

12
FOR
twelve

SHOTGUNS *vs* SORCERY #1

HARD TIMES
IN
DRAGON CITY



MATT FORBECK

**Hard Times
in
Dragon City**

Shotguns & Sorcery Novel #1

By Matt Forbeck

Also by Matt Forbeck

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Dedicated to my wife Ann and our kids Marty, Pat, Nick, Ken, and Helen.
They always get me through the hard times.

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12 for '12

This is the standard edition of a book first released as a reward for the backers of my second Kickstarter drive for [my 12 for '12 project](#), my mad plan to write a novel a month for the entirety of 2012. Together, over 330 people chipped in almost \$13,000 to successfully fund an entire trilogy of *Shotguns & Sorcery* novels.

Thanks to each and every one of you for daring me to take on this incredible challenge — and for coming along with me on the wild ride it promises to be. And thank you to all my readers, whether you're backers or not. Stories have no homes without heads to house them.



Chapter One

I'd never seen so much blood in my life, and I used to date a vampire. Well, maybe date's too strong a word, and I didn't know she was a vampire at the time. Right up until the end, that is.

I'd been in the Stronghold part of Dragon City before, far as it was from my usual haunts downslope. It wasn't that humans weren't allowed in the area, after all. More like we weren't appreciated.

Of course, the Gütmanns were different, at least Anders' branch of the family vein. He and I had been adventuring partners, once upon a time, and even after he got killed, his widow and offspring always treated me with the same kind of respect — affection, even — that Anders had shown me. I'd spent many evenings swilling mead with them, playing tile games, and chatting about the price of cut stone and how well the city's curtain wall was holding up.

Most of Anders' kids were older than me, of course, some by decades, even though they were still considered youths among dwarves. But they never let that come between us. Little Gerte would even crawl up on my lap after dinner sometimes and tell me about her day while her mother beamed over at us from the other side of the table.

Seeing them all murdered like that tore me up. I felt like someone had taken a knife and gutted me from my belt to my collar, but it was Heidi who'd suffered that fate.

When Yabair had come to rouse me from my bed, I'd known

something was wrong. As a captain in the Imperial Dragon's Guard, he didn't bother to pay me social calls. Most times when I ran into him it was trouble. If he sent someone around to my place over the Barrelrider in the Big Burrow part of town, something disastrous had happened.

He'd never come there on his own. An elf like him wouldn't be caught slumming around the lower parts of the city, not unless he was on official business. So when I heard someone pounding on my office's outer door so hard I came out to answer it in my skivvies, I had no idea it would be him waiting for me in the stairwell.

The look on his face told me almost everything I needed to know.

"Am I under arrest?" I said.

He didn't say a word, just shook his head from side to side.

"Can I get dressed?"

He frowned. "I don't suppose time is of any material essence in this matter."

I took that to mean that whatever had happened was already over with, but I still threw on a fresh shirt, pants, jacket, and hat as fast as I could. I skipped shaving and tapped a coffee cup with the tip of my wand to conjure up a hot slug of joe to sip on the way. I figured I'd need it.

Outside, Yabair had escorted me into one of those flying chariots the Guard favored — garish things painted in their traditional scarlet and gold, with the Imperial Dragon's seal emblazoned on the front. In the past, I'd only ever gotten to ride in one while I was in handcuffs. I'd like to say it was a treat to be able to ride up front and without any manacles keeping me rooted to one of the seats in the back, but the guard's manner had me spooked.

No matter what Yabair had in mind for me, the rest of Dragon City seemed to be going about its business without a hiccup. From high in the chariot, I could see the entirety of the city splayed across the mountain's southern face, all the way from the golden Dragon's Spire at the top, down through the Elven Reaches that encircled it and straight through the progressively grimier parts of town to the Great Circle, the thick wall of stones and enchantments that kept out

the undead horror that lurked in the wild lands beyond.

Even at this early hour — just after the lightkeepers had gone through the streets and capped the glowglobes that kept us company through the night — at this height, with the chill wind whipping past my face, the city was filled with familiar sounds and smells. Merchants called from their stalls, hawking their wares: food, services, spells. People shuffled through the cobblestone streets on their way to work, to school, or to their next drink. Fires blazed under meager meals and incinerated trash, their tendrils of smoke blending together into a melange of scents that wafted high into the air to join up high above us all with the never-ending column that streamed from the Imperial Dragon's lair.

I'd been born here, lived here, and with luck I'd die here, of old age in a warm bed. Nothing in my past choices of careers pointed toward that kind of end, I'm sad to report, but a man could still hope, even here in Dragon City. They hadn't figured out a way to take that away from me. Not yet.

Yabair didn't say a word all the way over to the Stronghold's Gate, a towering arch carved out of the side of the mountain and banded with gleaming strips of hammered steel. Even when we set down in the open lot across Siegebriker Square, he didn't do more than gesture for me to get out and follow him. The dwarves officially acknowledge the Dragon's authority, but they don't allow flyers in their halls, so we had to leg it from that point.

I knew the way to the Gütmanns by heart, of course, and every step that took us closer to their home filled me with just a little more dread. By the time we reached the door to their home, I'd been topped off. Walking into their entrance hall and seeing the bodies there made it overflow.

I had to sit down on the cut-stone floor, or my legs would have given out for sure. I couldn't find a spot clear of blood, though, so I went back out into the wide hallway that led up to their home and slid to ground there instead. Yabair, to his credit, gave me a few minutes to compose myself before he came to retrieve me again.

That was more consideration than the elf had shown me in all the

years I'd known him, and that scared me as much as anything. Every moment I sat there, I imagined worse and worse horrors awaited me within. By the time Yabair tapped me on the shoulder, I almost jumped out of my skin.

"Will you be all right?" he said. He didn't show any concern for me in his voice, just a worry that I might foul up his crime scene. That gave me enough courage that I could help myself to my feet.

"Did anyone survive?" I asked.

"I had hoped you could tell us."

Chapter Two

"How many?" I said. "Bodies, I mean."

"Five, we think. We're still investigating."

That coffee did a backflip in my belly. I felt grateful I'd not taken the time to grab something to eat.

The elf shrugged as he sized up my condition. "We don't know exactly who was here at the time. It's possible someone was out for the evening. Or that they had visitors."

"Besides whoever it was that killed them, you mean?"

Yabair gestured at the open door. I took his hint and preceded him back into the Gütmanns' home. This time I was braced for the sights and the stench waiting for me, and it was still horrible. I shoved my feelings aside and tried to look at the place like it was any other crime scene. I'd seen enough of them in my life that I wouldn't argue with someone who might call me jaded, but I found it impossible to see people I loved cut open like that and not react.

There were two bodies in the foyer, both dwarves. Whoever had killed them had meant it. He'd used a blade of some sort to slash open their throats. They must have bled out in seconds.

"Do you know them?" Yabair said.

"This is Carsten." I pointed at the pale corpse closest to the door. "And that's Guenter. They're brothers. The two oldest kids."

He grunted at that. These two were kids only in the sense that they were Anders and Heidi's offspring. Carsten was the younger of

the two, and he'd been a hundred and forty-two on his last birthday. Like most dwarves, he still lived with his parents and would until he finally settled down and found himself a wife, something neither he nor Guenter had been in much of a rush to do. Not that they didn't like dwarf women, but they had a good setup here and were loathe to leave it.

Now they'd never get the chance.

"What happened to their beards?" I pointed at both dwarves' chins. They had beards, long ones normally, but they'd been hacked off just below the chin, right at the point where the cuts appeared in their throats.

"The murder weapon appears to have been sharp enough to slice through their elaborate facial hair as well as their jugulars," Yabair said.

"I get that." I suppressed a shiver. Anything that was sharp enough to remove a dwarf's thick beard with a single slash would put my own razor to shame. "But where are the beards? Did you remove them?"

While the marble floor was sticky with blood, I didn't see any sign of the beards.

"The running theory is that they were taken as trophies," Aleks Drupov said as he sauntered into the room.

The gnome wore a leather apron, a pair of white rubber gloves, and a set of magnifying goggles that pushed back the wintry shock of hair that topped his high, narrow forehead. I'd met him before, usually when I was trying to ply him with drinks to wheedle information about one case or another out of him. I rarely saw him when he was actually on the job.

I acknowledged him with a grim nod. "It makes an odd kind of sense. These two put a lot of pride in their beards."

"Most dwarves do."

I glanced at Yabair. "Where are the others?"

"One in the kitchen. One in the master bedroom. The little one's in her room too."

Gerte. My heart ached.

I followed Aleks through the dining room — which seemed as pristine as ever, other than the bloody footprints on the floor — and through a swinging door into the kitchen beyond. There someone had made use of the butcher's block in the middle of the room, the one around which I'd had more late-night drinks than I could count. Four half-finished pints of stout stood at the table's cardinal points, one of which had been spilled. The rest of it was covered with blood and Dörthe's head.

Someone had sliced right through her neck with a clean cut. The body had fallen to the floor, but the head remained on the table, her eyes still open and staring out at the opposite wall in shock.

"Her braid's missing too." Aleks pointed at the back of Dörthe's head, and I saw where her golden hair had been shorn away.

I had to close my eyes for a moment and pinch the bridge of my nose. I couldn't bear to see any more. I turned and walked back out into the dining room, then pulled out a chair and sat down.

"You're disturbing a crime scene," Yabair said.

"He's fine," Aleks said in a tone far more comforting than the one his elf boss employed. "I've gotten everything I can out of here."

"That was Dörthe, the eldest daughter," I said. "She's not always here. She got married last year to a guy named Johan Steinmetz. Runs a quarrying business deeper in the mountain."

"She must have been visiting with her family," Aleks said. "Having a late-night drink."

I nodded and stood up, bracing myself for the rest of this grisly tour. Aleks put up a hand. "You don't have to do this."

"Yes," Yabair said. "He does. I need a positive identification for each and every corpse in this abattoir."

Aleks glared up at the much-taller elf. "He can do it later, in the morgue."

I shook my head. "Better to do it here, right? I might miss something otherwise."

I didn't say it, of course — not to those two, there and then — but I'd already decided that I was going to track down who did this and grind his bones into a bloody paste. If that meant having to steel

myself to see every bit of the crimes the bastard had committed, then that's what I was going to do. I promised myself that I'd take all the hurt that made me feel and use it to drive me toward finding justice for my friends.

Chapter Three

Aleks led me and Yabair into the master bedroom. We found Heidi there, sprawled on the stone floor at an unnatural angle, a rune-crusted revolver near her open hand. The killer's blade had sliced straight through her flannel nightgown, cutting her open from her belly to her chin.

"What kind of psychotic bastard uses a blade?" I said as I knelt down next to my dead pal's dead wife.

"It's quiet," Aleks said. "Imagine if you get caught killing someone this deep into the Stronghold. It's a long way out."

"The neighbors didn't hear a thing." Yabair sniffed. "Not surprising with all this stone surrounding them, I suppose."

"That mean she didn't get off a shot?" I said.

Aleks shook his head as he pulled out a wand, slid it through the pistol's trigger guard, and lifted the weapon into the air to examine it. "Gun still has all six bullets in it. Enchanted ones too. She'd have made a mess of the killer if she'd pulled that trigger."

"Fast bastard."

I stood up and looked back toward the main part of the home. "So, the grown-ups are having drinks in the kitchen when the killer arrives. Maybe he knocks on the door.

"It's late, so Carsten and Guenter are suspicious. They go to answer the door, and the killer takes them out. He stride through the dining room and finds Dörthe there. He kills her and goes hunting

for the rest.”

Yabair nodded. “Mrs. Gütman here must have been as suspicious as her boys. She went to the bedroom to get her gun at the same time they went to the door. That’s why she wasn’t in the kitchen when the killer arrived there. Fast as he was, he never would have let her leave the room.”

That sounded about right. “He killed her in more of a hurry.” I pointed to Heidi’s head. Her braid was missing too, but her head was still attached. “He sliced her open before he took his trophy.”

“Then he went looking for the little one.” Aleks frowned hard enough to burnish lines in his face. He turned and beckoned for me to follow.

He led me into Gerte’s room. It was smaller than her mother’s but painted with vivid, happy colors and lit with glowglobes bright enough to make it seem like daylight inside despite the place’s lack of windows. “Those were capped when I came in,” Aleks said, “except for one nightglobe in the corner.”

Gerte lay there on the bed, her hair still long and free, just as she’d liked it. She hadn’t been in a rush to get her tresses braided quiet yet — that was for older girls — and her mother had indulged her in that. I suspect Anders would have approved.

She looked like she’d started to get up to see who had barged into her room. She’d been a hard sleeper, and I would have taken even odds on whether or not she would have awakened if her mother had managed to fire her gun. Either way, she didn’t make it far.

There was a hole in her chest, right above her heart. Some blood had welled up from it, but most of it had drained out through the exit wound in her back. Her white sheets were soaked a bright crimson.

I knelt down next to her bed. Her bright green eyes were still open, her mouth formed into a circle of shock. I reached out a hand and closed her eyes, then placed a gentle kiss on her cold forehead.

Yabair started to protest — something about this still being a crime scene, I’m sure — but Aleks stopped him with a hand on the elf’s forearm. That was one wise gnome. The way I felt at that moment,

he might have saved the guard captain's life.

The pair of them walked out of the room and gave me a moment to grieve. When I emerged, I found them back in the dining room, standing near the table.

My dismay had thickened my throat and reddened my eyes, but I put all that behind me. There would be time for funerals and proper good-byes later. Right now, I had a job to do, and I meant to take care of it fast.

Still, I had to clear my throat three times before I could speak. "Who do you like for this?" I said.

"Did they have any enemies?" Yabair said. "Neighbors with a grudge? Rivals for affection? Had they come into some money recently?"

I shook my head at each of the questions. "You have guards questioning the neighbors?"

"Up and down the hall, and in the levels directly above and below us too. They haven't come up with anything yet, but they'll keep at it."

"They won't find anything," I said. "This wasn't a crime of passion."

The elf arched an eyebrow at me. "Did you get a good look at those bodies? To come in here and slaughter five people in the dark of night like that, to spill so much blood, you don't think that requires passion?"

"This is the work of a professional," I said. "Someone who knows how to handle a blade. Those were all clean cuts, one for each kill. Whoever did this didn't hack away at —" I wanted to say, "the Gütmanns," but found I couldn't.

I tried again. "He didn't hack away at them like a butcher. He disassembled them like a surgeon. Quick, clean cuts that did exactly what he wanted them to. Not a single slash wasted."

I hated to admit it, but the killer impressed me. Whoever he was and for whatever reason he'd committed this horrible act, he was frighteningly good at it.

"Perhaps you can ask our suspect, then, where he received such

training," Yabair said.

I stood up and narrowed my eyes at the elf. "You've already arrested someone for this?"

Standing behind Yabair, Aleks rolled his eyes. He knew they had the wrong man, not that it would do the poor slob any good. Yabair didn't seem so sure himself, but he still gave me a solemn nod.

"It's Dörthe's husband, Johan Steinmetz."

Chapter Four

“Are you going to beat me too?” Johan said as I entered the interrogation room in the Stronghold’s precinct house with Yabair. He didn’t look at me at first, probably figuring I was just the latest in a long line of inquisitors there to rough him up until he confessed to murdering his young wife and her entire family. No matter how many times he’d tried to explain he was innocent, no one had listened to him, I’m sure. What was the point in paying attention to them any longer?

It gave me a chance to size him up. I’d met him several times before, gotten drunk with him once or twice. I’d even come to his wedding, although I’d sat on the bride’s side of the judging aisles.

He sat there under the harsh light of a single bright glowglobe, in his rolled-up shirtsleeves, strapped into a chair with magical shackles that glowed an angry red any time he squirmed against them. Judging from how raw his exposed wrists were, he’d been at that a lot, although perhaps when he’d been under duress by other means.

His beard had been unbraided and hung in damp, sweat-soaked shanks from his chin. He wore his hair close cropped, in the modern style, but it looked a lot grayer since the last time I’d seen him. He smelled of piss and fear.

“Having a rough day?” I said.

Johan’s head had been lolling back on his neck, but now it

snapped straight up. He stared at me with wide unfocused eyes set in deep, dark circles, one of which had been blackened good. It took him a moment to recognize me in this context. He'd been cringing at the thought of another questioner come to torture him, after all.

When he finally knew me, hope flickered in those dark eyes of his. "Max?" he said through a pair of busted, swollen lips. "That you?"

Yabair shoved a chair toward me. I twirled it around and sat on it backward, resting my elbows on the top of its back.

"What happened?" I said.

Johan shook his head. "I don't know. One minute, I was getting ready to head down to the quarry, and the next thing I know the Guard's breaking down my door. They didn't ask me any questions or tell me anything, just beat the tar out of me and hauled me in."

"They hurt you?" I shot Yabair an accusing look.

"He received those injuries while resisting arrest," the elf said, as if that was good enough.

"I wasn't resisting," Johan said, pleading for us to believe him. "I didn't know who they were. I thought they were going to kill me."

"He keeps his wand close at hand for an honest man," Yabair said. "He sent one of the guards to the hospital."

"Cutting rock's a dangerous business," Johan said. "The Brichts got a lot of enemies. You never know what's going to happen."

The Brichts were one of the most powerful dwarf families in the city. They had their pokers in every forge in the Stronghold, but they'd made their first fortune by establishing a monopoly over the city's supply of cut stone. It turned out to be a sharp investment. Rock was too heavy to transport into the city by air — at least not in the large amounts builders demanded — and the undead hordes outside made transporting such goods by land impossible. Plus, the walls required to keep those hungry dead out of the city meant a solid demand for Bricht stone.

Johan had started with them as a miner and had worked his way up the ladder. Not so long ago, he'd been promoted to the executive level, which meant wearing a suit and tie instead of overalls and a hardhat. He'd asked Dörthe to marry him soon after that.

I didn't like the Brichts much. They had too much power in too few hands, and one of them — Henrik Bricht — was a murderous jackass who'd once set up a friend of mine to take the fall for his crimes. Still, I didn't see how he or his family played into the slaughter of the Gütmanns.

"They tell you what happened?" I said.

The defensive shield Johan had thrown up at the mention of his arrest crumbled to dust. Tears welled up in his eyes. "They killed her," he said. "They killed my sweet Dotty, her and her entire family."

"They' who?" Yabair leaned forward, looming over my shoulder and glaring down at the dwarf.

"The murderers!" Johan said. "Whoever they are!"

"And you have no idea who that might be?"

The shield went right back up again, accompanied by a righteous fury. "Do I look like the kind of guy who would do something like that? I love Dotty. I loved them all!" He turned to me with desperate eyes. "Tell him, Max!"

"I never doubted it," I said. "Not for a moment."

"Perhaps you loved her too much," Yabair said. "She was at her mother's place rather than yours. Did she leave you?"

"I was working late. She went over to wish Gerte an early happy birthday."

My heart ached so hard it wanted to stop. The girl would have been ten years old this week. Had Gütmann really been gone that long?

"Were you jealous of her relationship with her family?" Yabair said.

"No!" he said, and I had to believe him. Much as Dörthe loved her brothers, for instance, she thought they were idiots for staying at home as long as they had. She'd wanted to get out and start her own home in the worst way, and I don't think I'd ever seen her happier than when she walked down the aisle next to Johan.

"I've gone over this with you already!" Johan said. "I don't know what else to tell you. What more do you want from me?"

“The truth,” Yabair said, “and you’re going to rot in here until we get it.”

I got to my feet then and made to leave the room.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Yabair laced his voice with the menace I was accustomed to hearing from him.

“He didn’t do this,” I said. “I’m going to go find the people who did.”

Chapter Five

"You seem very sure of your friend's innocence," Yabair said once we were standing outside the precinct house again. All sorts of people — mostly dwarves — rushed in and out of the place, past its reinforced doors. None of them gave us a second glance. They all had their own reasons for being there, and none of them involved us.

Sure, the slaughter of a family of five in the heart of the Stronghold was big news, but Dragon City was a big place. It had other troubles. I chose this one as mine.

"I wouldn't call him my friend," I said as I kicked my hat back on my head. "But he didn't have anything to do with this. You're wasting your time."

"Of course he didn't kill those people himself," Yabair said. "He doesn't have the skills much less the spine. But that doesn't mean he's innocent."

I fed him the prompt he was looking for, even though I suspected I'd regret it. Paranoid stretches of logic have never been my favorite. "How's that?"

"He could have hired someone to do the job for him."

I scowled and started heading for the Stronghold's Gate. That surprised Yabair, something I always relished on the rare times I managed to pull it off, but he caught up with me a moment later.

"He's a junior executive at the city's largest quarry," I said. "He

couldn't afford to hire that kind of muscle."

"Maybe he's using company money to do it. It wouldn't be the first time someone embezzled from the Brichts."

"He married Dörthe after he got the promotion. What's his motive for offing her, much less everyone else in the family?"

Yabair gave me a condescending snort through his long, thin nose. "You've never heard of a dwarf changing his mind? Maybe he wanted a divorce and she wouldn't give it to him."

"I saw them last week. They were happy."

"Even if they seemed that way, who knows what happens between a husband and wife in their home, behind closed doors?"

I gave him a wary eyeball. "You got something about your own marriage you want to get off your skinny chest?"

He ignored me. "Maybe he didn't do it. Maybe he didn't hire anyone. Maybe he has an enemy who was trying to send him a message."

I grunted. "Maybe he caught Henrik Bricht redhanded with his fist buried in an elf's chest, and the bastard killed his family to make sure that he wouldn't say a word about it."

A sly smile spread on Yabair's lips. "I like that one. See? It's easy when you put your mind to it."

I fought the impulse to smack the smile from his face. "You sound an awful lot like you're just trying to justify your lazy work by keeping Johan locked up rather than going out and finding the real killer."

That stopped Yabair in his tracks. I continued on, then turned around and threw out my arms at him when I realized he wasn't going to try to catch up. "What?"

"I've been a part of the Guard since long before your grandfather was born, Gibson. I knew the original hero Gib, from whom your family takes its name."

I'd heard this story before, many times. "And?"

"And I cannot tell you how many people I've arrested over the years whom have sworn their innocence and urged us to let them go so they can be free to pursue 'the real killer.'"

"You have truthsayers. Haul one of them out of that dusty tower you keep them in and get them to clear Johan. Then you can knock it off with your conspiracy theories and get down to figuring out what really happened at the Gütmanns' place."

He flushed at that. "We have one on the way. Even if he doesn't find anything wrong with the dwarf's story, though, that doesn't mean Johan is innocent."

I shrugged. "Which one of us has never done anything wrong? You keep poking at him long enough, and you'll find something to put him away for, I'm sure. That won't get you any closer to finding justice for those slaughtered dwarves."

"The wheels of justice may turn slowly," he said with a haughty stare. "But they do grind on. Short-timers like you lack the proper perspective to see that."

"Forgive my lack of patience." I didn't bother to hide my sarcasm. "I don't have as much time as you to sit around and spit out useless bits of philosophy. I have a killer to catch."

Yabair strode toward me. I stood my ground.

"If Steinmetz had nothing to do with this, then he will be exonerated in good time," he said. "All you're going to do is stir things up and get more people hurt."

I cocked my head at him. I knew he hated that. "Or, if I move faster than the glaciers coming down from the north, I might not only beat out the coming of the next age of ice but also stop a killer before he slaughters another group of innocents."

"You don't have any authority in this matter." He sneered at me. "Leave this to the professionals."

"Let me know when you find some," I said. "I'd like to speak with them about this."

I turned to leave and made to give him a light smack on the chest with the back of my hand as I went. I knew it was a mistake as soon as I did it.

He reached out and caught me by the wrist, then twisted it hard, driving me to my knees. I could have kept standing, sure, but only if I didn't mind having my arm broken. I refused to cry out in pain

though. I wasn't about to give him the satisfaction.

The people passing by stopped to stare at us for an instant, but when they noticed Yabair's scarlet uniform and the vicious look on his face, they found something else to worry about, fast. He leaned over me and spoke to me a calm voice.

"I brought you in on this because I respected Gib and because I know that — despite your many faults — you're a good man and you knew the victims. You cared about them.

"I hope you can figure out a way to help me solve this case. I truly do. Innocent people were slaughtered on my watch, and I cannot tolerate that."

He shifted to a whisper he hissed at my ear. "But if you fail to treat me or my uniform with respect again — especially out here, in public — you can look forward to sampling much of the treatment Mr. Steinmetz received today."

I nodded my understanding at him, and he let me go. I stood up, rubbing the pain out of my arm, and he brushed off his uniform, which looked just as trim and spotless as it had before.

Given the day I'd had so far, I wanted nothing more than to draw my wand and feed it to him, but that wouldn't get me what I wanted. What's more, he was right. I'd let my frustrations push me into doing something harmless but stupid. I felt my face flush, not in anger but embarrassment.

"All right," I said with a grimace. "You do it your way, and I'll do it mine."

"That's what I wanted to hear." He didn't smile at this at all, but his frown disappeared. "Where do you plan to start?"

I grimaced at that. "I wish I knew."

Chapter Six

I hoofed it back to my place, which took me longer than I cared to admit. I didn't think I had much waiting for me there other than a shower and a bit to eat, though, and I needed the time to think. While Yabair's willingness to throw people in jail until something cracked annoyed me, it had one big advantage over my plan in that he at least had one.

I had no idea where to start. I only knew that Yabair was looking in the wrong place. I knew Johan too well to think he would ever do something like that to Dörthe and her family.

But who would have done such a thing? I didn't recall the Gütmanns talking about any enemies. They didn't seem to have any money problems either. If they'd taken it easy, Gütmann's share of the haul from our last big adventure should have set the family up for life.

I remembered then, though, that Heidi had complained a bit about the cost of the Dörthe getting married. In the dwarf culture, the bride's parents not only paid for the ceremony and the celebration but also to put the bride and groom up in a new place and give them a good start on life. I knew from having been to the wedding that Heidi had dropped a tremendous amount of gold on that special day for her little girl. Maybe that had put a dent in their savings.

I'd been to Johan and Dörthe's home too, a trendy apartment in the upper reaches of the Stronghold, complete with a stone balcony

carved out of the mountainside. I'd figured that Johan had kicked in for part of the place with the funds from his new promotion. I'd also guessed that his connections with the Bricht family had given him a leg up in the negotiations with the place's old owners. Smart people didn't often drive hard bargains with the Brichts.

Still, that didn't seem like a reason for someone to burst into the Gütman home and slaughter them all. If they'd gotten in some kind of money trouble, I'd like to think that Heidi would have known she could have turned to me. I'm not spectacularly wealthy myself, but I made enough during my adventuring days to retire from that deadly occupation before the risks caught up with me, which I counted as a win.

Due to helping out my landlord with a tight spot involving his daughter Moira — another of my adventuring friends — I owned my place free and clear. My only expenses were food and drink, and Thumper, the bartender down at the Quill, always let my tab ride for as long as I liked. I didn't live like a king, but I had enough to get by, and a bit more stashed away for stormy days.

Would Heidi have been too proud to turn to me for help? Might she have taken out a loan from someone else, someone who wanted to make an example of her and her family when they couldn't work out a way to collect? Possibly, but unlikely.

Maybe one of Heidi's sons had brought the troubles to their door. Neither Carsten nor Guenter were particularly fond of work, preferring to rely on Heidi for three hot squares and a clean bed instead. If one of them had gotten too ambitious, he might have made a foe of the wrong person.

I couldn't imagine the same would be true of Dörthe. She was as hard-headed and sensible as her father, who was as true and faithful a friend as I'd ever had. Still, love could make people do strange things, as I could testify myself.

By the same token, while I was sure that Johan wasn't behind the murder of his wife and in-laws, that didn't mean he might not be culpable. There were sure to have been others who wanted that prized promotion of his, and they might have been willing to mount

an attack on him to eliminate him from their career path. Perhaps Johan had been meant to be the main victim and had only been saved from that fate by dedication to his career.

Or it could have been someone who had a beef with the Brichts. As powerful as they were, they had made more foes than just about any family in the entire city. Hell, I didn't like them much myself. That didn't mean I'd hire someone to slaughter the family of one of their junior executives, but other people maybe had lower standards for such things.

I considered passing right by my place and heading straight for the Quill for a bite and a beer, but I felt like I had the stench of death about me so I decided to get cleaned up first instead. My place isn't much, mind you, but it suits me fine.

When I came back into town after my last sojourn into the ancient ruins in the wild lands beyond Dragon City's walls, my compatriots and I had celebrated at the Barrelrider, a halfling restaurant owned by Moira's father, Nit Erdini. I'd had a bit too much to drink to want to stagger anywhere else, so they'd put me in the empty apartment above the place. When I woke up the next morning, I decided I liked it so much I would stay, and I'd been there ever since.

It had two main rooms plus, like most halfling joints, lots of pantries, which I turned into closets. I'm not much of a cook, so the lack of a kitchen in the place didn't bother me. I just ate my meals downstairs or at the Quill instead. I turned the front room — which had been a parlor with a large circular window overlooking the street — into an office of sorts, and I flopped in the back room, which had the advantage of being a bit more private.

As I walked up to the Barrelrider, I noticed that someone had shut the window over my desk, which pivoted on a point near the center of the circle. I was sure that I had slept with it open, and as fuzzy-headed as I might have been from the rude awakening Yabair had delivered to me, I was pretty sure I hadn't shut it on my way out the door. That meant someone had been in my place since I'd left it — and maybe still was.

I sauntered up to the nondescript door to the right of the

Barrelrider's entrance like I hadn't noticed a thing. Once inside the short entrance hallway that preceded the stairs that ran up to my place, I drew my wand from its shoulder holster and got it ready. I prepared a nasty little spell that was sure to give anyone in my place a good shock, and I left the last syllable for it sitting there on the tip of my tongue.

Then I crept up the stairs with as much care as I could muster, trying to avoid the creakiest of the stairs, which Nit routinely forgot to fix. The door at the landing was closed. The words on the frosted glass set into the top half of it read:

MAX GIBSON

FREELANCE

I never specified what I freelanced at. I figured that gave me the kind of flexibility I sometimes required.

I stood there and considered my entry options. Should I just walk in like nothing was wrong? Should I kick down the door? Should I blast out the glass?

Then someone inside called out to me in a voice I hadn't heard in a decade and would have been content to never hear again. "Come on in, Max," she said. "I can hear you breathing out there."

Chapter Seven

Bellezza Sanguigno had always had my number from the first moment I laid eyes on her. To this day, I don't think I've ever seen anyone more heartbreakingly beautiful, nor more willing to use that well-known asset to get whatever she wanted. She had smacked me around with it like I was a rented mule, and it had always — well, almost always — brought me back into line with her desires.

You can only deal with someone like that for so long before you begin to despise yourself for giving in to her, though, and I'd reached my breaking point with her in a spectacular way. I'd avoided her like a plague-ridden rat from that point on, and up until that moment I'd done an impeccable job of it. Then she had to go and ruin it for me.

I didn't want to open the door. I knew she was behind it. I'd heard her call my name, and take it from me, the sound of that particular song was something I would never forget.

On the other hand, there was nothing I wanted more than to see her again. I felt like a dragon essence junkie who'd just stumbled upon a chest full of the stuff. The temptation to indulge in it was so strong, no matter how bad — even lethal — I knew it might be for me.

In the end, I turned around and left. I just didn't want to deal with her, and not being in the same room with her had worked just fine for me for the past decade. I didn't see a reason to fool with my

winning plan.

I didn't get halfway down the stairs before she swung open my door and shouted down at me. "Max Gibson!" she said. "Are you such a coward that you still can't bear to face me?"

I opened my mouth to respond, but not a word came out. Nothing I could think of to say would make it better or get me what I wanted, which was her out of my place. I blushed, this time in complete embarrassment, and turned around to face her.

"Hi, Belle," I managed to say.

She looked just as breathtaking as I remembered her. She hadn't aged a day since the last time I'd seen her, although I'm sure she couldn't have said the same about me. She was tall for an elf, with long, blonde hair, pouty red lips, and eyes the color of the distant sea when seen from the Dragon's Spire. They sparkled in the same way as those waters on a sunny day.

She scowled down at me, marring her perfect features and wrinkling her porcelain-smooth skin. She arched a questioning eyebrow at me, and there was nothing I wanted more at that moment than to make up for whatever wrong I'd done her. I started back up the stairs, fighting the urge to sweep her up in my arms with every step.

Then, as I drew closer, I saw that old defensive look in her eyes, and I remembered how cold and calculating she could be. Because of her rare beauty, she attracted all sorts of people. She'd learned from a young age — long before my grandparents were born — not to trust the motives of anyone around her, which I could understand. My motives didn't feel all that pure at the moment either.

But that look reminded me of how she'd persuaded me to leave Gütman behind as I dragged her to safety, and I didn't feel a damn thing for her any more — just disgust for myself.

"What are you doing here, Belle?" I pushed past her and strolled into my office.

She followed me into the room and shut the door behind her. I considered asking her to leave it open, but I didn't want to give her

the satisfaction of making a request she was bound to ignore. She smirked at me.

"Is it forbidden to pay a social call to an old friend?" She strove to come off as innocent as a straying schoolgirl, but I'd long ago grown immune to that angle.

"It's unexpected," I said. "It's been ten years."

She dismissed that with a wave of her hand. To an elf like her, a decade was beneath her notice, or so she seemed to claim. "You never call upon me."

"You knew where I was." I glanced around to see if she'd done anything to my office other than close the window. I sat down in my chair and waved at her to take a set on the couch next to the door. I could smell her perfume clinging to the leather.

"Isn't a gentleman supposed to call on a lady?"

I snorted at that. "There's nothing gentle about me, Belle. As for you..."

I let that hang in the air as a test. If she took up the implied insult, she might have a genuine reason for being here. If she ignored it, she wanted something bad enough that she was willing to ignore such unspoken slights.

"I'm sorry about that," she said. "I should have come earlier. I got caught up in family matters instead."

With elves, family matters could mean anything. She might have had a spat with her elder sister Fiera again. Her father might have decided the time had come for her to marry. Her mother might have expressed some disapproval over something she'd done — like take up with me.

It always made my head hurt to try to make sense of Bellezza's family tree. When you had people in it living for centuries, such things tended to cross over and back and intertwine so much you couldn't tell where the branches ended and the roots began. I'd long since given up trying.

She gave explaining herself to me another shot. "I lost track of time."

"For a decade?"

She gave me the cutest damn shrug that made her barely modest dress — which had been dyed to match her magnificent eyes — do things that threatened to imperil my resolve against her. In any case, she made her meaning clear. Time meant a lot more to me than it did to her.

Of course, that's because I could bet on having a lot less of it to spend. The life expectancy of a human living in Dragon City was measured in decades, while elves could hope to trod this battered earth for centuries. It was rare to find one of us make it to eighty years old, much less celebrate a centennial, but elves, they were never-changing immortals immune to the ravages of time, at least as far as short-timers like me were concerned.

Dwarves came next on that longevity list, then gnomes, and together the members of those three races made up the most powerful dynasties in the entire city, surpassed only by the Dragon Emperor himself. The rest of us — the humans, the halflings, the goblins, the orcs, and whoever else — we were like fireflies flashing in the night to them. There for a season of our lives, sparkling bright and pretty, full of life for those who took the time to see us, and then gone before we could really be known at all.

"What do you want, Belle?"

"To see you," she said with a hesitant smile. "Isn't that enough?"

I leaned forward in my chair and rested my forearms on my desk. "It would be if it was true."

"You would doubt my word?" She fanned herself in mock offense.

"Every letter of it."

She gazed at me with those wide blue eyes of hers, long enough that I wondered if she was trying to get me to fall into them and drown. I considered giving into it. Just before I made that impossible leap, she made up her mind, nodded at me, and spoke.

"I'm here to talk with you about a mutual friend, to whom I'm afraid something terrible may have happened," she said.

"Heidi Gütman?" I knew that her being here when I got back from the Stronghold had been too much of a coincidence.

"No." She gave me an odd look. "Moirra Erdini."

Chapter Eight

“What happened to Heidi Gütman?” Belle asked, concern puckering her flawless brow.

“What happened to Moira?” I didn’t much want to talk about what had happened to the Gütmanns. I couldn’t get the images of their corpses out of my mind.

“I sent her on an errand for me,” she said. “Last night. To the Gütmanns.”

My heart sank. I’d known Moira for years, and she was always getting into one kind of trouble or another. Her parents loved her, but they’d spoiled her rotten by making her think the world owed her everything it had. If it wasn’t given to her, she didn’t see anything wrong with just going out and taking it.

She was good at taking things, though, and that made her handy to have along on the sort of tomb-plundering expeditions I’d been part of during my younger days. All those zombies scratching at the Great Circle had been buried at one time, after all, and they’d left behind a lot of worldly goods they no longer had any use for. It seemed only fair that if they were going to make our lives miserable we take something of theirs to make up for it.

Or so the argument went. I was never all that comfortable with it, but it beat working for a living.

Moira never had any recriminations about that sort of thing. After Gütman had died and the rest of us had retired, she still tried to

convince us all to get back together to go after one last big score. She had a kind of fearlessness about her that the rest of us had seen beaten out of us, and I had to admire her tenacity if nothing else.

But if Moira had been at the Gütmanns' home last night, I couldn't see what good might come out of that.

"What happened to Heidi?" Belle said again, more insistent this time.

"She's dead," I said. "Her and the entire family."

I scrutinized Belle as I said those words, trying to gauge her reaction. Like most elves, she could be a bit cool, but the news of such a tragedy befalling old friends should have provoked some kind of reaction from her.

It did. Her eyes widened until I could see whites all around them, and she opened her mouth to speak, then thought better of it and swallowed hard instead. I could tell how upset she was because I noticed how the pointed tips of her tapered ears, behind which she'd tucked her hair, flushed pink. It wasn't the kind of thing that someone who didn't know her would have noticed at all, but I saw every bit of it.

"You can't think that Moira had anything to do with that," she said.

I shook my head but didn't say a word. I just let that news hang in the air between us.

She frowned at me. "You really can't think that I had anything to do with that."

I sat back in my chair with a nonchalant shrug. "I don't think anything," I said. "All I know is what I saw there: a lot of good people murdered by a professional with a very sharp blade."

Belle lost her composure at that point. Color came to her cheeks as she blinked back the tears in her eyes. "I can't imagine," she said. "I don't want to."

"I don't have to imagine," I said. "I saw it myself this morning. Heidi, Carsten, Guenter, Dörthe, even little Gerte. All dead."

She stood then and made to leave. I got to my feet and beat her to the door. Under most circumstances, she'd have been quick enough

to slip out before I got there, but she was too disturbed to put her feet in front of herself that fast.

"You can't just come in here and leave like that," I said. "What happened to Moira?"

She looked up at me, and for a moment I thought she might slump into my embrace and beg me to comfort her. I may have actually wished for it. Instead, a steely look returned to her eyes, and she took a step back.

"I sent her to deliver a gift to the Gütmanns last night. I didn't think there would be any trouble over it. I can't believe —" She shuddered. "It just doesn't make any sense. Why would someone want to kill them?"

"I'm hoping to figure that out myself," I said. "The Guard has Dörthe's husband in custody for the killings right now."

"Did he do it?"

I shook my head. "Not a chance, but that doesn't mean they might not pin it on him anyhow." I squinted at her. "What did you send Moira to deliver?"

She squirmed in front of me. "If you must know, the Gütmanns had fallen on hard times, and I'd taken it on myself to give them a hand. After what happened to Anders, after all, I felt, well —"

"Guilty?"

She glared at me as if I'd slapped her face. "Compassion," she said. "For the family of an old friend who sacrificed himself for us."

I don't know who she thought she was talking to. I'd been there. I'd seen what happened. Gütmann may have been sacrificed for the rest of us, but he didn't do it to himself.

"How kind of you."

She screwed up her face at me. "Don't you dare judge me," she said.

"Just returning the favor."

Her nostrils flared, and she reached for the door. I didn't get out of the way.

"Where's Moira?" I said.

"That's what I came here to ask you to find out. You know her as

well as anyone. You live above her parents' place. I figured you'd have the best chance of tracking her down."

A terrible thought struck me. Not that Moira killed the Gütmanns, no. She didn't have that in her. But she did have a penchant for walking off with other peoples' property.

"Are you sure she made it to the Gütmanns last night?"

Belle gave a hesitant shake of her head, and I knew the idea had occurred to her too. "She's run errands for me before, though, and it's always gone off without a hitch. It's not like her to just disappear like this." She furrowed her brow. "Is it?"

I opened the door for her and stepped out of her way. "I'll find her," I said. "Not for your sake, but for hers."

She frowned and was still gorgeous every second she did it. "You don't think she had anything to do with the Gütmanns being murdered, do you?"

"No," I said as she walked past me. "Not on purpose, but that's too big a coincidence, don't you think?"

She looked back at me as she moved down the stairs and gave me a nervous nod. "You know where to find me?"

"Yeah," I said. "I always have."

Chapter Nine

Moira had left home at an early age — for a halfling, at least — and she'd never gone back. As much as she claimed to love her parents and the rest of her family, she couldn't stand to be around them for more than an hour or two at a time. Once we'd hung up our traveling cloaks, she'd used her share of the treasure to buy herself a sharp little apartment on the edge of Gnometown, a bit higher up the mountain.

I almost never visited her at her place, preferring to meet her in her parents' restaurant instead. For one, Moira was a lousy cook, which maybe explained why she'd not gone into the family business. For two, her parents took pains to accommodate guests of all sizes at their tables, but Moira's apartment had been built long ago by reclusive gnomes. Its architecture was actively hostile toward anyone taller than a dwarf.

Despite that, I headed over to her home to knock on her door. It was possible that Belle hadn't bothered to check there, and that would have been the simplest solution to finding Moira. To even reach the short blue door of her apartment, though, I had to worm my way up a twisty stairwell so tight and narrow that I couldn't turn around in it once I started through it.

When I got to the door, I gave it a sharp rap, but no one answered. Her father had let me keep a key to the place the last time I'd helped her out of a jam, so I tried it and found that the door was unlocked

anyhow. That put my senses on a sword's edge. Moira might have been many silly things, but she knew how to protect her belongings. She never left her door open.

I pushed the door open on its creaky hinges and regretted it the instant the stench from inside stung my nostrils. Moira had never been much of a housekeeper, but she'd gotten much worse about it since her on-and-off boyfriend Stubby had moved in with her. I'd have thought she'd have dumped him long ago, but for some reason she just couldn't bring herself to kick the pathetic slob out.

From what I could see as I nosed my way through the foyer and into her living space, the place had only gotten worse since the last time I'd been there. I saw mold growing in the sink and maggots crawling in the rotten food there, and the floor had gotten so damn sticky I might have thought it was a glue trap.

I struggled to my feet and walked through the place hunched over, trying not to scrape the top of my head on the five-foot ceiling. I hoped I wouldn't have to touch anything. I'd have preferred to be robbing a tomb in the plague pits to being forced to spend much more time in there.

"Moira?" I called. "Stubby?"

From the state of the place, I guessed that Moira had officially left it to Stubby. They'd been having problems, I knew, from the last time I'd been there. The depressed halfling hadn't made even the slightest pretense of trying to keep her home clean for her, and I'd figured it would only be a matter of time before the Auxiliary Guard ordered the place cleaned or condemned. I'd rarely seen a home in such need of a good, cleansing fire.

I found Stubby in the bedroom he'd once shared with Moira, lying in a pile of greasy, twisted bedding and a large stain formed by his own blood. Someone had sliced open his neck, leaving him to clutch at his throat in open-mouthed surprise until the light drained from his glassy eyes. I knelt down and closed his eyelids. His flesh was cold.

Whoever the killer was, it didn't seem like he'd taken a trophy from Stubby. Of course, halflings didn't have the same cultural

associations with their hair that dwarves did. They bled out just the same though.

I knew I needed to alert the Guard to this right away. Yabair might try to finger Moira for the crime, but if that meant that we found her before the same thing happened to her, I was willing to risk that.

I could see why she might want to kill Stubby. If I came home to find my place like this, I might have been tempted too. Even so, I didn't think she'd done it.

Moira was handy with a knife, but I'd always known her to prefer pistols and wands to blades. Besides, the method of dispatching him matched up a bit too well with what the Gütmanns' killers had used on them: single, precise strokes designed to kill with the minimal fuss. It couldn't be a coincidence. Whoever had murdered the Gütmanns had done in Stubby too.

I looked around the rest of the place, wondering if the killer had found Moira here too. I didn't find any trace of her. As far as I could tell, she hadn't been here for weeks if not months.

I saved checking into Moira's office for last. It lay behind a green door in the back of the place, with a golden knob set into the center of it. She'd put a charm on it that would give a vicious shock to anyone who touched it without her permission. Fortunately, I was one of those rare souls she trusted with such things.

I tapped my wand against the door, and the whole thing glowed a faint blue, showing me that the charm was still in place. Whatever the killer was after, he hadn't taken the time to dismantle the door's magic. It would have taken forever, even for someone with the right skills, and I don't think he could have had that much time.

Unless he was still here.

I have to admit, that thought hadn't occurred to me until that moment. If the killer was determined to get into Moira's office, though, he might have come in here in the middle of the night, killed Stubby, and then set to work on the door. Or maybe he'd just given up on it and decided to wait for her to show up instead.

Then I'd come knocking on the door and calling out for Moira and Stubby. That would have given the bastard plenty of time to find a

good hiding place or even just scoot out one of the windows overlooking the street.

I reached for the doorknob, and the blue glow pulled away from my fingers as they approached, retracting to the edges of the doorframe. I twisted the golden knob and pushed and then slipped in to the subterranean darkness beyond.

As I did, I heard the killer coming up behind me.