

# Chapter One

'I want you to bring me his head,' Lamiel Silverthorn snarled, his elvish countenance so twisted with loathing he could almost have passed for human. Offhand, it was hard to decide which of the two races would have been most insulted at the comparison, but Pip Summerdew cared

little for the feelings of either. They both tended to think halflings like himself were little more than gluttonous halfwits, to be treated with amused condescension or barely veiled contempt; which, on the whole, was a distinct advantage in his line of work.

‘Detaching it might prove a little difficult,’ Pip said, giving up trying to find a position in the elven chair he was currently occupying which allowed his feet to reach the floor, and drawing them up to sit cross-legged instead.

A faint flicker of distaste crossed his host’s visage as grubby bootsoles met exquisitely embroidered silk.

‘I’m sure a bounty hunter of your experience can sort out the details.’

‘Fair enough.’ Pip nodded. Two hundred of the solid gold trade tokens the elves used

when bartering with the merchants of other races would keep him in the style he hoped to become accustomed to for a very long time. 'Half up front, the rest when I deliver.'

Silverthorn's gold-flecked eyes narrowed a little, his thoughts as transparent as if he'd spoken them aloud. If Pip got himself killed before completing the assignment, he'd be well out of pocket, and no closer to the vengeance on his sister's murderer his honour demanded. 'I thought I'd pay you the full amount when you return with Graznik's head,' he said.

'Then you thought wrong,' Pip rejoined, hopping down to the polished oak floor. 'I'll see myself out.' He took a couple of paces towards the door.

'No. Wait.' Elves usually spoke in exquisitely modulated tones, which sounded more like choral music than

normal speech to halfling and human ears, but Silverthorn's voice had begun to take on the timbre of someone treading on a cat. It was clear that the Prince of the Sylvan Marches wasn't used to being spoken to like this by anyone, least of all a scruffy little hairfoot. 'Half in advance, if you insist.'

'I do,' Pip said cheerfully. He waited while his host scribbled a note to the chief secretary of the Sylvan Marches embassy in Fennis, authorising the payment, and smiled sardonically. 'It won't turn into leaves when the sun comes up, will it?'

'That's fairy gold,' Silverthorn said shortly. 'Not ours. And even if it wasn't, I've got more sense than to try cheating someone in your profession.'

'Glad to hear it.' Pip slipped the note into his belt pouch. 'Any other instructions?'

'I thought I'd been clear enough,'

Silverthorn said, a faint tic beginning to jump beside his right jaw. 'I want Graznik's head. What else is there to discuss?'

'Well,' Pip said slowly, 'your sister's body was never found. If it turns out she's alive after all, and still in the camp...'

'Ariella's dead,' Silverthorn said, in a tone which brooked no argument. 'The orcs of Dragonwood killed her. Can you carry out the assignment or not?'

Pip nodded.

'You have my word,' he said.

Any halfling with money in his purse would head for a tavern, as surely as water flowed downhill, although on this occasion Pip had another reason beyond the siren call of food and fine ale. The taproom was crowded, mainly with humans, but his reputation allowed him to proceed unimpeded to a

discreet corner booth, where a corpulent young man in the robes of a wizard had already settled for the evening. He was dividing his attention roughly equally between the overflowing platter in front of him, the tankard of ale in his hand, and the serving wench at his elbow, who, despite the obvious glut of customers in need of her attention, was lingering to giggle at the display of coloured sparks dancing on the tabletop.

‘Pip!’ Kris the mage smiled a greeting to the halfling, murmured something inaudible to the girl, which made her blush, and dismissed the sparks with a wave of his hand. ‘What’ll you have?’

‘I’ll start with whatever you’re having,’ Pip said, clambering on to the opposite bench.

‘Good choice,’ Kris agreed, clearly contemplating dessert now Pip had arrived

with a bulging purse. ‘What can I do for you this time?’

‘I need an edge,’ Pip told him. ‘Something like that Cloak of Shadows thing, but longer lasting. And something to muffle noise.’

‘Not a problem.’ Kris nodded, chewing thoughtfully at a chicken leg. ‘But you don’t usually need any help in sneaking about. Planning to walk through an army?’ He grinned, amused at his own wit.

‘Near enough,’ Pip said, and began to eat.