

Chapter One

The common room of The Shepherd's Cock – formerly known as The Shepherd's Crock, until someone pinched the 'r' – was in pandemonium. A mass of sweat-charged, ale-filled humanity surged and jostled around the gaming area trying to place wagers.

As the mob shrieked and yelled to get the croupier's attention, a short, squat, ugly little man shoved and battered his way through. Reaching the croupier, he shoved a pile of coins into the man's outstretched hand. "Red, number ten," he growled.

The croupier eyed the man warily for a moment, then looked down at the coins. His eyes widened at the amount of gold he held. Quickly recovering his composure, he picked up one of the coins and bit into it. A huge grin split his face and he thrust the coins into a belt-pouch before removing a pencil from behind his ear. Scribbling something on a scrap of paper he handed it over. "Red, number ten it is, my friend. And may you be lucky."

Grunting an acknowledgement, the little man disappeared from view clutching his stub as more bodies pressed forward to place their wagers.

Across the other side of the room, blissfully unaware of the tumult, Ryzak slept the sleep of the totally hammered. Blissfully unaware, that is, until a loud guttural bellow tore through his slumber with the subtlety of a finger to the eye.

"That square's mine!"

Ryzak's eyes snapped open. Honed by years of hard drinking, his survival instincts kicked in and he thrust out a leg to stop himself from sliding off the chair. The action made his forehead slip off his arms and bump onto the tankard-scarred tabletop. He rubbed at his pounding head and eased himself upright.

A shrill scream rang out. As suddenly as it had sounded it cut off, replaced by strange choking noises.

"Nice one, turd-face. Now hand over the dosh."

Ryzak groaned. This was all he needed; some smart-arse with a big mouth aggravating the throbbing in his head. By the gods, he felt rough. It must have been that last ale. For some reason it was always the last one that made him feel ill. He peered myopically around the dimly-lit, smoke-filled interior of the common room, searching for the commotion that had disturbed his sleep.

His bleary gaze fastened on his friend Jollif, the tavern-keeper, who was busy pushing his way through the mass of inebriation at the far end of the room. Despite his drunken state, Ryzak could still recognise Jollif's corpulent figure when he saw it.

"All right, Sam," he heard Jollif say. "You've won your money, now get your hands off the croupier's throat, there's a good chap."

An avenue had opened in the throng to allow Jollif through, giving Ryzak an unrestricted view. His eyes narrowed as he saw which 'Sam' Jollif was speaking to.

Sawn-off! The end result of a brief but fruitful liaison between a lonely shepherd and a sex-mad rock-trolless, Sawn-off Sam was a maniac at the best of times. When riled, he swiftly turned from a short-arsed surly half-breed into a short-arsed murderous half-breed. The man was lethal.

Sam's low, growling reply carried to where Ryzak was sitting. "Yer gonna make me?"

Ryzak groaned. He recognised the tone of Sam's voice, and hoped that Jollif also did. Otherwise this could be the point at which his friend became a dead friend.

"If I have to."

Bugger! No such luck.

Sam puffed out his barrel chest and fixed Jollif with a hard stare. "So yer think yer man enough, do yer?"

"Well," began Jollif, not appearing to notice the none-too-subtle challenge, "if you don't release the croupier he will soon be a very dead croupier. Then we won't have anyone for the gaming table and that will be the end of the gambling for a week or two, until we find another."

Sam's face puckered into a scowl as he thought it over. Suddenly he smiled, then thrust the bug-eyed croupier away, stepped forward and clapped Jollif on the back. "Yer got a point there, tavern-keep." Turning to the watching crowd, he grinned and raised his voice. "Right, me lads. The ales are on me. Seems like I 'it a lucky streak and 'ave a few crowns in me pocket."

As the crowd cheered their appreciation, Ryzak shook his head, in relief that his friend had avoided an untimely death, and dismay that the ruckus had come from the gaming area. It never ceased to amaze him how people could get so worked up over a stupid bar game. It seemed like a waste of time to Ryzak, more so since he'd lost most of his money playing the game within days of arriving in the small village of Fleshwick. He was so broke now that it was as well Jollif was the tavern-keeper, or he would have been slung out on his ear.

Another loud cheer went up. Ryzak winced and ran a grubby hand through his dishevelled mop of sandy-brown hair. He scowled at the noisy group and reached across the table for his ale. Now he was awake he might as well have another drink. He raised the tankard to his lips and took a hefty swig – and halted mid-swallow. His eyes bulged in horror as the foul-tasting liquid hit his taste-buds. His ale had gone warm! A feeling of nausea crept over him. The blood rushed from his face and a cold sweat slicked his skin. He doubled over and spewed the offending contents onto the scuffed, pockmarked floorboards, watching in sickly repugnance as the brown liquid frothed and bubbled for a moment before being absorbed by the wood. Wiping dark brown dribbles off his chin with the sleeve of his tunic, he straightened and gestured towards the bar for another drink.

By the gods, his life was a mess. Even his old friend Jollif was getting fed up with him hanging around. He had not said, as such, but Ryzak could tell. Perhaps it was time to move on. After all, he had only intended to stay for a week, reminiscing about the good old days with his pal; but that had been six months ago. It was amazing how quickly time passed you by if you let it.

The slam of a tankard on the table jolted him out of his ruminations. Looking up, his eyes met the hostile gaze of the serving girl. It looked as though Jollif was not the only one wanting to see the back of him. Ryzak attempted to give her a winning smile, but it must have come out like a drunken leer. The girl's eyes went cold and flinty. Drink-dulled reflexes prevented him from avoiding the blow. He could only sit in stunned amazement as a hand lashed out and caught him hard across the cheek with a wicked slap.

Before he had the chance to protest his innocence of whatever it was she thought he had done, she had spun on her heel and stalked away. Bewildered, Ryzak watched her go, his cheek burning from the impact. In no fit state to figure out how he had managed to upset her, he decided to drown his sorrows. As he raised the tankard to his lips his arm trembled, and he slopped some of its contents onto the table.

“I think you've had enough,” scolded Jollif, easing his portly frame on to a stool beside him. “When *you* spill ale, you've definitely had enough!”

The inn-keeper removed a grubby rag from his tunic pocket and began to dab at the beads of sweat forming on his bald pate.

Ryzak's bloodshot eyes tried to focus on his friend's flabby features. “Jollif, my bes' friend,” he said, smiling in recognition and clapping him affectionately on the back – slopping more ale in the process. “Bin with me through all the good times,” Ryzak continued, throwing an arm over Jollif's shoulder and hugging him in a moment of drunken ebullience. “Heroes, that's what we are. Heroes. General, er, whassname, said so. Right after the Battle of Drakov, 'member? Tha's when I single-handed, hingle-san – charged the enemy all on my own. ‘Turned the battle’, he said. Me! Turned the battle! Those were the days.”

Ryzak heaved a satisfied sigh and raised the tankard to his lips – and missed, spilling most of the contents down the front of his tunic. He stared at the wet stain in fascination for a moment, then began to dab at it with his hand.

Jollif looked on pityingly. How the mighty had fallen, even if the man was only mighty in his own mind. He well remembered the incident Ryzak referred to; the man never shut up bragging about it, which was why he always ended up drinking on his own. He told his tale to all who would listen, and to those who wouldn't, hence the ring of empty tables around him. If it were not for the gaming area, Jollif did not think he would have had a patron left.

Ryzak would never admit that he was actually trying to flee the battle at the time, of course. He was not quite that stupid. In his panic to escape, he had startled his horse and inadvertently sent it galloping the wrong way, towards the enemy. His own troops, seeing such an apparently heroic charge, had enthusiastically followed. By the time Ryzak had realised he was heading into danger it was too late, he was in the thick of it.

“That was a long time ago, Ryzak. We have to move on, make new adventures.”

Ryzak abandoned his ineffectual ministrations and turned his bleary gaze on Jollif. “You're right, my frien'. I've bin thinking while I ...”

The tavern door crashed open. The loud smack as it slammed against the wall, coupled with the shouts of pain from the patrons it smashed into en route, silenced the conversation in the room. Heads turned to see what the excitement was about.

Jollif rose from his stool in astonishment as a beautiful young woman hurtled into the room, her clothing in tatters, fear etched on her face. She screamed as three battle-scarred barbarians ran in after her, their unkempt black hair hanging loose over their fur-lined jackets. Swirling red patterns were tattooed on the cheeks and foreheads of their

fearsome faces.

“Bugger me,” murmured Jollif, recognising the tribal markings of the men. “Wolverines!”

They were the most feared of all the barbarian tribes, known the land over for their ferocious fighting skills, their reckless abandon and their passion for torturing their captives. They were right evil bastards.

The light from the oil lamps glistened on their drawn swords as they skidded to a halt just inside the door, the sinister gleam adding to the aura of menace surrounding them.

“Bugger me,” Jollif whispered again, and began to back away from the table. There was only one safe place for him, and it certainly wasn't here.

Startled by the door crashing open, Ryzak swung round, nearly falling off his seat as his sense of balance deserted him. Once he had recovered, he gaped in open-mouthed admiration at the tall, dark-haired beauty who had run into the common room.

The girl's fist flew to her mouth in fear as she stumbled forward. Then, noticing Ryzak looking at her, she ran to him and threw herself at his feet. “Please, good sir,” she implored, “will you help me? Those foul beasts mean to take me for their own amusement. Please save me!”

In the background, the remaining patrons beat a hasty retreat, leaving Ryzak to it. It was not their fight, after all. Why spoil a good night? Ryzak, on the other hand, ever smitten by a pretty face, grinned drunkenly down at the girl.

“Never fear, my pretty maiden. My frien' and I would be pleased to be of assistance. Wouldn't we, Jollif?” He twisted round, his gaze falling on an empty seat. “Jollif? Jollif?” he called, nervously scanning the now empty room. “Where've you gone?” The strange, sickly feeling in the pit of his stomach gripped him as he turned to face the three men. They were slowly advancing, their features distorted by smiles of cruel intent.

Ryzak gulped in apprehension and rose unsteadily to his feet.

The more heavily tattooed leader leered at him. “Give the girl to us, stranger, or you die.”

Swaying from the effects of too much ale, Ryzak peered into the girl's fear-filled face, flicked a nervous glance at the three men, looked at the girl again, gave a forced smile, and began to frantically claw at his sword. For some reason it seemed to be glued into its scabbard.

The leader grinned. “It don't seem right killing a *hero* without knowing who he is,” he sneered. “What's yer name?”

Ryzak looked up in terror. “Er, Ryzak,” he heard himself mumble.

“Ryzak?” the barbarian repeated. He glanced at his colleagues, a hint of fear in his eyes. “Not *the* Ryzak? Hero of Drakov?”

His sword finally clear of leather, Ryzak pointed it in what he hoped was a threatening manner towards the men. “What?”

“*The* Ryzak? Hero of Drakov?” the leader asked again.

Taken aback by the recognition, Ryzak stood taller, puffed out his chest, and tried to appear nonchalant. “Yes. I am he.”

The effect was slightly marred by the clatter of his sword falling to the floor as the effort of concentrating on the three men, holding his weapon and talking at the same time all proved too much.

The leader appeared not to notice the lapse. Casting his cohorts a nervous glance, he hastily sheathed his sword. “I'm terribly sorry to have bothered you,” he said, spreading his arms wide and bowing low. “Really. You keep the girl. Plenty more where she came from. Right, lads?”

Mumbled agreement sounded from the man's companions as they slowly backed away.

“Well. We'll be off now. Sorry to have interrupted your evening.” The leader turned and scrambled for the exit. In a mad dash, his men followed his example, shoving at each other in their hurry to escape.

“Oh thank you, thank you, good sir,” the girl gushed as they fled. She rose to her feet and threw her arms around Ryzak's neck, kissing him soundly.

Both astonished and relieved by the men's sudden departure, Ryzak fainted.

The girl gave a startled yelp as he fell. Then, pulled over by his collapse, she landed in a crumpled heap on top of him.

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The three Wolverines fled north along the deserted main street of Fleshwick. They did not stop running until they reached a deserted barn at the outskirts of the village. The leader skidded to a halt and cast a furtive glance behind him before sprinting the short distance to the open doorway and throwing himself through. His cohorts rapidly joined him.

Inside, all three lay on the ground, exhausted, listening for signs of pursuit. But aside from their heavy breathing, nothing could be heard. There were no loud shrieks of outrage, no heavy pounding of booted feet, no growls of anger. Nothing. Even so, five minutes had passed before the more heavily tattooed leader rose and quietly urged his men to do likewise. Once on their feet they listened for any alien noise, but all remained quiet.

Relieved that they did not appear to have been followed, the leader broke the silence with an awe-struck whisper. "Oh my, that was outrageous. Did you see the look of panic on that unkempt rascal's face?" He giggled, then clapped his hands in delight. "He was actually afraid of us."

"Of you, Rupert," one of the men gushed. "I was so scared, you nearly had me peeing my pants."

Rupert laughed and reached out to tweak the man's cheek between forefinger and thumb. "Oh, Stevie, you are a one. Fancy being scared of little old me. Come. Let us remove these loathsome wigs and wash our faces free of this filth. It is time to celebrate, my fellow thespians. We have been well paid and Troupe Dalberr has finally come of age, even though our adoring audience was blissfully unaware of his part in our act."

Accompanied by their girlish titters, Rupert ushered his companions to the back of the barn, where they had secreted some water and a change of clothing earlier that day.

Half an hour later, suitably washed and attired in clean leggings and tunic, Rupert linked arms with his two friends. "Let us away from here, my fine fellows. Now is the time for us to eat good food, drink sweet wine, and lay our weary bones upon the finest silken sheets. We have played our part to perfection, and who can gainsay us?"

As they quietly slipped away, a freshly-laundered set of lady's riding clothes swung gently on a wooden peg behind them: mute witness to their stealthy departure.