

Marks

by Bret Sheeley

Lorel was positively certain the mark and his companion were unaware of her tailing them. This was the first time she was hired on her own for a bounty, but she had spent enough of her twenty-eight years doing various mercenary work to know the signs of one being watched being aware of it. If either the mutt or the dwarf knew she was there, she would eat her boots.

She had trained her ears to listen for movement in the other encampment as she rested with her back up against the tree. The cold air of the season in the far north gave her breath the repeating puffs of swiftly vanishing mist, and the woods provided uncomfortable roots no matter where she adjusted her seat, but she was grateful her mark had at least entered into the trees. The added cover allowed her to get closer with less risk of discovery.

Still, she remained quiet. The mutt might not be full Gildanesti from the description she was given, but it was always possible his own hearing might be good enough to tell that something besides wildlife was nearby. Him hearing wildlife would be bad enough. It wouldn't do for either of them to think an elk was nearby and have them come close enough to hear her moving slightly or breathing in the chilling air.

With a pull of the two cords protruding from her hood, the fur lining better sealed off her blonde hair and now blue ears from the dropping temperatures. Above the canopy, the pale moon in the sky was half-full, but it was setting. *Must be near midnight*, she thought as she tried to mark the time just as much as the sounds from the two less than a hundred feet away.

She could tell one was up on watch. She couldn't tell which. Lorel wasn't that good. Not yet. Even if both were dumb enough to sleep in a forest this close to the Broken Lands, she wouldn't advance on them just yet. If she advanced on the mark the dwarf would likely wake up, and she wasn't that sure of herself to take out the two that quickly, regardless of what she boasted to her employer.

And so she sat, and waited.

Something within her, maybe some part of her training, gave a sharp shout to her mind. She shuddered awake and took a fast inhale of the cold as her mind quickly began reminding her from nothing where she was and what she was doing. A tall long-tailed blue bird about the size of her head startled from the ground in front of her. It took off with even more surprise than Lorel was in, flying up past the bare branches into the star filled sky. Its deep-to-high shriek must have been the loudest thing Lorel heard in the past three days.

Her feelings became frustration and self-loathing as she realized she fell asleep long before she meant to. But the loathing disappeared as she heard movement and soft talking from the other camp. Lorel remained as still as death, holding her breath more out of panic than an attempt to keep quiet and listen. Her brown eyes widened. Steps on the forest floor were coming her way.

She grabbed her bundle and doing what she could to place her steps on hard dirt ground, she wound through the trees away from where the damn bird had made its cry. Finally she positioned herself behind one of the wider trunks in the vicinity and pressed her back against it before risking a look.

The dwarf did not have his crossbow out, or his short blade. However his left hand was on the blade's hilt at his side. He progress slowly towards where she had napped. His hair was full of dark black curls, but she could now see his face. It was something she never got a clear view of tracking them from behind. He had a beard, naturally, but it was cut close to his face and ended in a sharp point right off from his chin. It must have been the shortest beard she'd ever seen on a dwarf of any kind with the exception of on women and children.

He hushed out something she didn't hear clearly. Either it was a name she was unaware of or maybe it was something in a foreign tongue. He kneeled down and examined the forest floor right where she began her flight. She ducked her head back behind the trunk before the Hartdar's head turned upward in her direction. This time she held her breath to make sure no dispersing mist would give her position away. Her hand slowly moved to the dagger in her sleeve when she heard the wide footsteps coming nearer.

"Morgz!" the dwarf called out again the voice of someone trying to simultaneously and pointlessly be heard throughout the area and yet be quiet in case anybody else was nearby. "Morgz!" He was getting closer, but she realized he wasn't walking directly towards her. He headed off in the direction her initial footprints had betrayed her path, but the dwarf didn't realize her path turned towards the thicker tree. He went on straight, passing by her by a

full twenty feet. She cautiously moved in the shadows away from him, all the time watching his back as he trudged deeper into the woods.

A minute later, Lorel let herself a single sigh of relief before turning her mind to her mark. She lost track of the mutt once the dwarf began to approach, but she was certain she didn't hear any other movement through the trees when she was able to listen.

Lorel kept her dagger in palm beneath her sleeve and moved from tree to tree until she saw the light of the flames. The mark had started a campfire. Or to be more accurate, he had relit a fire they had going when they first made camp hours before.

The mark was taller than the dwarf by a foot and a half. Not a tall man, but his lean figure did give evidence to his Gildanesti-blood, if there was such a thing. Elven blood was elven blood after all, and the Gildanesti were already an elven-human mix.

He wasn't wearing much protection, just a tan leather jacket over a blue shirt. His brown pants were travel worn with several stitches sealing tears of old journeys. What she had taken for a thin scarf when she was tailing him before she now could see was a dark cord almost an inch thick going around his neck. An odd adornment.

The modestly short-cut red head had a youthful look to him, another common gift of the blood. *Lucky bastard*, she thought with envy. She knew her looks would deteriorate in not more than a decade or two before having to live life as one of the elderly. *Well*, she corrected herself. *Was lucky*. His face was rounded overall, but the angle from his cheekbones was an additional sign of his mixed heritage.

He moved before the fire to poke it with a stick. No sign of the bluish tinge many of those from the coral elf stock, but that didn't always carry over as the human-blood mingled in. She had heard rumors of some other type of elf that took to the sky, but until she saw it, she would consider it a children's story.

At that point the mark sat down on a log with his back right towards her. Weighing the fact she didn't know how long it would be before the dwarf returned, she praised fortune for luck finally turning her way. She could finish the job and leave with proof long before his traveling companion came back. Crouching low, she ventured out of the shadow, lining the blade point with the back of his neck.

Fast, swift, quiet. The motion was done in not much more time than a few blinks.

Lying on her back with her head next to the fire, she stared at the childish grin of the mark as he stood over her. His boot pressed down on her left arm, the one holding the blade. With her brain trying to register the fact he had fluidly leaned his body to the side when she plunged the dagger down towards the spine in his neck, grabbed her arm, and flipped her over his shoulder, she only now began to register the pain in her hand.

Not from his boot, but from the fire. Her blade hand was in the flames.

She gave a cry, but as soon as her hand released the weapon, the mark angled his foot and dragged her arm upwards, towards him. The dagger was still in the fire, but her hand was out of it.

Lorel scrambled and tried to get onto her feet, but his other boot came up and in what looked like a dance-step clocked the side of her face. Her balance gave out and with one arm still pinned, collapsed onto the ground.

She was getting awfully tired of waking up from sleeps she didn't intend on taking. *At least you're waking up at all*, a part of her mind told her.

Shut up, the rest of her mind spat back.

She was sitting up against a tree, and her wrists were bound behind her. The fire was before her to the right, and directly across from her sitting on the log was her mark. The glow from the flames gave his devious smile almost a devilish look. There was still no sign of the dwarf.

"Hope I didn't make the bonds too tight," he said in a melodic middle ranged voice. "I put some salve on your hand to help the healing. Does it still hurt?"

"I'm fine," she lied. Her left hand and wrist still ached. She will need to have it looked at if she could get out of her predicament.

"That's good," he said. "I wouldn't want a cute woman to suffer because of me."

She corrected her thoughts again. Definitely more the imp than the devil.

"What's your name?" he asked pulling his pack closer to him.

"I'm not telling you anything." She tried to put as much edge in her tone as possible. However it just occurred to her that she was a woman tied up in a camp of two men in the middle of nowhere. And with this one calling her 'cute' she did not want to entertain one thought he might possibly be having.

"Why not? It will be a while before Bormon gets back. He thinks the rest of our group was signaling us with that bird call." He pulled a bunch of grapes out of his pack and broke one off with a snap. His smile slipped as something

occurred to him mid-thought. "We probably should have adjusted our bird calling signals to not include birds native to around here. Oh well." He popped the partially frozen grape into his mouth and proceeded to suck on it.

"You're not going to find out who sent me," she clarified as her frustrations mounted.

He pushed the grape to the side of his mouth with his tongue. "I don't care. There is a bunch of people who probably don't like me. What does it matter which one it was who hired you?" He rolled the grape to the other side of his mouth. "Or sent you, just in case you work for whoever all the time."

"I was hired," she said before she could stop herself. *Keep your mouth shut!* As she continued to move her left hand around in attempts to stop it from stiffening from both the burn and the cold, her fingers found the knot on her binds. They were tight, but she was skilled. It would take some time. *Or don't keep quiet. Maybe you could buy yourself some time and he won't notice.*

"Lorel Traden," she said. "My name is Lorel." She gave a smile, which in earnest was an attempt to cover a grimace. *That doesn't mean you have to tell him the truth about yourself!*

His smile returned, and something about it bugged her. "See. That wasn't so bad. Jace Kadavri, but then you probably knew that." He chewed and swallowed before breaking off the next grape. Her eyes noticed her knife was on the log next to him. He was almost half sitting on it.

"How did you know I was there?" she asked, fishing for a topic, as she was able to bend a finger and thumb from her right hand into the proper angles to assist in undoing the knot. "That I was behind you?"

He sucked on the grape a few times before answering. "I saw you when you let Bormon pass by. Thanks for not trying to kill him, by the way. That was awfully kind."

"Don't mention it," she said with more than a small amount of bitterness in her voice.

"It's okay. After we realized you were following us, our main concern was to make sure nobody got hurt." Another suck. "Well, *my* main concern was anyway."

She sighed. "That is why you turned towards the forest. To lure me in closer. I thought you two didn't see me when I first spotted you in Medren."

The first expression of honest surprise covered his face. He didn't even bother to try and hide it. "You've been following us since Medren?" The surprise became almost a look of... *Was he impressed?* "I didn't notice you until two hours ago when your snoring scattered half the wildlife in the forest."

"I DON'T SNORE!" she shouted, shifting onto her knees. She told herself she was being childish bursting out like that, but she didn't care.

The mark looked up from his grapes. "You do so. I admit I had to wake Bormon on my own, but you sounded like a lumberjack at work."

Lorel leaned back up against the tree, but kept herself in a position better suited to jump than had she been still sitting on her posterior. Slowly and carefully, her fingers continued to press in and around the threads within the knot, looking for the one bend willing to move without tightening everything into a worse mess. "Damn elven ears," she muttered.

Kadavri blinked. "Okay, now I'm insulted."

There. Slowly she began to pull it through, only letting her fingers move. Not the wrists. Nor the arms. Only the fingers. "Sorry, Elven-Ears. Does 'Mutt' sound better to you?"

"No," he popped another grape in his mouth. "The fact I'm a mixed-blood doesn't bug me. It doesn't bug most people. You seem to be one of the few people who seem to care one way or another about it. There are half-ogres north of here. Half-elves have their own country far off in the east. Why does-?"

One foot kicked back against the tree, propelling her forward. Her lunge was fast. A little too fast. She was already upon him before she could completely untangle her hands from the rope. Instead of going for her dagger, she had to ram herself directly into him. The bunch of frozen grapes was the only buffer between them.

As her momentum carried the two of them over the log, Lorel tried to swipe her arm down to where the dagger was. However Kadavri's weight dragged the dagger with him as he fell. It dropped out of her sight into the dead brush.

She felt his hands grabbing at her upper arms, but she was able to lift them fast enough to prevent having them pinned. She could only think of one other option. Lorel grabbed for his throat.

The mark squirmed his body out from under her, but she had her hands fast on his neck. Lorel and Kadavri both attempted to knee the other in the stomach. So instead their kneecaps collided. The pain was momentary, but it resulted in her grip slipping. The mark twisted and started to pull out of reach. She grabbed the neck cord instead.

The cord looked like some type of brown-black leather, but it began to stretch in a fashion she didn't think possible. What she thought of as a choking

hazard proved to be very extendable, it would take a great deal of pulling and twisting to make it useful in cutting off air.

Her interest in it faded as she noticed the tattoos on his neck, originally covered by the cord. It was a chain of waves, each drawn in a simple collection of spirals, one rolling into the next.

Lorel looked into Jace Kadavri's round yet angular face. Not elven blood. Kunda. This man was kender-blood. He stood there with the cord stretched out to her fist, a brief moment of her simply standing there with grape stains over her front.

He smiled at her. It was not an impish smile. It almost seemed sympathetic. "Your other daggers are still hidden in your jacket. I didn't take them off of you."

The heel of his palm came up sharply and broke her nose. For the third time that night she slept.

She smelled the horse before realizing she was on top of it. She realized she had her arms and ankles tied together before wondering where the horse had come from.

Lorel made the rocking motions back and forth over the saddle her stomach was pressed against. She knew it was futile, she could feel the rope across her midsection. The gag in her mouth stopped her from yelling anything more than garbles and muffled cries.

The mark tilted his head in front of her eyes. Her brown stared into his slate blue. "I made the ropes tighter this time. I'm sorry if you get cut up trying to free yourself."

It was daylight now. To her left, past the black horse's head, she could see the sun coming up over the hills. They were at the edge of the forest, and she could see the light frost covering the ground. She looked back to the one she tried to kill last night. If she lived, she would have to try again.

The elemental mark on his neck was once again covered. It was something she'd only seen on the kunda, specifically those of the Hoda tribe. When they became adults, they would declare which element they were "born" from. Considering how his body seemed to flow when they were in combat she figured water was an apt choice. It was all part of the tribal faith of the Hoda, something she only knew a few things about. She never considered one of only partial kunda heritage would be included in such a ritual. She never considered there were partial kunda. He noticed her looking at his neck.

“Yeah,” he said touching the cord. “Quarter-kunda, in case you were wondering. I don’t go around advertising it. I have no shame. Don’t get me wrong. But when I like to move through the human societies, especially in the Midlands, it reduces the number of questions. My cousin understands, and he’s been traveling with me for a while.”

With her tongue Lorel succeeded in pushing the gag out of her mouth and onto her bloody upper lip. He grimaced. “I really need to learn to tie things better.”

She at least was able to hold onto some dignity and not yell. “What now... and where did you get the horse?”

He smiled again at her, kindly and not foolishly. “Even though the bird wasn’t the rest of my group, they were still a few miles away. Bormon found them, and they brought horses. As for you, the last town was about ten miles or so back. Mig will be able to take you there. In fact you can keep her until later.”

“I will come after you again,” she said flatly.

“Yeah, hence why I said ‘until later.’ I know Hornwell isn’t one to welsch a deal on.”

“But you refused to pay up on your bet! That’s why-.” Her anger exploded. “You tricked me!”

He shrugged. “Hornwell was one of the few who would be stupid enough to think I was elven.” He chewed his lip. “The nerve.” With another shrug he stretched and yawned. “Antaeun willing, things will change for the better between us. Besides,” he leaned in towards her face, “I meant it when I said you were cute.” He flipped the gag back into her mouth as she opened it to share her own thoughts on the matter, and then he slapped the back of the horse. The horse galloped off as her kicking and screaming began once again.

Jace Kadavri watched Mig race off. He had no doubt she would bring Lorel directly to the town of Groston.

Of course it was possible Mig might stop to graze. He couldn’t remember if she had been fed this morning. “Oh well.”

Bormon was waiting halfway back to the encampment. He was fingering his short beard tip, as he had always seemed to do lately. Jace respected his friend too much to bring up that point. His closest friend turned soberly towards him. “You could had informed me ahead of time what you were doing.”

Jace nodded. "It was a choice on my part, and I'm sorry I tricked you into heading into the woods like that. But if we jumped her, somebody could have gotten hurt. If we called her out, I didn't know how she would react."

"And if she attacked me from behind in the woods?"

"I was there, Bor," he said with all jovialness gone. "I would not under any circumstances let anything happen to you. Not again." He added the last after a moment.

His friend breathed in the cold air and exhaled a large mass of mist between them. Before more than a second had passed, the air had cleared.

"She will be back after us, and odds are there will be others."

"There will always be others, Bor. Whether with her or because of somebody else we made as an enemy, there will always be others."

"I will trust you on this matter," the Hartdar said slowly. "You have the trust of everyone in our troupe because you've earned it. Mainly because of the times you appear wrong turn out to be right later. But if I might ask, why did you let her go? You've had no problems taking down those out for blood before, even women."

The kunda smile Jace tended to wear crept slowly back to his lips. It wasn't there fully, but enough. "I'm a sucker for a good looking woman." He looked down at the grape stains on his jacket and shirt. He tried to pick a spot clean, but the cold air had frozen the juices into the fabric. "And I swear I'm going to marry that girl someday."

Bormon laughed. "That's the fourth time you've said that about a girl in the last month."

"Fifth," Jace corrected. "Don't forget the one in Gef-throth."

"Fourth," Bormon countered. "Gef-throth was five weeks ago."

Jace looked at his friend as they got back to the others. "Five weeks?" Bormon affirmed his correction. "Wow. Alright then." He made a mental note to try to keep a better track of the days.

"You're also now without a horse," Bormon also injected.

"She'll be back," he said not sure if he meant Mig or Lorel. "Besides, it'll be a nice change to have a girl chasing me instead of vice-versa."

The dwarf shook his head under the man's smile, "Not when she wishes to gut you. There appears to be no *alive* stipulation on that bounty."

Everyone else in the camp was glad to see the group fully back together, even if Mig was now absent. He'd have to double-up with one of the others, either Morgz or his cousin Dreff, until the next town when he'd have to cut deep

into his purse to procure another steed, even if only temporary. In the long run, however, he was certain it would be worth it.

Whatever would happen because of tonight he was sure in his gut it would be interesting. Not necessarily fun, but interesting.