

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,'