





MATT FOR BECK

Bad Times in Dragon City

Shotguns & Sorcery Novel #2

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 make sure I have many more good times than bad.

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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's been. And thank you to all my readers, whether you're backers or not. Stories have no homes without heads to house them.



Chapter One

As a rule, I don't play cards with wizards. They cheat, which I understand. Everyone wants an edge. But they think they're too clever to get caught, so they cheat badly, and that never ends well.

That's why Kai had hauled me down into Goblintown, to get into a game where no one knew me and where even a whiff of magic about you during a hand would earn you a stiff beating and maybe even a fatal dip in the Ash River. "It'll be fun, Max," the orc told me. "It'll take your mind off Belle."

That sold me on it. That and the fact that Goblintown was too damn dangerous for me to take along the dragonet that had imprinted itself on me. Not that I hadn't grown attached to the little guy, but I didn't much care for the attention that having him with me brought. It's hard for people to not gape at us when they know that the father of the creature draped over my shoulders is the Dragon Emperor himself.

Most people were smart enough to leave the dragonet alone. He was tough enough on his own, but toss in the fact that his daddy would destroy you and everyone you'd ever cared about if you tried to pluck a scale from his kid's tail, and even the thickest-headed folks in Dragon City were wise enough to give the creature a wide berth.

When it came to me, though, that was another story. The dragonet's messed up biology might have convinced him I was his

real papa despite my distinctive lack of scales, but I don't think the Dragon Emperor would have been too saddened if I got myself hauled out of his family portrait by a lethal and messy means. So when I informed the members of the Imperial Dragon's Guard assigned to watch over me that I wanted some time to myself, they were only too happy to volunteer to keep an eye on the dragonet while I wandered off and hopefully got myself killed.

That wasn't on my agenda, of course. I just wanted a little time out of the public eye, a chance to blow off some steam without everyone in the room giving me a wary eyeball. I'd had a rough few weeks since Belle had jilted me — again — and I wasn't all that welcome at the Quill these days.

The fact that I owned my favorite bar didn't mean much to Thumper, the bartender there. "You're driving away the regulars, Max," he'd said to me. "And you're bringing in gawkers instead."

"A little fresh coin in the coffers never hurt anyone."

He'd snorted. "Gawkers don't drink."

So I'd banished myself from the crowd at my watering hole and spent most of my nights holed up in the storage room on the second floor instead. I'd have preferred to flop down in my office over the Barrelrider in the Big Hill part of town, but it still hadn't been repaired since Belle's crazed and bigoted sister Fiera had blown her chance to murder me in it. She'd done a number on my place though.

I'd have taken out my headaches on her if I hadn't already killed her. I hadn't gone to the Sanguigno estate meaning to, sure, but once she'd been engulfed in a dragon's flames like that, it had seemed like the merciful thing to do. Belle maybe hadn't seen it that way.

So instead of spending any time with her, I'd moped around in the upper part of the Quill for weeks, barely ever leaving the place. It wasn't until Kai had come up to check in on me that I realized how bad I'd let myself get.

"Smells like the zombie traps outside the Great Circle in here," Kai said when he entered, wrinkling his green-skinned nose in disgust. "You sure one of those rotters didn't crawl in here with you?"

"Good to see you too," I said. "Get out."

The dragonet perched on the back of a cracked wooden chair opposite mine at the little table in the center of the room, flexed its wings, and hissed at the newcomer. He didn't like strangers much, and he'd not yet met Kai. I'd known the orc for well over a decade, and I didn't much like him either.

"Thumper says you need to get out of here." Kai's yellow eyes flickered about the place, taking it in. His nose didn't unwrinkle. He pulled back his lips, exposing his jagged teeth.

"I suppose he said it's for my own good."

Kai shook his head. "I think he just wants to clean the place. The customers are starting to complain, I hear."

I glared at him. "About what?"

Kai wiped the sweat from his face with the back of his sleeve. "It's a little ripe in here." He gave the dragonet a sidelong glance. "How much heat does that thing give off?"

I gazed at the dragonet, and it stared back at me with wide green eyes and slitted pupils. "What's that got to do with anything?"

Kai glanced at the door. "Do you ever let it out?"

"It's not a pet," I said.

He shook his head. "Let's get the hell out of here."

I looked down at myself. He was right. I looked filthy and smelled awful. "Like this?"

He let out a low, rough laugh. "Where we're going, no one will care."

I was too wrung out to argue, and a belt of dragonfire sounded like a good bet right then. I nodded at him and pushed myself to my feet. The dragonet slipped around my shoulders before I could protest, and I wound up carrying him out with me.

It only took me a few moments to get the Imperial Guards stationed across the street from the Quill to take custody of the dragonet, but it took far longer to get the creature himself to agree. Young as he was, he was still a dragon, which translated into "not to be trifled with." Fiera had found that out the hard way when he'd found her holding a wand on me.

Once I finally convinced the dragonet that I wasn't abandoning him forever — just for the night — Kai led me downslope through Dragon City, from where the Quill sat the edge of the Village to the neighborhood in which he lived: Goblintown. I thought about hailing a ride, but few of the hacks flying carpets around the city cared to risk their rides by taking fares into the lower parts of the city. I'd forced the issue before, but this wasn't any kind of emergency. I figured I could use the walk to clear my head, so we hoofed it down through the benighted streets, watching the glowglobes on the street posts become farther and farther apart as we went.

"Why don't we try somewhere upslope?" I said. My last few experiences in Goblintown hadn't been stellar.

"Don't worry about it, Max," Kai said. "I got your back, and I know just the place."

I should have known better than to trust the orc. I didn't doubt he had the best of intentions. He always did.

Still, Kai was what our mutual friend Cindra had always liked to call "charitably incautious." Her husband Kells often added "criminally optimistic." On some level, he just trusted it would all work out, whether he had any reason to or not.

That's how we wound up in a private card game down in the dim and dank back room of some nameless shack that made the Skinned Cat — Kai's regular joint — look like a sunny resort high in the Elven Reaches. The liquor they served there tasted like it had been strained through a goblin's dirty underwear, but in the state I was in I didn't much care. It did make me wonder if Kai had brought me here to poison me in front of his friends, but it seemed like it would have been a lot simpler for him to knife me in an alley on the way here instead, or so I told myself.

I only had to suffer through one greasy glass of that homemade hooch before Kai wrangled us an invite to the card game. I knew the people there didn't like me at all — I was the only human around within a crossbow's range, I was sure — but they put trust in my coins if not in me. Kai vouched for me too, but I'm sure even they

knew better than to trust him.

Maybe that's what got me into trouble.

I lost the first few hands on purpose, just to get a sense of the people I was playing with. As long as they were able to take my money, they were happy to have me in the game and have the tubby hobgoblin waitress ply me with drinks even worse than the first. It was when I started winning that they turned against me.

Besides Kai and me, there were three other people at the table: a twig of a goblin missing all his upper teeth, a young orc thug with a nose ring that would have looked better on a bull, and a fat ogre opposite me, who seemed to take up most of the room.

The goblin didn't worry me much. I could throw him through the nearest window with my left pinky. I'd lay good odds on me being able to take out the orc easily too. He was all bluster, but the lack of scars that hadn't been self-inflicted told me he got by on that far more often than he relied on his knuckles.

The ogre worried me. A nasty, cunning smarts glittered in his suspicious, beady eyes, and he glared at me over his cards like their presence between us was the only thing that kept him from spitting in my face.

I decided to fold my next three hands. I barely looked at my cards. I hadn't come here for a fight, and if I had to lose a few coins to keep that from happening, I considered that a part of the price of the evening's entertainment.

Then I glanced down at the hand the ogre had just dealt me, and I saw the best lineup of cards I'd ever had the privilege to hold in my life. I kept my face as stony as heart of the Stronghold, the part of Dragon City the dwarves had carved out for themselves.

"Well?" The ogre glared at me over his own cards. His voice sounded like millstones grinding diamonds. "You in?"

I looked down at my cards and considered my options. The orc gave the ogre a knowing chuckle, and the goblin tittered in tandem with him.

I glanced at Kai. He pursed his lips and gave his head an inquisitive jerk toward the table.

I threw my cards down in front of me. "I fold."

Chapter Two

The orc and the goblin froze, caught in the middle of a cackle. Kai found something riveting to pay attention to off to his left, away from me. The ogre slapped his ham-sized hand flat into the middle of the table, his nostrils flaring wide as he sneered across the table at me.

"Dragon's balls, you do."

I put my shoes flat on the floor and got ready to leap to my feet. With luck, I'd be able to clear my wand from its holster before the ogre could wrap his hand around my head and crush it, but I didn't think I could manage to recite the spell's words with his meaty fist squeezing the life out of me. I decided I'd go for the sawed-off shotgun nestled next to my wand instead, if it came to that.

I only had one shell in the shotgun, of course, but it was a doozy. I wouldn't have a chance to reload it — not in here — but it might make a big enough statement that I wouldn't have to.

"Take the pot," I said to the ogre in as steady and even a tone as I could manage. "It's yours."

The ogre sneered at me. "You think I just want your ante? Pick up those damned cards and play them, you cave slug."

I glanced over at Kai, but he sat there looking away, still pretending to be more interested in signaling the waitress for another round than in the angry ogre across the table from us.

I shook my head. "You don't want that."

The ogre snickered at that. "You're some kind of wizard, eh? Reading my mind now, are you?"

The goblin found his laugh and giggled at me, his eyes glinting with bloodlust. "We don't much care for wizards around here, do we, Ollie?"

"I don't mind them myself, Wint." The orc licked his upper lip. "Delicious when done proper. Ain't that right, Ferd?"

The ogre didn't answer. He just kept staring at me, waiting for me to make my move.

I put my hands on the edge of the round table in front of me then, and I pushed myself to my feet with the kind of slow deliberation that seemed prudent when every set of eyes in the room except Kai's were trained on me.

"I don't know what your problem with me is," I said to the ogre. "I came here to play cards, not kill fat bastards like you, no matter how bad they might have it coming."

The collective breath of the entire tavern seemed to catch in its patrons' chests. I ignored everyone else but Ferd. I might have to deal with the rest of them soon enough, but if I didn't get the ogre to back down, that would all be moot.

Ferd's gaze flickered toward Kai, and right then I knew. I spoke to my old friend without taking my eyes off the ogre for an instant.

"How much you into these guys for, Kai?"

Kai turned toward me and coughed. "What are you talking about, Max?"

"How much?"

"Enough." Ferd gave me a wide grin that showed off gaps in his teeth that I could have shoved my fist through.

I looked at Kai then, and he gave me a helpless shrug. "You know me, Max."

I did, and I was sorry about it right then. After Kai had saved me from Fiera destroying my office, I figured he had my back, much like we'd done for each other in our adventuring days. While that might have been true most of the time, it didn't mean he wasn't willing to sell my backside to someone for the right price, especially if it meant

getting himself off the hook for a large gambling debt.

It's a lot easier to stay on the same side, it seems, when everyone else nearby is a zombie that wants to feast on your brains. Just being breathers lumps you all together, and it's not hard to find some kind of common ground upon which you can build a united front from there. In Dragon City, with the undead hordes well beyond the massive wall that encircles the Dragon Emperor and his grateful subjects, that's a lot harder to pull off.

I leaned forward on my edge of the table and braced myself on it, then let out a weary sigh.

"You going to play that hand?" Ferd said. He scooped up my cards and flipped them over with far more deftness than I would have given him credit for.

The goblin gasped. "Look at that hand!" He pointed at me. "You cheat!"

"I folded."

"We don't much care for wizards around here," Wint said, repeating himself. "At all."

Ferd leered at me over the table, a wet guffaw rumbling between his thick lips. "I don't know," the ogre said. "I think we might be able to find some kind of use for him."

I shoved down on my side of the round table as hard as I could. The far side of the table's scarred and stained surface snapped up and caught Ferd square in his massive chin, sending blood and teeth flying. If I hadn't caught him by surprise, I don't doubt the wood would have splintered against his granite jaw, but as it was the impact knocked him backward in his chair. He fell sprawling into the table behind him.

The table now between me and Ferd, Wint, and Ollie, I snatched the shotgun and my wand from my shoulder holster with a single sharp move. I leveled the gun at Wint, who was coming around the right side of the table at me, and I let my wand drop from my grasp and land in my off hand.

"Hold it!" I shouted at the orc. Staring straight down the barrel of my sawed-off and watching an eager glow race along the runes engraved in its steel, he skidded to a stop with a frustrated snarl.

"Check your left!" Kai said.

I glanced that way, in the direction where Kai had been sitting a moment ago. He'd flung himself away from the table as soon as I'd shoved on it, and I'd taken that as a good sign. While he'd served me up to these bastards, he wasn't going to join in the feast.

Instead of Kai standing there beside me, though, I saw Ollie sticking his arm around that side of the table, a small pistol in his fist.

I knew the toothless goblin wasn't there to chat. I threw myself backward and tried to bring my shotgun around to bear on him at the same time. Instead of cursing my luck, I started to spit out a spell too, sure that I'd never have a chance to finish it.

Ollie's little gun went off, the crack ringing loud in the tight room. Pain stabbed through my right side as the bullet creased my ribs, tearing a shallow furrow through my flesh.

Out of reflex from the pain more than anything else, I squeezed my shotgun's trigger as I stumbled backward. The recoil knocked me flat, which I suppose I should have been grateful for, as it put me below the blast from my shotgun shell.

I don't know what kind of trouble I'd been expecting to run into when I let Kai talk me into coming down to Goblintown with him, but I'd loaded my shotgun with an enchanted shell before I strolled out of the Quill with him. When I pulled the trigger, I knew I was too close to whatever the thing would hit, but if it came down to getting shot down by a toothless goblin or taking myself out along with him and his friends, I had no regrets.

The magic load went off as it smacked into the table next to Ollie's head. I like to think the little goblin had an instant of relief between the moment he realized I'd missed him and the point at which the spell in the buckshot went off and exploded into a ball of fire that engulfed the table and anyone standing near it.

The flames immolated the goblin as if he'd soaked his clothes in whisky, which maybe he had. He didn't even have time to scream before they turned him into a blackened crispy shadow of himself.

I felt lucky to have been knocked to the floor. The blast of fire bloomed over me but rose toward the ceiling rather than gouting toward the ground, where it would have barbecued me as fast as it had turned Ollie from a rare goblin to well done. It scorched my skin and singed my clothes and hair, but it didn't set me ablaze.

I couldn't say the same about the table, though, which went up like the kindling in a funeral pyre. I blinked my eyes to clear my vision, then realized it was the heat warping the air that made everything look funny.

A howl went up from behind the table, and an instant later a chair smashed into the wall of fire from that same angle. That knocked it aside and into a neighboring table of hard-nosed orcs who growled in protest.

I didn't worry about them for an instant though. I was too busy staring down the broiled ogre standing where the table had once been and reaching for me with a blistered mitt bigger than my head.

Chapter Three

I dropped the shotgun, which was useless now, its single shell already spent. I didn't have the time to reload it, so I reached for my wand instead, the words to a nasty little spell already on my lips. They froze there an instant later when I realized I'd dropped the damn thing while trying to shield my face from the explosion.

I could have cast the spell without the wand, sure, but it's a lot harder trick to pull off. The wand might only be a tool, but it's a damn handy one. In theory I can pound nails with my forehead too, but forgive me if I'd much rather try it with a hammer.

I decided to give it a shot anyhow, realizing that I didn't have much of a choice other than rolling over and dying. Ferd backhanded that idea right out of me.

Stunned by the blow, I couldn't put up much of a fight as the ogre grabbed me by the front of my shirt and hauled me up into the air. Dangling there in his grasp, my feet flailing a full foot off the floor, I glanced around, hunting for some kind of weapon, someone who might lend me a hand — anything. All I saw were dozens of scorched and furious faces glaring and snarling at me.

None of them belonged to Kai, which didn't surprise me much. I didn't expect he'd join in the effort to murder me in a messy and satisfying manner, but he wouldn't want to stick around to watch it either. Knowing him, he was already halfway down the street and making an obnoxious effort to be noticed in a pathetic effort at

establishing some kind of flimsy alibi.

"You pale little git," Ferd said with a growl that would have sent a pack of rabid wolves running off with their tails wedged between their legs. "I'm not cruel. I was going to make this quick — snap your skinny neck and be done with it."

He leaned in close enough that I could smell what he'd been drinking for the past week, and I had to fight not to gag on the scent. "Now," he said, "I think I'll take my time."

I headbutted him in his nose as hard as I could. Rather than feel the bone there crunch in the satisfying way I'd been hoping for, though, it felt like I'd just smacked my head into a stone wall. I reeled back as far as the ogre's grip would allow and groaned aloud in agony.

Ferd chuckled at me. "Maybe I'll kill you quick after all. There's a bit too much fight in you, isn't there?"

I opened my mouth to protest, but he didn't care to listen. He lifted me another foot into the air to give himself a bit more room, then slammed me down into the floor.

My back smashed into the floorboards, which would have been enough to knock the air from my lungs, but the ogre's fist followed through into my chest and made sure to finish that job. It felt awful enough to have my chest squeezed clear like that, but then the ogre flattened his massive hand against my chest and pressed down, doing his best to ensure that the last breath I'd taken would be my final one too.

I reached up and put my hands around Ferd's arm and tried to shove it away, but it felt as rough and solid as a tree trunk. I tried clawing at it with my fingers, but he just snickered down at me. I gave squirming out from underneath Ferd's a hand a shot, but it was like trying to haul yourself out from beneath an avalanche. There just wasn't anywhere to go.

My vision started to tunnel down hard, and I reached out in a desperate attempt to stab my fingers into the ogre's eyes. He straightened his arm, locking it at the elbow, and leaned into it, adding a cracked rib to the suffocation. It struck me that it might be

a race between whether I would die from a lack of air or a crushed heart.

I kicked and thrashed as hard as I could, searching for some last desperate way to grab some sort of edge from which I could pry myself loose from the ogre's grasp. As my vision faded farther, my arms and legs grew heavier, and I found myself thinking that after all the things I'd been through, all the times I'd faced death and escaped it, this was a damn lousy way to die.

I heard a crash then, and splinters rained down onto my face. The weight on my chest shifted, and I dragged in one more ragged breath. Pain stabbed into my side from my cracked rib, but rather than flinching at it I relished it. Pain meant I was still alive, and the sharpness brought me focus.

Ferd twisted his head about, and I followed his gaze to see Wint standing to one side, the legs of a shattered chair still in his hands.

"What?" Ferd glared at Wint, his face a mask of bloodlust and rage.

"I've been shouting your name. You wouldn't listen!" Wint held the chair legs up before him, then dropped them on the floor as if they'd turned hot enough to burn.

"I'm busy!"

The orc jerked his head toward Kai, his nose ring glinting in the dim light of the shack's cheap glowglobes. Kai held his double-barreled shotgun in both hands and poked the business end of it at Ferd, whose gaze finally focused on it. The ogre's eyes grew wide with outrage.

"You want to cut another deal for yourself?" he said, confused and furious. "Now?"

Kai ran his tongue over his teeth. "You said you were going to toss him over the wall."

Ferd snorted. "I'd be happy to. When I'm done with him."

"Alive," said Kai. "You said he'd still be alive."

No one else in the room said a word. They just stared at the ogre in utter silence. The loudest sound in the place came from me trying to wheeze a bit more air into my lungs, and I wasn't about to quit.

"Put that damn thing down, or I'll toss you over with him."

Kai cocked both barrels of his gun. "Go ahead and try."

Ferd grunted like a mad bull. "That's your game, eh? Sell your friend here to us for a little fun, and then play the hero for him instead?"

Kai edged a step forward. "Get off him. Now."

I could hear the gears grinding in the ogre's head. If Kai moved just a few inches closer, he might come within range of a vicious sweep of Ferd's long arm. But could the ogre knock the shotgun aside before Kai pulled the trigger? Kai wasn't giving him much of a choice but to try.

I felt Ferd tense up. "You want him?" He made a fist out of the hand on my chest, and I gasped in the momentary relief before it pressed back into my sternum.

The cunning bastard wanted it to look like he was going to throw me at Kai, hoping that might make Kai hesitate to pull the trigger. He hadn't actually grabbed my shirt though. He planned to just swing as hard and fast at Kai as he could instead.

I wanted to warn Kai, but I couldn't breathe well, much less talk. I grabbed the ogre's wrist in a vain attempt to slow down his attack. Ferd pressed into my chest one last time as he prepared to unleash, and the pain threatened to blind me. My fingers fell from his arm, and he put his plan into motion.

As Ferd's fist rose from my sternum, I put every last bit of strength I had into a vicious and well-aimed kick. I couldn't manage it before when he was trying to crush me, but with his attention now on Kai, I had one last shot.

I planted my boot up and under his crotch as hard as I could, putting every last bit of desperate, adrenaline-fueled strength into it, and I connected with a satisfying thud.

Midway into his swing at Kai, Ferd froze, his eyes bulging out in pain and surprise. His momentum carried him off me, but his fist veered off its path toward Kai and joined his other hand in clutching at his injured groin.

I rolled away from him and pushed myself to my knees. I wanted

nothing more than to throw up from the pain in my side, but my need to gasp fresh air into my aching chest overrode that for the moment.

Wint took a step back and glared at Kai and then me. "What good did that do you?" he said. "You think either one of you is going to walk out of here alive?"

Kai pointed his shotgun at Wint. "Who do you think's going to stop us?"

Every chair in the shack scraped back from its table as the people in them got to their feet. I glanced around and saw a sea of angry green faces snarling at both me and Kai. I don't know which one of us had them angrier — me, the human intruder, or Kai, who'd betrayed his own kind to keep me alive.

I figured we were about to find out. Kai could take out a handful of them with his shotgun — maybe more if he was clever enough to fire the barrels one at a time — but once he did that, we had nothing left. They'd tear us apart.

Worse yet, I saw that several of the people angry at us had pistols in their hands too. As soon as anyone started firing, the room would get crisscrossed with lead, and the floorboard would be bathed red.

Chapter Four

"Hey, fellas," I said as I hauled myself to my feet. "It doesn't have to go like this."

None of them said a word. They just glowered at me as Kai surveyed them with the barrels of his rune-crusted weapon. All it would take was one wrong move, and we'd wind up with a bulk delivery for Dragon City's morgue, with Kai and me piled at the bottom of it.

That's when the door slammed open, falling half off its hinges, and a half-dozen well-armed members of the Imperial Dragon's Guard stomped in, dressed in their crisp crimson uniforms piped with gold. Each of the elves held a wand in one hand and a blade in the other. They didn't usually go for guns when they were on the job. For the most part, they didn't need them.

The elf captain leading this squad of guards was my old pal — and I use that term loosely, in a way he never would — Yabair. He'd thrown me in jail more times than I could count, sometimes for good reason, but just as often for not. He sneered at me as he strode into the center of the room, his every movement daring someone to speak a cross word to him, much less attack him.

"You will stand down," Yabair said to no one in particular and yet everyone within earshot. "This human here is under the protection of the Dragon Emperor. Any harm done to him shall be considered an assault upon the Emperor himself."

The people in that room were some of the hardest and meanest in Dragon City, but none of them were dumb enough to challenge Yabair or his words. One by one, they returned to their seats, keeping their hands above the tables at which they sat. The only exceptions were me, Kai, Wint, and Ferd, who still rolled on the ground, his hands clutching his bruised crotch.

Wint cast furtive glances around, trying to drum up some kind of support among his friends, but none of them would meet his gaze. Sweat beaded on his forehead as he looked for a place to sit down and blend into the crowd himself. Instead all he spotted were the pieces of the chair he'd broken over Ferd's back to get the ogre's attention.

He swallowed hard, looked into Yabair's unforgiving eyes, and then bolted for the door.

Yabair didn't take a step after Wint. He just gave a sharp nod to the guard standing closest to the exit.

The elf hefted his sword and swung it in a deft and sure move that crossed through Wint's path as the orc tried to dash past him. With a snap-step, he returned to his original stance to watch his actions bear fruit.

Wint took two more steps and faltered on the third. He stumbled to his knees, clutching a hand to his throat. Bright red blood seeped from between his fingers and coated the floor before him.

He stared in shock at the puddle spreading out before him until he fell over into it.

A few of the shack's patrons gasped at Wint's fate. Yabair glared in their direction, and they joined everyone else in turning away.

"Gibson," Yabair said. "You're alive. Come with me."

It wasn't a request. Most days I might have bristled at that, but considering how welcome I knew I'd be in that shack if I decided to defy him, I went along without a word of complaint.

Kai shouldered his shotgun and fell into step behind me. Yabair reached out and put a hand on his chest to stop him.

"You are not under the Dragon's protection," the elf said to Kai. Kai looked down at Yabair's hand as if he wanted to bite it, but he'd seen what the other guard had done to Wint. Taking on an elf in close quarters never made for good odds, but if Kai stayed here the rest of the shack's patrons would rip him to pieces the moment the guards were out of sight.

I turned back and put my hand on Yabair's arm. I knew I was taking my life in my own hands when I did this, but I was too tired, hurt, and angry to care. "He's under mine," I said.

Kai's breath caught in his chest, and I looked into his eyes. I may not have wanted to call him a friend after the shit he'd pulled with me that night, but I also couldn't forget that he'd risked his own life to save mine when his deal with them went sideways. I wasn't about to leave him behind.

Yabair raised an eyebrow to mock me for bothering with Kai at all, but he removed his hand to let the orc join us. Kai lifted the shotgun from his shoulder and slipped it back into the leather scabbard slung across his back, uncocking the weapon as he did. Then he trailed after me as I followed Yabair out into Dragon City's night-shrouded streets.

The rest of the guards fell into step behind us. No one in the shack moved a muscle until the last one of them followed us out into the open air. Then the room burst into a sea of quiet murmurs and harsh whispers.

"Nice timing," I said to Yabair. I stretched, testing my ribs, then winced as pain stabbed through my left side. It made a nice match for the burning sensation from the bullet that had creased me on my right. "Couldn't you have found me a few minutes earlier though?"

Yabair snorted through his long, thin nose and led our little procession up a narrow street, toward the open square beyond. "A few minutes later, and perhaps I would have saved myself the trouble of ever having to find you again."

After a cut like that, I'd be damned if I was going to thank him.

"What do you want?"

Goblintown wasn't part of his patrol. The Guard proper mostly kept to the parts of the city higher than the Village. The Auxiliary Guard took care of the human parts of town and good chunks of the Big Hill too. No one watched over Goblintown.

"You left the dragonet."

As we emerged into the open square — rickety buildings crowded and looming around it on all sides — he guided us toward a pair of flying chariots painted in the Guard's colors, bright crimson with golden details. If I'd left a ride like that parked there, it would have been gone before I could have turned around to look for it, but even down here in Goblintown everyone knew better than to touch one of the Guard's sleds.

"I'm a free man."

Yabair gestured toward one of the chariots. "If it makes you feel better to think that, I won't bother to disabuse you of your quaint notions."

I pulled up short before the chariot. The rest of the guards got into the other one, leaving this one to Yabair, Kai, and me.

"You didn't come find me because of the dragonet."

Yabair was many things, but first and foremost he was the Dragon's elf. I knew the Dragon felt ambivalent about me: grateful that I had saved his child's life but irritated that the dragonet had imprinted itself on me rather than him.

I understood. I had mixed feelings about it myself. If I could have changed that from happening, I probably would have.

I said "probably" because the dragonet had saved both Belle and I from her sister trying to murder us. I appreciated that, and to tell the truth I'd gotten a bit attached to the creature since then. I'd lived alone for the better part of my life, and after our adventuring group had broken up, I didn't have all that many friends. Having the little guy around felt — well — right.

Yabair shook his head. "He is safe with the Emperor in the Dragon's Spire." As he said these words, he turned to gaze up at the top of the mountain towering high above us.

For most of my life, I'd ignored the mountain's peak. No one I knew had ever been up there, and I never thought I'd have any business with the Dragon myself if I could help it. Until I'd left home and started adventuring, I'd never gone any higher up the

slope than Wizards Way, and that had only lasted until I'd gotten myself kicked out of the Academy of Arcane Apprentices.

The Dragon's Spire had always seemed impossibly high, someplace I'd need wings to reach. The Great Circle, though — the massive stone wall that protected the city from the horrors that lurked in the wilds beyond — had done a far better job of commanding my attention. The stench that rose from Goblintown on hot summer days made that part of town impossible to ignore, and on a breezy day, even worse smells wafted up from the undead bastards forever scratching and scrabbling against the outside of the Great Circle's cut stone.

The dragonet had changed that for me. His birth — hatching, I guess — had forced me to visit the Dragon Emperor for the first time, and the fact that he considered me to be one of his parents drew a lot more of the city's attention to me, whether I wanted it or not. I'd become a lot more civic minded since then.

"So what brings you down here to haul my mutton from the fire?" I asked.

"The Council of Wizards demands your presence," Yabair said, holding his mouth like he wanted to spit out his own tongue. "I have been commanded to escort you to them."

"And if I don't give a damn about their demands?"

Yabair curled a lip at me. "Then I'd be happy to return you to the company of your friends in that tavern back there and let you resume your evening with them."

Chapter Five

I stepped into the chariot. Yabair moved into it on my left and grasped the front rail, taking control of it. As we began to rise into the air, Kai leaped onto the back of the platform and moved off to my right, putting me between himself and the captain.

I thought Yabair might boot Kai off the chariot right then — or maybe wait until we rose high into the air first. Instead, he pointedly ignored the orc. Unlike most elves, Yabair dealt with other kinds of people on a regular basis, and they instilled no fear or revulsion in him.

Well, no more revulsion than he had for anyone else.

The chariot climbed high into the air, rising above bowshot range fast, ensuring that no ambitious killers on the ground below could take a potshot at us. Most people in Dragon City knew better than to try something like that with the Guard, I figured, but I also didn't want to get shot for being wrong about that, so I appreciated the altitude.

From up here in the night sky, Goblintown didn't look so bad, an array of glowglobes and cooking fires offering tiny glimpses of the worst parts of Dragon City otherwise cloaked in darkness. As I shifted my gaze up the mountain, I saw the lights grow brighter and more frequent as the slope rose up through the Village, Big Hill, and even Gnometown.

Rising past Stronghold Gate, they tapered off. No surprise, as

most of the dwarves who lived in that part of the city did so underground. Only the wealthiest of them could afford a window much less a lighted balcony on which they could sit and take in the night air.

The Elven Reaches spiraled above the Stronghold Gate's steely arch, huge estates fashioned from living trees that were older than anyone living in Dragon City — besides the elves that tended them, and the Dragon himself. The lights there sparkled like stars in the night sky and seemed almost as cold and distant.

Sometimes clouds obscured everything from the Stronghold Gate on up, but on a clear night like this you could see all the way to the Dragon's Spire, the very peak of the mountain. It glowed with a golden warmth generated by the Dragon Emperor's own scorching heat. They didn't need glowglobes up there. The Dragon's blazing scales provide enough illumination all night long.

I glanced at Kai. The vista sweeping out before us didn't seem to impress him at all. He had a white-knuckled grip on the railing in front of him instead, as if he feared that Yabair might flip the chariot over at any point and dump us to our deaths.

"If he wanted us dead, he'd have left us in Goblintown," I said.

Kai snorted, not meeting my gaze. "You're one lucky son of a bitch, Max. And an ungrateful one too."

Thinking back over how my night had gone so far, I didn't see any evidence for that. "How do you figure?"

He sneered at me. "Didn't I just save your life back there?"

I almost choked, and a stab of pain from my cracked rib reminded me that I should be furious with Kai. I probably would have been but for two things. One, I already knew Kai was scum, and I'd gone to the card game with him anyhow. And two, I was too relieved to be alive at this point.

Still. "Didn't you try to sell me to that ogre and his pals to settle a gambling debt?"

"That's not the point."

I widened my eyes. "You set me up for a painful death, and that's not the point?"

"I wasn't going to let them kill you." He shook his head so fast it seemed like it was vibrating. "They told me they were going to toss you over the Wall. I had it all worked out."

I had to be missing something there. "And you don't think that would have made me just as dead?"

Kai allowed himself a tight grin, and he reached back and patted his shotgun's stock. "I was going to have them put you on the edge of the Wall, and then I was going to knock you off of it with this.

"That's an odd way to try to save someone's life."

Kai reached into a pocket on the front of his grimy shirt and produced a single sky-blue shotgun shell. "I was going to use this," he said. "I had Kells make it up for me special."

Kells sold me my explosive shells too. He'd served as the armorer for our group back in our adventuring days. No one had a better hand for enchanting ammunition.

I took it from Kai and examined it. Magical runes encircled the outside of the shell, painted there by hand, and other mystical letters had been stamped in the shell's brass bottom. It didn't have any instructions on it, but using a shell like this was dirt simple.

Load into weapon. Point at target. Fire.

"I still don't see how this wouldn't just make me that much more dead."

Kai snatched it back and stuffed it into his shirt. "It's enchanted."

"I can see that."

"With a flight spell."

"Huh?"

Kai gave me a clever grin. "I shoot you with it, and it casts a flight spell on anything it hits. You fall off the wall, wait until you're in a dark spot, and then just fly to safety."

I grimaced at the thought of that. "And you don't think the pellets in there would hurt me?"

"I didn't think of that, but Kells did, of course. What's the good of making a dead man fly?"

I rolled my eyes at this. "You don't think maybe you should have told me about this at some point?"

"I'd have gotten around to it," Kai said, a glint in his eye. "If I'd have told you, you'd have blown it for me. You're not much of a liar."

I tried to muster up some indignation at the insult but couldn't manage it. Whether it was true or not, I didn't much care. There are worse flaws.

"Why?" Yabair said.

Both Kai and I snapped our heads around to stare at the elf. He didn't look back at us, keeping his eyes focused on the sky ahead of us instead. I had no idea he'd been listening much less that he'd care to comment.

Kai laughed. "I owed those jackasses a lot of gold. This was the best way I could figure out of it."

Yabair shook his head, frustrated and impatient. "Not 'Why did you gamble away money you don't have?' or even 'Why did you think they'd let either of you live?' Rather 'Why did you pick Gibson to sell out?'"

I turned back toward Kai and gestured for him to give the question an honest reply.

Kai shrugged. "I don't know. How many people do you think I could willingly drag down to Goblintown with me anyhow?"

He had a point. The times I'd joined him there, I'd often been the only person around with skin that wasn't some shade of green. He might have been able to haul Moira down with him, but she was usually too smart for something like that. Usually.

"Was it your idea?" Yabair said. "Or did they ask for Gibson by name?"

That brought Kai up short as he considered what the elf meant. "Now that you mention it —"

"They set you up," Yabair said. "They brought you in, cleaned you out, and pressured you into giving up Gibson."

Kai's jaw dropped in disgust as he realized that the captain was right.

"Did they tell you why they wanted me?" I glared at Kai.

He nodded. "They were going to toss you over the Wall. Feed you

to the zombies."

I suppressed a shudder at that. I'd killed enough of the shamblers in my time, and I'd seen what they could do to someone they got their teeth into.

"Why?"

Kai snorted at me like I was an especially slow goblin. "Because they like that sort of thing."

"They're in league with the Ruler of the Dead," Yabair said, still not even glancing at either of us. "They meant to sacrifice you to her."

That churned my stomach good. The Ruler of the Dead was the greatest necromancer the world had ever known. She and her undead servants ruled over the entire land here, other than this fortified patch of rock we liked to call Dragon City. Given half a chance, she'd have battered a hole in the Great Circle and taken the rest of us under her wings. And Kai's gambling pals had wanted to serve me up as an appetizer for that feast.

We rose through the sky in silence. Yabair had never been one for idle conversation, and I didn't know how to respond to that little revelation. Kai seemed to have made his first smart decision of the day by choosing to keep his mouth shut.

Now that we'd gained plenty of altitude, Yabair had set the flying chariot on a beeline straight for the Academy. The levitating system of gigantic baskets that brought riders from the Village up to the jutting spear of rock on which Wizards Way sat had stalled out for the night, but lights burned bright and sharp atop every one of the titanic towers that stabbed up from the narrow plateau, each of the structures competing on behalf of their owners to be considered the tallest or most ostentatious of the lot. Brightly colored pennants coated with obscure heraldry I'd never bothered to learn to decipher snapped in the magically generated wind there, making them seem far more dramatic and important than they had any right to claim.

The wizards claimed that these towers were symbols of their power. To me it seemed like they were trying to compensate for other shortcomings. "Message incoming," Yabair said.

"What?" I looked up and peered into the darkness. "How do you mean?"

He pointed to a faint light hanging high and to our right. It took me a moment to focus on it, and another to realize that it was coming right for us.

An instant later, a glowing arrow smacked right into the front of the chariot, burying its tip just under the rail. Kai jumped about a foot, but Yabair didn't flinch a bit. I admit I had to fight the urge to duck behind the chariot's railing for fear of another arrow coming in just a few inches higher.

"Get that, would you?" said Yabair.

I reached down and yanked the arrow from the front of the chariot. It had a note tied to it with a red ribbon. I undid the ribbon and unfurled the note.

It was addressed to me. I read it once and cursed. Then I read it a second time and cursed again, with more feeling this time.

"We can't go to meet with the Wizards Council right now," I said.

"I have my orders," Yabair said in a tone designed to cut off any chance of debate.

I held the scroll up in front of me so he could read it. "You have new orders," I said. "Straight from the house of Sanguigno. Belle needs me. Now."

Chapter Six

"I don't care for this," Yabair said as he brought the chariot down in front of the Sanguigno estate, high in the Elven Reaches.

I couldn't say I disagreed with him. I'd never been up to Belle's family home at this time of night. Humans were barely tolerated here during the day. Walking around here in the dark seemed like an open invitation for any elf who spotted me to toss me off the side of the mountain.

Kai would be shot on sight. Realizing that made me want to invite him to come along with me into the house.

"You going to wait for me here?" I asked Yabair as I hopped off the back of the chariot.

He looked down his nose at me and snorted. "I am a captain in the Imperial Dragon's Guard, not a taxi service."

"Until you get orders to pick me up one place and drop me off somewhere else." I couldn't help drive that point home and twist the needle good.

"I think that's more like a courier service," Kai said, joining in.

Yabair ignored us both and stared up at the stars for a moment. "By the time you finish here, it will be too late to bring you to the Wizards Council. I will inform them that they can expect you in the morning."

Kai hadn't gotten out of the chariot yet. He shifted from foot to foot there and gave Yabair a wary stare.

"Can you drop me off someplace a little less, um—"

"Clean?" Yabair frowned. "I'm sure I can find an empty cell for you in the nearest precinct house."

"I was hoping for something with a fewer bars on the windows."

Yabair didn't say a word. He just took the chariot up into the air and sailed off into the night with the orc cowering against the farthest part of the railing.

I didn't know how I'd get back to the Quill, but I'd worry about that when I needed to. First I had to deal with Belle.

I unrolled her message to me again. It read:

To Max Gibson, from House Sanguigno:

We require your presence at our family estate immediately upon your receipt of this message. We are told that you may be in the company of Captain Yabair of the Imperial Dragon's Guard. If that is so, please inform the captain that he is to escort you to the Sanguigno home with all due haste.

Your friend, Bellezza Sanguigno

Despite the fact that the entire message didn't say a damn thing about what Belle wanted or what could possibly be so urgent that she needed to have Yabair fetch me to her place in the middle of the night, the bit that mystified me the most was "your friend." Once upon a time, Belle and I had been friends — and for a while much more than that — but we'd gone for over a decade without speaking much to each other. That had only changed recently, with the murder of the family of our mutual adventuring partner, the long-dead Andreas Gütmann. And then when I'd been forced to shoot her sister Fiera, who was threatening to kill us both, we'd gone right back to not speaking to each other again.

I suppose that's not fair. I'd have been happy to speak with her, but she'd made it painfully clear she didn't feel the same way. This was the first contact we'd had with each other since that damn day.

I wondered if I should have had Yabair stop off and retrieve the

dragonet for me before leaving me here. I supposed not. He'd burned Fiera to a crisp, after all. I'd only put the bullet in her to make a quick end to it. I don't think he'd have been welcome in the Sanguigno home, although as the Dragon's only heir, they'd have been hard pressed to refuse him entrance.

I stood there for a moment and stared at the entrance to the Sanguigno estate. Like most elven homes, I had a hard time wrapping my head around it. It was mostly made of trees that the Sanguignos had grown together over the years with a mixture of patience and magic that boggled my mind. Belle had tried to explain it to me before, and I understood the theory, but the idea of casting tiny little spells every day over decades if not centuries to coax pleasing and useful shapes out of trees when all you really needed was a good saw and a hammer to get the job done threw me.

"You're too impatient," she'd said.

"Me?" I had pretended to be offended.

"No," she'd said with a wistful smile. "Humans. All of you."

That's the hazard of living a short life, I supposed. If you didn't take the shortcuts, you'd never see the results.

I'd only been up in the Elven Reaches a handful of times, much less to Belle's home, and it had never amounted to much more than breaking my heart. I knew the smart thing to do would be to turn around and go home. Whatever kind of trouble Belle had gotten herself into — and I knew that would be the only reason she would call for me like this — it was her problem, not mine. I didn't need the drama.

Right?

I walked toward the door to knock on it, then spun on my heel. I couldn't do this to myself. I had enough problems of my own, including a dragonet who was probably wondering where I might be. Even creatures like dragons that could live for thousands of years were impatient in their youth, it seemed.

I didn't get seven steps away before the door to the Sanguigno estate opened on hinges as quiet as a mountain breeze. I didn't hear it so much as feel how it changed the air behind me. Then she called

my name.

"Max?" Belle spoke in a voice hoarse with emotion. "Is that you?" She knew it was me, of course. How many other people might be

loitering on her doorstep at this hour?

"Hi, Belle." I stopped, but I didn't turn around, not yet.

She sighed in relief. "I'm glad you got my message. Please, come in."

I spun to look at her framed in her doorway, the soft light of the small glowglobes that lined the entryway bringing out every curve in her sweet, pale face. She looked just as young as the day I'd met her some fifteen years back. Not a damn thing about her had changed. She was just as heart-stoppingly gorgeous as ever.

"I didn't think I was welcome around here anymore."

Belle frowned, wrinkling her porcelain forehead. "I need you, Max," she said. "You're the only one who can help me."

I winced at that. "Isn't that the way it always is?"

"Don't be like that," she said. "I can't help the position I'm in — that you helped put me in. I can only deal with it the best I can."

"Then do that." I still hadn't taken a step toward her.

"I wish I could. I've tried, I really have. I just don't know where else to turn." She moved a little closer to me with every sentence, hauling up just out of arm's reach.

I wanted to scoff at her, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. I may not have seen much of Belle over the past decade, but I could hear in the rawness of her voice and see from the tears welling up in her eyes that she was on edge. She'd been crying already, and it wouldn't take much from me to push her back right over into that. I knew what that would do to whatever small bits of resolve I could muster when it came to her.

I decided to focus on the business at hand. "What's this all about, Belle?"

She glanced around as if there might be listeners lurking in the bushes, then gestured back toward her door. "Wouldn't you like to come in?"

I grunted. I wanted that more than just about anything else. I

wanted her. I wanted us, the way we used to be, much as I knew that was impossible. She might not have changed, but I had.

I couldn't help it. I was only human.

I nodded, and she led me into her home.

The first thing I noticed when I entered the place was that someone was missing. "Where's Ford?" I asked.

The Sanguignos' butler had greeted me at the door every other time I'd visited. He'd always had a sneer and a snide comment to make sure I knew I wasn't welcome here. Despite the fact he was as human as I was — no elf would ever live as a servant, not for long — he went out of his way to make sure I felt out of place here, even more than any elf I'd ever met had.

"He's not here," she said, an odd distance in her voice.

She led me out onto the balcony, and I made my way straight for the bottle of sunwine they always seemed to have set out on a table there. The golden liquid actually glowed faintly in the darkness, which at least made it easy to find. I poured a few fingers for Belle, and then I fixed myself a double.

Belle stood waiting for me at the railing, right about at the spot where her sister had been standing when I shot her. I could still see the scorch marks from the dragonet's flames darkening the wood there.

I brought her the wine, and she accepted it with a grateful smile, then downed half the glass in a single gulp. I sipped at mine. Sunwine didn't quite have the kick of dragonfire, the magic-enhancing hooch I usually preferred, but it tasted so much better. Where dragonfire burned, sunwine healed, and the way my chest still felt, I knew I could use some of that good stuff.

"So tell me," I said. "What is it that brings me here in the dead of night?"

Belle gazed up at me with her wide blue-gray eyes, her blond hair framing her perfect face. She chewed her lower lip for a moment, afraid to speak. As I took a good belt from my glass, she summoned her courage.

"It's about Fiera," she said.

That surprised me. I glanced out over the railing, where my gunshots had knocked the already blazing elf to her death. Could anyone have come back from something like that?

Seeing the confusion on my face, Belle laid a delicate hand on my chest. "No," she said. "My sister is very much dead. There's just one monumental problem."

"Which is?"

"We cannot find her body."

Chapter Seven

I downed the rest of my drink, stared at my empty glass for a moment, then walked back over to the table with the bottle of sunwine on it for a refill. Belle dogged my steps. As I reached for the bottle, she grabbed my arm.

"Don't you understand what that means?"

I nodded at her, then reached for the bottle with my free arm and tipped some more of that glowing sunwine into my glass. She removed her hand from me and waited.

We took our bodies seriously here in Dragon City. Although the Guard liked to pitch it as a tradition steeped in some sense of reverence for those who'd shuffled off this mortal coil — or been shoved — the truth was it had nothing to do with respect for the deceased.

It had to do with the Ruler of the Dead.

As soon as someone died in Dragon City, the corpse left behind became instant fodder for the Ruler of the Dead's army. If left lying around, she would sooner or later find it with her powers and imbue the empty shell with her magic, turning it from a rotting sack of meat into an undead horror. I imagine in the early days around here that was a terrible problem, but Dragon City had figured out an easy way around it centuries ago.

You just burn the bodies — and not the way Fiera had gone up like a torch. She'd have gone out eventually and left a charcoaled

corpse behind. No, we incinerated them until there was nothing left but ashes.

I don't know if the Ruler of the Dead's magic could seep into a pile of ash, but I knew the ash couldn't hurt you, no matter how malevolent its intent. It might make you sneeze, but that was a long way from having your brains torn out of your head for a feast.

"What happened to it?" I asked. "The body, I mean."

I sipped at my wine while Belle spoke. I could feel the warmth working its way into my ribcage, and I found I could breathe a lot easier again.

"After the incident on the balcony, I went down with Ford to recover Fiera's remains. We found her easily enough, lodged in a tree just below here. Her body was still smoldering though, too hot to remove — as was the tree, which had burned a bit too — so we decided to leave it there until it cooled and we could bring it down out of the tree."

"You left it there unguarded?"

"Of course not! Ford volunteered to stand guard at the base of the tree. After the day's events, I was —" She gave me a pained look. "Exhausted. Wrung out. I came back here to rest."

She moved back over to the railing, and I followed her. "I rose with the dawn, and I left home straight from my bed, still in my clothes from the night before. I went down to check on Fiera's body, only to find it gone."

She peered over the balcony's edge, down toward where Fiera had landed. Enough glowglobes illuminated the mountainside below us that I thought I might be able to the tree there, standing on a ledge not too far down. Instead, I could identify the spot in question only by how dark it was in the middle of all that light, like a missing tooth in an otherwise perfect smile.

"So you didn't find a body at all?"

Belle shook her head. Her voice trembled when she spoke. "I found a body all right, but it was Ford's. He'd had his head turned all the way around and his eyes and tongue had been plucked out of his face."

I winced at that, not out of any sympathy for Ford, who'd always hated the sight of me, but for Belle.

"Why didn't you call the Guard to remove Fiera's body for you?"

Belle shrugged. "We thought we could handle it ourselves. We wanted to have our final moments with her remains before they took her away for cremation. By custom, we had a week to bring her body in, and we intended to make use of it."

I shook my head in disbelief. I'd never paid much attention to elven customs, to be honest, mostly because they didn't ever seem to make sense. Plus, most elves didn't care to share much of their lives with outsiders, keeping an icy distance between themselves and the other races. Belle had been a refreshing change from that, which was one of the reasons I'd fallen so hard for her.

Still, in all our time together, we'd not discussed much about burial arrangements for her — or for any of us really. Out in the untamed lands beyond the Great Circle, death may have been an ever-present threat, but we all understood that none of us would risk our own lives to go back to retrieve a corpse. The Dragon's laws didn't apply beyond the Wall.

"It's been longer than a week." I pulled myself back from the railing to look into her eyes.

She didn't meet my gaze, looking back toward the darkened interior of her family estate instead. She set her jaw tight and nodded.

"Can't you just give them Ford's body instead?"

She scowled at me. While I might not have cared for the man, she'd known him for years, and he'd lived in her home and served her and her family. I could see she didn't care for this callous side of me, but I preferred to think of myself as pragmatic.

"It doesn't work like that," she said. "The rules are especially stringent when an elf dies. It's a rare event, and the Dragon takes notice."

That almost made me shudder. Having recently come under the Dragon's attention myself, I knew what an uncomfortable position that was to be in.

I shrugged at her. "What's the big deal? It's a missing body. Even if Fiera shows up as some kind of bloodthirsty zombie, it's not like it would be the first time it's happened."

Belle made a pained sound and gave me a half-hearted backhand across the chest. "When it comes to elves, it would be the first time it's happened in over a hundred years. The penalties are far worse than you could imagine, and we take them very seriously."

"What? Do they send you down to have to sully yourselves with the rest of the city? Is that how Yabair wound up in the Guard?"

The fear painted on Belle's face melted into anger. She curled up her lips and spit out the answer at me. "If the family cannot produce the body of the deceased, they must then produce another body from the family to take its place."

That stopped me cold. "You can't be serious."

She glared at me with eyes that demanded to know if she looked like she was joking.

I opened my mouth to say something sharp, but nothing came out. I tried again. "Isn't there any way around that?"

"The decree comes from the Dragon himself, and he has been known to enforce it personally."

"Not in my lifetime," I said. "Not even in my grandfather's."

She gave me a pitying shake of her head, the kind I'd have used with a dull child who just couldn't keep up. "And you think that's a long time?"

"You don't?"

"For you, sure. For me, not very. For the Dragon?" She grunted in disdain. "It's like yesterday."

"What do they do if they don't know she's dead?" I said. "It's not like they monitor the heartbeat of every elf in the city. Right?"

She didn't answer.

"Right?"

She gritted her teeth at me, her eyes blazing like twin suns. "You shot her blazing body over that balcony!"

She had a point. "Right."

"While she was burning to death in a fire started by the heir to the

Dragon Throne!"

"Got it."

Her voice rose in pitch and volume with every word until she was screaming. "And the Guard came here to take you away!"

I put up my hands in defeat. "All right!"

She turned away from me then and wrapped her arms around her chest to hug herself tight.

"So the Guard knows," I said. "Have they said anything to you about it?"

"Why do you think Captain Yabair brought you straight here tonight?"

That did explain a lot. I had been surprised to see Yabair blow off a request from the Council of Wizards to bring me to Belle's place. It made sense if he knew that she was in serious trouble.

Mortal trouble.

"So what happens if you can't find Fiera's body?" I reached toward her but came up short of actually putting my hand on her shoulder.

"Then another member of my family must die."

I grimaced. "I take it you don't have any fatally depressed cousins."

She spun on me then and stabbed a finger at me. "You think this is some kind of joke? We're talking life and death here, Max. And not for some distant relative either. It has to be someone as close to the dead person as possible."

I ran through Belle's family tree in my head, which didn't take but a few seconds. She had her father and her mother, and other than her dead sister Fiera, that was it. Despite how long I'd known Belle, I'd never met her parents. She'd assured me more than once that they wouldn't like me. That sort of thing had never bothered me — I was used to it — but she made a point of never bringing us together because of it.

For a while I'd thought that she was just ashamed of me, of having an affair with someone so far below her station. Elves did that sort of thing all the time though. They called it "stepping out for a smoke." Something that you did for a short break, that wasn't good for you in any way, but that you enjoyed enough to indulge in anyway.

I'd always wanted to ask her about that, if I was just a smoke break for her. I never did though. I don't think I wanted to know the answer.

"I'm sorry, Belle." I knew it wasn't enough, but it was all that I had. If someone had to pay the price for losing Fiera, I wasn't going to mourn the loss of either her father or her mother, but I could sympathize with Belle at least.

"That's it?" Her jaw dropped. "That's all you can say?"

"I'm sure your parents will work out which one of them has to deal with the Dragon —"

Her mouth opened even wider. "You don't get it, do you?"

And then I did. I'd been thinking like a human. If something like this had happened to my family, we'd have picked the oldest member of it to put forth, I like to think. Someone who'd had a full life and was closer to death already in any case.

But elves never grew closer to death, did they? To them, longevity was to be prized over youth. The loss of an elder would mean a terrible blow to the family's continuity, to its position within the city, and ultimately to its power. Forced to make a choice, they'd sacrifice the youngest member of the family instead.

Back before her death, that person would have been Fiera. Now, though, it was Belle, the elf standing right before me and glaring up at me.

"If I don't find Fiera's body soon, the Guard will come knocking on our door, looking for a replacement. If I can't produce my dear sister's corpse before that happens, I'm dead!"