but he doubted his own credentials. Would anyone remember old Ben Matray, let alone his half-Bourchian son?

Again, he looked back. This time, Faustus spurred his horse forward.

The horse snapped at Bet and Faustus pulled its head around. 'We're supposed to be going to Ardmore, cousin. South.'

Trick wondered if Faustus was always this grating or whether lack of sleep was making him irritable. 'Since you're the big expert, I can go home.'

The Ullwyn snorted. 'Just don't try any of your games.' He dropped back to ride beside Mizzle.

Going straight south from Port Told would mean running the gauntlet of coastal patrols. If they went too far west they risked hitting the main south road, which led past the border garrison. In between, the forest crept its fingers northward and they could slip south. Let Faustus guess at his motives till then.

They passed one sleeping village and another. Then Trick finally took them off the road and onto a southward tending track. Looking at the stars, he guessed they were a few hours away from dawn. They would have to find shelter for the day. He was already sore from being in the saddle but was comforted by the thought that Faustus couldn't be any better. His thoughts skittered away from how Mizzle was bearing up. The same thing happened when he tried to think about why she might want to go to Wyvern, stronghold of the LightElves. For no good purpose, surely, but he couldn't hold the idea in his mind long enough to examine it.

Trick shrugged. What was it to him if Mizzle wanted to make a suicidal run into the heartland of her enemies? As long as she didn't expect him to die for her, she could do what she pleased to the LightElves. But he sagged in the saddle as Linnet's cold arms embraced him. Did it matter how he died? He might wish for a cleaner death, but this way would do the deed just as well. What else was there for him, with Linnet gone and no hope left to him of avenging her and redeeming himself?

He straightened as he heard one of the other horses trotting up beside him. Faustus again, to act important and knowledgeable? But it was Mizzle.

'We will rest until daylight.' Her Burchian was impeccable. 'Then we will continue on.'

'Come on, Miz,' Trick said. 'The horses have to stop and you do know humans need sleep, don't you?' He didn't know if he was more worried for the horses or himself. And why would she want to travel during the day, when the light hurt a DarkElf's sensitive eyes and pale skin?

'This is why we rest now.' She reined back.

Trick glared at her but it had no visible effect. A small barn stood off the trail ahead. He rode over, letting Bet pick her own way. The old snow around it was undisturbed. He dismounted and went inside. It was little more than three walls and a roof, open on the fourth side to the wind, but it was dry and empty, with only a few scattered bales of hay and some old sacks. He guessed it was used for hay storage during harvesting, for no homestead stood close. Trick went back outside and signalled to the other two, then led Bet inside.

He was sore and hungry and overwhelmingly tired. The heaviness in his limbs and around his eyes was more compelling than the twinge of his bones and hollow stomach and his aching skull. He quickly unsaddled Bet and used twists of hay to wipe the sweat and loose hair from her back.

Mizzle and Faustus came in as he worked. Faustus looked around, gave a long-suffering sigh, and went over to a corner to lie down. Coal nudged him questioningly.

'Your horse is telling you to get up and unsaddle him, Faustie,' said Trick.

Faustus made a deep moaning sound and rolled over, tangling himself in his cloak. 'You do it.'

'Not my horse.'

He finished with Bet, looked around and saw Mizzle sitting against the back wall. He turned to Skye with a fleeting black thought. Once done, he realised he had forgotten to bring any feed.

He looked through the sacks lying around the barn, taking a moment to nudge Faustus with his foot. 'Your horse, Faustus.'

His cousin ignored him. He might have been asleep. Trick found a handful or two of grain in one of the sacks and kicked Faustus hard. 'I'm tired too, cousin.'

'I'll do it next time, I promise,' murmured Faustus, fending his foot off with closed eyes. 'Please, Trick.'

Trick crossed his arms, sighed and frowned, and then unsaddled the damn horse. Mizzle watched him all the while as he rubbed him down, tethered all three horses, gave them hay and the bit of grain, and filled a bucket with snow to let it melt for their water.

'What?' he said finally, exhausted and out of sorts. He didn't wait for an answer, lying down against the back wall away from the other two and wrapping himself in his too-thin cloak.

He drifted off. When he next awoke, the world had lightened but it wasn't yet dawn. He lay still, hoping for more sleep. Without moving, he looked out of the corner of his eye to check on Mizzle.

DarkElves slept but rarely. She sat as she had when he had fallen asleep, leaning against the back wall. She was slowly braiding her hair as she looked out over the fields.

It caught him as he lay there half asleep looking at her on the edge of his vision. The fluid movement of hands on hair.

Bright red hair, and Linnet turning from the mirror, putting down the comb, smiling and saying...

He jerked awake on a sharp outrush of breath. Linnet saying, *why did you leave me alone, for them to find me?* That was all she ever said now. She had never been so close, there in the cold glooming of the predawn.

He could almost feel her pressing against his back, reaching for his sword with cold fingers. If he hadn't gone to sleep lying on the damn thing, he might have used it then.

Movement from the corner of his eye distracted him. Mizzle still braided her hair. He shut his eyes and opened them, all thought of Linnet gone now. Why was she braiding her hair? The DarkElf females only did that when they went to war.

Mizzle tied off the end of the braid with one long strand of her hair and lowered her hands into her lap. She had taken off her cloak and he saw she wore the red-edged black uniform of the DarkElves, with

daggers at her belt. He couldn't see clearly, but the hilts did not look to be twins as was usual. Across her back were paired curved blades.

She was waiting for something, staring outward like that, poised and still. Perhaps other DarkElves were meeting her here and his recruitment had been a ploy to get a raiding party past the human soldiers stationed north. He was hard-pressed to see how, exactly.

He turned his head to look out, hoping she would not catch his movement. Nothing stirred in the half-light, and then someone was walking across the fields. Mizzle had been waiting for it because she had heard it long before it was visible, DarkElf hearing being what it was. Trick felt no alarm. The DarkElf he had known on the pirate ship had taught him bits of the DarkElvish and Ancient languages, DarkElvish magic, and how to remember anything that was ever said to him. He had also told him the DarkElf females were the best warriors he could ever wish to avoid.

The figure reached them and Trick shut his eyes. It was as if his thoughts had unmasked a ghost. Fingers stood there looking in at them, greeting Mizzle in her own guttural language.

Surely not. Surely he was mistaking this new DarkElf male for the DarkElf he had been thinking of because they all looked similar, blackhaired, dark-eyed. Fingers was long dead, washed overboard off the Livanian coast fifteen and more years ago. Trick had grieved for him as much as a child could. But a quick peek confirmed his identification—the scar along the side of his elegant face, and the missing fingers, which had prompted the pirates to give him the only name Trick had ever known him by.

Mizzle returned Fingers's greeting without inflection. From what Trick knew of their language, she had given the ritualised greeting for strangers. These two were not known to each other, then.

They spoke in a flurry of language that Trick could not follow. As he watched them, he noticed that Mizzle was more relaxed with this other DarkElf than she had been with him and Faustus. At least, she spoke more and expression flickered across her normally blank face. He tried not to stare.

It sounded as if Fingers tried to persuade her of something. He spoke rapidly, hands and face eloquent. Mizzle frowned and said something very clearly, which Trick worked out the gist of. *I will think on this.* Another ritual phrase, he suspected. Then Fingers bowed deeply to her, she halfbowed back from her sitting position and he walked back into the day.

Trick guessed he must have shelter nearby—DarkElves could act in the sunlight but not easily.

‘You are awake.’

Caught out, he sat up. ‘What was that about?’

Mizzle looked at him. He looked back, fearless in the light of the new morning. He thought she would not answer him.

But she said, ‘His name is Jarrett. He left the DarkElves in disgrace and wished to aid my own exile.’

Trick made a note of her description of her situation. She had been exiled but with fingers intact? An exile not imposed by the DarkElves, then, not if Fingers—Jarrett—was anything to go by. Perhaps he was misled by her perfect pronunciation and her grasp of Burchian was not so good after all, for the word she surely meant was *desertion*. ‘Did you know him?’

Again she hesitated before answering. ‘He left before I was born. But exile is a rare thing and so I had heard of him.’

He had caught enough of the words of their conversation to know that she omitted important details. Something about *Hiroko*—that meant LightElves. And something about theft. Did that mean she planned to take some relic from the LightElves? But then why the strong hint that the DarkElves pursued them? His eavesdropping hadn’t given him much. But if Jarrett had left the DarkElves before Mizzle had been born, then she must be at most two hundred years old. Jarrett had told him he had been wandering for around that long in human lands. She, on the other hand, seemed not to have learnt that he knew passing DarkElvish and that he knew Jarrett. He counted himself lucky—perhaps even Lucky—as he pulled bread and cheese out of one of the sacks for breakfast. The sack also held carrot, onion, apples, dried meat, and a package of bacon. But when he pulled that out Mizzle shook her head at him.

‘No fire,’ she said. ‘No time.’

He packed the bacon away again without a word, taking comfort in his own restraint while his mouth watered, and handed her bread and cheese, a meagre breakfast. He woke Faustus and gave him his ration. *Not* the sort of breakfast a nobleman was used to and Faustus pulled a face.

Trick ignored him. As he ate, he took stock of himself. His head felt clear and his legs did not shake at the thought of leaving Mizzle. Her influence must have passed in the night. He had no wish to provoke her to reinforce it before an opportunity to escape came to him, so he meekly saddled Skye for her and offered her the reins.

Faustus struggled to get his own horse ready, while it swallowed air and blew out its stomach and shifted its weight and refused to take the bit.

Faustus had bought himself a handsome enough horse and never cared to know the damn thing was badly trained and difficult when others did the real work.

While they waited for Faustus, Mizzle led Skye out into the light, her hair braided for war. That was going to cause problems. Trick saddled Bet, watched Faustus over her back, and waited.

‘Cousin,’ said Faustus at last.

‘No, I don’t think so.’ Mizzle would come back in and order him to take care of the horse because she was in a hurry, but until then, let Faustus beg.

Faustus glared which just made Trick smirk at him. ‘I just think we should apply our own particular talents here.’

‘Meaning,’ said Trick. ‘I should do all the hard work and you should sit on your arse?’

‘Since I’m trained at swordplay and leadership and you’re trained at—what, theft and arson?’

‘Who had whose sword to whose throat last night?’ He relished the memory.

‘I was in no danger.’

Mizzle came back in and directed a silver-eyed look at Trick and he put the tackle on Faustus’s horse while the Ullwyn stood back and gave him back his own smirk. He considered leaving the girth strap loose but could feel Mizzle watching him, so he gave Coal a knee to the stomach and cinched the strap tight. He could play the subservience game.

‘Up, cousin,’ he said and swung onto Bet.

Trick had no time to wonder why the sunlight glittering off the snow was not blinding Mizzle with her DarkElvish eyes. Faustus rode up beside him to continue the argument.

‘You would never have hurt me. I’m family.’

Trick was stunned by the man’s confidence. ‘I’m the son of a pirate. I was born on a pirate ship off the coast of Livania.’

‘What does that mean? Your mother is still an Ullwyn. My mother’s cousin, married to my father’s uncle.’

Trick bit his tongue hard. Faustus’s tone said she was lucky to have made that match, after her disastrous union with Trick’s father and with her dark blue eyes, sure sign she was *not* a pure descendent of the Goddess.

Faustus had icy-blue eyes, the pale eyes of the Goddess. Trick imagined he was popular with the Ullwyn mothers looking for a match for their daughters. It made Trick like him even less.

Mizzle rode up on Trick's other side and gave them a flat and incurious look.

He could bite his tongue no longer. 'Are you trying to tell us to be quiet?' He put a hint of insolence in his voice. He didn't want to push it too far but he was tired and he didn't think he deserved to be looked at like that.

She didn't answer.

Trick shrugged and turned back to Faustus in time to catch him peeking at Mizzle with that stupid besotted expression on his face. He could not restrain himself. He turned on her.

'So you don't let us sleep properly, you don't let us eat properly, and now we're not allowed to talk to each other?'

He didn't know how he had ever thought her blank and expressionless. The traces of emotion across her face were fleeting and subtle but definitely there. She tensed and he saw fury in her eyes. He felt a mixture of terror and joy bundled in his stomach. And then she went truly blank. He had the eerie impression he was looking at an empty shell.

She blinked and came back, but the anger was gone. Mizzle had done something to herself to stop herself being angry at him—to stop herself killing him, since that was what anger *was* to a DarkElf.

He was perilously close to letting her know he was no longer under her influence, but then, she had to know how long her own spell lasted.

Unless it affected different victims for different lengths of times. He stored that thought away for later analysis.

They reached the road and turned south again. Faustus came up close beside Trick. 'How could you be so rude?' His voice was all fear and hostility. 'I know you spent your first few years on your precious pirate ship, but didn't Carmelia teach you some manners?'

Carmelia was his mother's Ullwyn name. His father had called her Emily. He gritted his teeth. 'Take a leaf out of Mizzle's book and stop talking to me.'

Considering he'd spent the first years of his life on a pirate ship in company with Livanian rogues and a DarkElf, it was a wonder he hadn't turned out worse than he had; he would have cut the Ullwyn's throat by now. And yet who could say that Faustus was truly as stupid as he acted when he was obviously drowning in enough Elvish glamour to wipe all thought from his brain.

‘Why would Lady Fortuna possibly want you?’ Faustus shook his head, scornful.

And Trick was silent. Again, it occurred to him that Fortune regretted Her choice of High Priest. Once Chosen, he could not be Unchosen except by a very final, very simple event—his death.

So be it. He spurred his horse forward, away from Faustus and away from the quiet gaze of the DarkElf. He resolutely turned his thoughts to escaping from her rather than from life. The forest would give him the opportunity he needed; until he reached it, flight was impossible. The fields were barren with winter and open for miles around.

The wind whistled around his ears and sneaked under his cloak. He pulled it closer. With any luck, the weather meant they wouldn’t meet anyone on the track today.

But he was right in thinking Fortune had turned Her fickle back on him. Before long, they had to go off the path to let a wide cart pass, the travellers swivelling in their seats to stare at Mizzle. At least they were going back towards Port Told and the news would spread where they had already been and not ahead of them. Still, he dreaded having to go through villages.

He made them go round the first one. Faustus spurred his horse forward. ‘Why are you wasting our time, cousin?’

‘Faustie, am I your guide or just your good luck charm? Try listening to me.’

Faustus snorted but he didn’t rein back. He looked over his shoulder at Mizzle riding behind them, then leant closer to Trick. He kept his voice low. ‘Be politer to me.’

Trick let himself smirk at his cousin. ‘Am I making you look bad, cousin?’

He had the pleasure of seeing the Ullwyn clench his jaw. ‘Just watch your mouth.’

‘It’s not my problem you’re a minor twig with grand ambitions. I bet you’ve never even been to court, have you, little lordling?’

The look on his cousin’s face told him he’d hit home. He added, ‘And DarkElves have *really good* hearing, Faustie.’

With that last needling, he put his heels to Bet to ride alone.

Some time after midday and a short break to eat and rest where none of them spoke to each other, they approached Dester, the last town before the forest. Trick’s inclination was to avoid it like they had the smaller hamlets, but they needed grain for the horses. The deciding factor

was Mizzle, so obviously DarkElf in her red-and-black. He himself felt itchily conspicuous in the Bouchian uniform.

‘I need to go in for horse feed and a change of clothes,’ he told them.

‘It’d be best if you go round the town and meet me on the other side.’

‘Best for you, you mean,’ said Faustus. ‘I’m not having you run out on us.’

Trick knew how to shut him up. ‘Then *you* go in and I’ll wait out here with Mizzle.’

He watched Faustus struggle with the idea of leaving another man alone with the DarkElf.

‘We will all go in.’ Mizzle rode forward.

‘Easy to be bold when you’re ignorant,’ Trick said. He still didn’t get a reaction from her.

He feared the town’s long memory. DarkElf males may have done the actual pillaging but females led the raiding parties. The black-and-red uniform, the hair braided for war, the sword hilts curving over her back and framing her chillingly beautiful face—many a grandmother in this town would know the terror of this sight riding in at twilight straight from the mouths of their own grandmothers. Dester was a rich town, a tempting and easy target at the southern-most stretch of the DarkElves’ range.

‘At least put your hood up, Mizzle.’

But as he said it, he knew that wouldn’t work either. What else could a hood in daylight be taken to be but a DarkElf on a scouting mission?

‘Mizzle,’ Trick said. ‘Mizzle, *please* wait outside the town.’

‘I have never raided here,’ she said.

Given her age, possibly what she meant to say was that no living human could remember first-hand a raiding party. She was stubborn and she was stupid and she rode into the town.

‘At least hide the swords, Elvish,’ he said. One last attempt as they came down to the main street.

He had meant arrange her cloak over the hilts so they didn’t draw the eye, but Mizzle glanced at him over her shoulder. She said, ‘*Kyugen*,’ and the swords shrank down to tiny glittering toys. She tucked them under her cloak. It was better than he expected, no matter this casual magic made him nervous.

Problems didn’t begin until Trick stopped them in front of the supply store, a large and well-maintained wooden building.

Not as many people were on the main street as he had feared. He threw himself off Bet and ran into the store. He had to push through a couple of men who had stopped dead on their way out.

Trick glanced back out the door. More people gathered, gawping at the DarkElf while she stared over their heads, unconcerned. The shock wouldn't last long. He was sweating and his hands trembled with the need for haste. He snatched a bag of grain out of one aisle, and went down the back of the store where clothes were kept. He grabbed plain brown leathers and a thick cloak for himself and, guessing at size, a grey tunic and loose trousers for Mizzle. He was on his way to the counter when a glint of light on glass caught his eye.

Livonian brandy. He turned as if dragged by a magnet and picked up the tiny bottle, tucking the clothes under one arm and dropping the grain.

The best liquor this side of *anywhere* and so very rare to find it in Bourchia. Fully half the cost came from the glass, because the stuff wouldn't keep in the leather skins usually used for wines. For a moment he could taste it but he placed it back on the shelf. He could not possibly afford it and the old man behind the counter was watching him too closely for his other option.

A loud bang from outside made him jump even though he had been expecting something like it since coming into the town. The old man ran outside. Trick grabbed up the bottle again, dropped it into to the sack of grain and ran out after him. He clutched the sack and the clothes to his chest but the old man, standing like stone just outside, never noticed him slip past.

Mizzle was still on Skye, and Faustus had ridden Coal between her and a mob of townspeople. The bang had been a stone hitting the wooden front of the store. Only thirty or so people had gathered so far but more streamed from the houses along the main street and came in from side streets. The word was flying around this town.

'Murderer,' shouted a woman, and more stones flew. Faustus flung a hand up to protect himself but Mizzle didn't flinch. None of the stones touched her.

Trick shoved through a cluster of men towards the horses and counted himself Lucky they hadn't worked out he was with the DarkElf yet. He tucked his prizes into one of the sacks of food hanging from Bet's saddle. It bulged conspicuously but he didn't think the old man would notice it.

He swung up and started to ride Bet forward. The horse was big and he doubted the crowd would stay in front of her. Still his shoulders were rigid, waiting for the blow, until they began to part.

As he went past Faustus, he saw his cousin was bleeding. One of the stones had struck above his eye. 'We're going through,' he told Faustus. He said it louder for the crowd. 'We're going through. We don't mean any harm here.'

Mizzle followed close behind, leaving Faustus to bring up the rear. Trick began to think they might escape with dignity and skins intact.

'How dare you?' he heard Faustus cry at the townspeople. 'I am an Ullwyn of the Port Told Ullwyns.'

Port Told. Never touched by DarkElf raids. Not sending soldiers to help, either, never mind that Bourchia had been under Livanian rule then and disallowed from muster. Ullwyns had had their own private army in flout of the law, and still did, and never gave it over to public-spirited enterprises. These people had long memories and DarkElves weren't the only ones they blamed.

A flurry of stones flew at Faustus, who threw up his arms to cover his face. His stallion, edgy at the best of times, reared and kicked out at the people crowding too close. They fell away from those dangerous hooves and Faustus half-fell from the saddle. Trick kicked Bet forward, forcing her to lead the other two horses in flight. Either Faustus would hold on to the saddle or he wouldn't.

He did. They came out of the town on the south side at a full gallop, Faustus hanging mostly off his horse. When they slowed, he slewed off, covered with horse sweat and hair.

'You tried to leave me there.' The Ullwyn stalked up to Trick's horse, his hands balled as if he thought he was going to pull him out of his saddle and hit him.

'To a mob you provoked,' said Trick. 'Yes, that's right. And I should have tried harder.'

Faustus launched himself at Trick. Trick landed a solid kick in the chest that knocked him right over. Faustus made a tempting target for trampling, lying on the ground, but Mizzle rode Trick off even as he thought it, pushing Skye up into Bet until the bigger horse gave way.

'And don't you start with me,' he said. He had the feeling she was about to give him a lecture about not deserting comrades and other ignoble things. And she had been their target and yet the stones had flown at the wall and at Faustus. He did not think that was accidental. 'As if a DarkElf could give lessons on morality.'

She looked at him obliquely. 'They have DarkElf blood and yet do not look Elvish,' she said. 'Why is that?'

Trick froze. It was a set-up question. He didn't bother lying because she already knew the answer. He spoke through gritted teeth. 'Any newborn which looked too much like its father was smothered.'

Mizzle smiled, a tiny, grim smile. 'Ah,' she said. 'Human morality. You have so much to teach us.'

He had nothing to say. He turned Bet and went on down the road.

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