

Chapter 1: The Murkstep

456 Years Later

Ranluas wrenched his leg free of the deep bog, wincing at the foul squelching sound and accompanying acrid odor. He sighed and collapsed back onto the narrow path, staring up at an expanse of iron clouds. Somewhere deeper in the bog, something growled, but Ranluas pointedly ignored it. If anything dangerous had picked up his scent, he would have heard it coming long ago, one of the few benefits of his mixed blood.

He knocked the heel of his boot against the hard-packed dirt, clumps of viscous mud and grimy vegetation falling away. Ranluas picked himself up, brushing the sweaty locks of his light brown hair from his face. The air around him was unbearably humid, not even a hint of a breeze to usher it along.

He was deep within the Felbogs at this point, dozens of miles from anything that resembled a settlement. That suited him just fine; he found the strange bog creatures better company than most humanoids. At least they didn't hiss *cateye* or *longblood* when they thought he was out of earshot. They simply tried to swallow him whole; direct confrontation he could understand.

Ranluas set off down the path, treading carefully and sure not to step over any of the tracks in the dirt. He frowned as none appeared to have a wide heel and three protruding claws.

Tilting his head back, he scanned the sky for the third time that day. *What's taking her so long?*

Risel had flown off days ago, he had presumed to hunt for her own food. The razorclaw became moody if Ranluas asked too many questions of her, so he hadn't asked her destination at the time. Feeling a pang of sadness at her absence, he now wished he had. For all his talk of enjoying solitude, it was nice to have *someone* to talk to. He had spent enough of his life alone as it was. Besides, a man could go crazy wandering these bogs with only the cries of unseen creatures breaking the silence. Crazy enough to trudge headlong into pools of rancid bogwater, apparently.

A welcome sight pulled Ranluas from his gloominess: a fresh, perfectly preserved, *beautiful* footprint. Wide heel, three sharp claws. His pace quickened, fueled by the discovery, Risel and her absence forgotten. If the murkstep had climbed out of the water and onto the path, it would be searching for a larger patch of marsh to eat and slumber in for the night. If he could catch up to it before it submerged itself again, he would have a significant advantage if it came to a fight.

His brisk walk turned to a run. His leather boot soles slapped against the dirt, conscious but uncaring of the sound he was producing. Murksteps were extremely hard of hearing: you'd have to practically be on top of one for it to notice you. The problems came once it did.

Ranluas tried to recall everything he'd learned about the creature from the bestiary in Saltbell's library. His mind worked quickly, bits and pieces of recollection floating to the surface. Long, serpentine body. Insectoid face dominated by sharp, bisecting jaws—powerful enough to

tear a man in two with a single bite. Six pairs of clawed feet, each tipped with hallucinogenic toxins.

Not the worst thing he had ever tracked down.

Ranluas drove his left foot into the ground, launching himself over a break in the path where two marshes conjoined. As he sailed past the obstruction, he suppressed a loud whoop. *Gods*, it felt good to be on the hunt again. As he landed, he skidded to a halt, immediately thankful he was able to contain himself.

He grew still, pointed ears twitching as he willed his senses further outwards. Yes, there *was* something there, a rhythmic buzzing that alternated between two frequencies. He recognized the sounds well before they became intelligible. Two voices, both human. Not good. If there were humans this deep into the uncharted parts of the Felbogs, they belonged to one of the Brigand Families. Most likely Jade's Fang from Blackbottom, as he had pursued the murkstep deep into the northern marshlands.

He quickly searched for a means to conceal himself. His hearing gave him fair warning, but he had less than two minutes before the bandits were upon him. Ranluas could handle himself against the two, especially with the element of surprise, but taking the time to deal with them risked losing the murkstep's trail again.

As Ranluas took in his immediate surroundings, it was apparent that his options were painfully limited. The trees in the Felbogs were spindly things and held no vegetation. Constant cloud cover and foul water meant the trees lived, but never flourished. Much like him, now that he thought about it. Was he that much different from these trees, hiding away in these suffocating marshes? He *lived*, sure, but-

Focus, you meandering idiot! The logical part of his mind screamed at him, and he shook away the contemplation. Now was no time for introspective wallowing, especially without Risel here to see it. The trees were of no use and there was no other vegetation aside from rough and scraggly weeds that grew on the surface of the bogs. He groaned audibly. He'd known what he would have to do as soon as he'd picked up the voices. It was just nice to pretend, even if for a brief moment, that he had any other option.

Ranluas unslung the cherrywood longbow from his shoulder, reverently tucking it behind a cluster of moss-covered stones the size of his torso: the safest place he could find under the circumstances. A hard leather quiver and canvas bag with most of his belongings followed close behind. The voices were now clear in his ears; about a minute before the pair became visible. His assumption that they were Brigands had been accurate; that much was apparent from their horrendous grammar and strong accents, like school children with mouths full of marbles.

He felt at his waist, caressing the smooth wooden pommels of the two daggers given to him at far too young an age. They, of course, would unwittingly join him on this brief venture. He couldn't go *completely* unarmed; that would be more obscene than stripping nude. His hands slid around to the back of his belt, where the priceless leather pouch remained looped. That too would stay, the contents perfectly sealed inside.

Ranluas started as a snapping branch echoed in his ear. The brigands were approaching rapidly; less than twenty seconds now. He peeled off his boots, placing them with his other belongings. He grabbed two stones he guessed were heavy enough, and pulled a clump of dead reeds from the edge of the marsh over the pile. Glancing down the path, he could just make out the shadows of two broad figures coming around a nearby bend.

Wait until Risel hears about this.

In two long strides Ranluas cleared the path, leaping as far into the bog as he could, twisting mid flight so his hands, each one grasping a moss covered stone, broke the murky water first. The rest of him followed, muscles taught to keep his body as straight as possible. He slid neatly into the grime, plunging himself into darkness. Even with his sharper sight, silt and muck swirled across his vision, obscuring all but the shafts of weak daylight dancing on the small ripples he left behind.

He had guessed wrong, the weight of the stones was too much, sinking him further into the bog. Water turned into a semi-solid stew of mud and dead plants. He dropped one of the stones and began to float back towards the surface. Air bubbles drifted upwards as he calmly released small breaths until the weight of his remaining stone served as a counterbalance to his natural buoyancy. There Ranluas drifted, perfectly suspended over the murky bottom, feeling the slimy tendrils of vegetation grope at his uncovered skin.

He used the visual deprivation to his advantage, willing his hearing to the surface, back to the winding path, the sounds of nature rushing to meet his ears. Another wonderful trick his Elfkin blood leant him. The voices of the two Brigands came muffled as though through a thick stone wall.

“...tellin’ ya, there’s a reason ‘e’s got us pullin’ in all the stores.”

“You think he’s expectin’ trouble?”

“Don’t see why else ‘e’d want the extra loot now.”

Ranluas frowned beneath the water. Jade’s Fang controlled much of the northern Felbogs, and their smuggling business across Godking’s Lake brought in immense profits. What could make Thatcher feel the need to further supplement his income? These two were most likely assigned to pull up crates of uncut gemstones and gleaming gold coins, hidden deep in this no man’s land. A common strategy amongst the Families. If there were only two of them, they must have some kind of proficiency in combat. This part of the Bogs was rife with natural dangers. Dangers like an easily distracted Half-Elfkin with sharp knives lurking under the muck. He remained perfectly still as the Brigands walked past the marsh he was submerged in.

“You see the new floor they opened in the Tower?”

A throaty laugh echoed through the water. “I ‘aven’t been back in the Tower since I blew all o’ last month’s earnin’s on twenty-two.”

“Twenty-two!? Ain’t that the broth-”

“Yeah, yeah. I don’t need no lecture from you, Krote.”

The voices were growing fainter now, the pair thumping up the path Ranluas had just come down. Would they notice his boot prints leading in the opposite direction? Doubtful. They didn't seem like the most observant tandem.

He flinched as a barbed piece of vegetation wrapped around his leg. Just another minute to be sure; he didn't want the Brigands doubling back for him. His lungs began to protest, but he ignored them, straining to hear the last of the Fangs' conversation.

"...think it's a left up 'ere."

"Left!? There ain't no path left."

That distorted laugh again, not much louder than a whisper now.

"I told ya to wear ya worst clothes, didn't I?"

A moment of silence. "No. I ain't divin' in no bog."

"Calm yerself Krote, I never said anythin' 'bout divin'. Just a little wadin' is all. There, see that carvin' on the trunk? When ya see that out 'ere in the middle o' nowhere, that's how ya know-

The vegetation around Ranluas' leg constricted, yanking him downwards. He let out a gasp in surprise, large air bubbles rushing upwards into the murky darkness. Whatever it was was strong, cutting through his trousers and pressing against his skin. He extinguished his panic, allowing the logical side of his mind to take over. Not vegetation, but a *grip*. Ironclad, three cool knives digging into his calf and shin.

As the water congealed to mud and debris he felt a large shape shift beneath him, kicking up even more sediment. He barked a humorless laugh, his last remnant of air swallowed by the void.

Idiot. You were too distracted by those two buffoons and your fanciful daydreams to notice the tracks.

Despite all of his self-proclaimed skill, despite the week he had spent in careful pursuit, the murkstep had found *him*.

It dragged Ranluas deeper into the bog, wet earth and stale water forcing their way into his nose and mouth. *Not good. Really, really, not good.* If the creature was able to bury him at the bottom of the bog... he shuddered. Once a murkstep's prey was rendered immobile, they slowly suffocated to death in the mud, too wrapped up in blissful hallucinations to notice. At least he thought that was the case; the bestiary in Saltbell currently felt a world away.

Ranluas clawed at his belt, pushing arms through thick silt, ignoring the trio of claws grasping his leg. That would have to come later. For now, he needed a weapon. He was whipped through the void, any semblance of direction he had retained now promptly erased. *Stay calm. Thirty seconds before you black out. Use them.* His hand found one of the daggers, the wooden grip a lifeline in the darkness. He drew it sluggishly and forced his body to move through his suffocating surroundings.

His palm brushed against the scaled foot holding him in place, feeling rigid plates stacked upon each other. Still being thrown about like a piece of laundry left out in a storm, Ranluas

pried his fingers between the murkstep's wide foot and his injured leg, the skin around his knuckles peeling off against the hard scales.

He probed his dagger into the small space held open by his bloody digits and hoped to find the soft underside of the murkstep's foot. Unfortunately, he also found his own calf, sharpened blade slicing cleanly into his already damaged leg as he jostled it into the creature's grip. He bit down from the pain, catching his cheek between his teeth, blood mixing with the muck coating the inside of his mouth.

Ranluas got the dagger into what he hoped was a suitable orientation and pushed for all he was worth. He wrestled his free hand from the beast's grip, slamming it onto the pommel. The blade protested, as if grinding against the hard exterior of a shellfish. Then—blessedly—it burst through, sinking neatly to the hilt.

A scream erupted in the darkness all around him, his sensitive ears ringing from the shrill frequency. *Now!* He kicked with his injured left leg, fresh streaks of pain shooting up to his hip. The beast's grip was loosened just enough for Ranluas to break free, immediately clawing in a direction he hoped led to the surface. His only chance lay in drawing the creature out of the bog and onto dry land.

Strange images began to flicker in the dank darkness around Ranluas; was that a *man* swimming next to him? Head pounding and lungs well past agony, he ignored them, focusing on what he thought was a distant ripple of light. The sediment around him began to disperse, giving way to clearer water. He kicked out his arms and legs rhythmically, doing his best to remember the swimming lessons given to him at the docks of Fayre a lifetime ago. It was a painfully slow process; his left leg wouldn't respond as he wanted it to.

Anxiety bubbled up inside of him. He could *feel* the darkness pressing against his back, thinly veiling the grinning maw of the murkstep. It would rip into him any moment, jaws piercing his back and tearing out his spine. Vivid images manifested before him: his insides becoming his outsides, settling to the bottom of the bog for the beast to dine on, Risel left alone to-

His head broke through the surface, sour air flooding into his lungs. He drank it gluttonously, chest heaving as dark spots in his vision slowly receded. The air did not remain in his lungs for long, as a sharp gasp emptied them again. *Oldir's ears*, he swore to himself, looking around at trees lush with greenery, dense swaths of vibrant leaves and ripe Darian fruits nestled in the branches. In his brief time submerged, the Felbogs had transformed into a tropical paradise.

The bestiary had said a murkstep's toxins took five to ten minutes to enter the bloodstream. He'd have to edit that.

The water next to him began to froth, setting off clanging alarm bells in the back of his head. Splashing his way across the murky surface, he instinctively kicked to one side as the murkstep's scaly back breached the water near him. He lunged out for a clump of weeds and shouted in surprise as they turned to writhing snakes in his grasp. The voice of reason, painfully soft, hammered in his mind, fighting against what seemed reality.

Ranluas dragged himself out of the bog, throwing himself into a roll as a whistling sound descended towards him, the murkstep's chitinous face slamming into the soft bank nearby. He came to rest on the narrow path, chest heaving, fantastical hallucinations swimming before him. The tree nearest him had a grinning face grown from the bark, one of its eyes closing in an animated wink. The sky itself was a bright green, fluorescent and difficult to look at. Strange creatures with three pairs of wings lazily wheeled about in the veridian expanse. *Gods*, he thought to himself, *this is worse than the time I accidentally inhaled shimmerdust.*

Rolling onto his side, he groaned loudly at the pain in his lower left leg. As expected, the murkstep hesitated in the bog, deciding if he was worth exiting the water for. He took a brief moment to take stock of his situation. Glancing down at himself, it seemed grim. His lower left leg was torn badly at the calf, sheets of skin ripped away, blood pooling on the dirt beneath him. His trousers were in tatters and every inch of his pale skin was covered in a thick layer of grime. The apparition of a small man dressed in Fayrian style, with long coat and tight britches, danced a jig on his chest. That one he could probably ignore.

Sparing a glance in the direction the Brigands had gone, Ranluas tried his best to get to his feet, hissing as he put pressure on his left leg. The murkstep had seemingly made up its mind, beginning to claw its way up the bog's shallow embankment towards him. As it climbed out of the water, Ranluas got his first earnest look at the creature.

The murkstep was about eight feet in length, six pairs of muscular legs jutting out from its silver-scaled body. Its face was wide and flat, dominated by two separate pairs of jaws, bisecting one another to form a massive maw. Internally, it would be supported by an enormous spine and countless vertebrae. It roared up at him, the sound manifesting in Ranluas' distorted vision as rippling, multicolored waves. They crashed around him, blowing back the false leaves of the nearby trees. Worse, the edges of the murkstep began to blur, its form becoming indistinct like an overambitious watercolor.

His hand wrapped around the smooth hilt of his remaining dagger, a quick tug bringing it free from its leather sheath. His other blade was either still implanted into the bottom of the murkstep's foot or was now submerged deep in the bog. Silver script adorned the side of this one, etched in a flowing, feminine hand. *Fumus*, it read. 'Smoke', in the First Tongue. If he could not get to his bow, this would be his best chance against the creature.

As if hearing his thoughts, the murkstep charged forward, clawed feet hammering into the dirt. It moved faster than Ranluas anticipated, closing the distance between them in a matter of seconds. Using his good leg, he dove out of the way, skidding across the path and rolling down another, steeper embankment. As the murkstep charged past, Ranluas noted the beast's open underbelly, unprotected by the tightly linked scales. *Just like the foot, only a bigger target.*

He blinked as another apparition appeared before him.

A female Elfkin stood on the path above, golden-brown hair softly blowing despite the stagnant air. Sharp ears almost a foot in length protruded through her honey colored tresses. She wore the traditional elven *sona*, a form-hugging gown made of fine cream silk. A warm smile formed creases around her striking blue eyes, the only hint of her mature age. He knew this

woman, or at least, he had. Her visage pulled at his memory, like a child insistently tugging on their parent's coat to get their attention. *Mother*. Ranluas remembered very little of her, of any part of his brief childhood before being forced to flee the elven capital of Asmerine.

The murkstep rushed through the image, dispelling it into colorful wisps that rose skyward. He cursed himself, not expecting the hallucinations to pull from his memories. He wouldn't have time to get out of the way of this charge, not while balanced on the steep embankment. Bracing himself, he gripped his remaining dagger in both hands, waiting for an opening. The beast reared up, bending almost in half as its six front legs left the ground.

Ranluas dashed in, a shout building in his chest as he rushed to meet the creature. It slammed downwards, sharp claws inches from his face. This close, he could see the toxin on them, dark condensation gathering at the tips. He dove headfirst up the embankment, twisting onto his back as he landed, thrusting the knife with both hands into the exposed flesh of the murkstep's underside. It sank in easily, blood spraying from the wound, coating Ranluas in a dark green icoir. It shrieked in pain, writhing on top of him, jerking the dagger from his grip. The weight of its serpentine body crushed into him, driving him deep into the soft soil. He heaved with the scraps of energy he could muster, pushing with the murkstep's motions.

A small opening emerged to his left and he shot through it, rolling down to the edge of the bog. The wounded creature slid into the water near him, high-pitched trumpeting still giving off colorful waves of sound. Ranluas scrambled up the incline, losing his footing as often as he kept it. His left leg had lost all feeling, lagging behind him as he reached the narrow path. Weaponless for the moment, he sank to one knee, ripping a strip of cloth from his tattered pants. He bound his leg just above the calf, tying off a tight knot in an attempt to slow the blood flow.

Below, the murkstep was gathering itself for another charge. Ranluas was certain the creature had at least minimal intelligence, and he doubted his same tactic would work again. He scanned the length of the creature, which was coiling around itself on the surface of the marsh, looking for another weak point. *There*.

He felt at his belt almost by instinct, frowning as his fingers probed empty leather. *It'll be close*, he thought as the creature sprung forward, screaming and leaking green blood across the wet earth. It was getting increasingly difficult to discern the murkstep's true form, its body blurring and refocusing in a nauseating pattern. His mother stood on the other side of the bog, hands clasped before her as if in prayer for her long-lost son.

Ranluas closed his eyes and slowed his breathing as the murkstep thundered up the incline, using the sound of its hammering feet to judge its distance. He would *not* fall to this creature. He couldn't admit it, but he had maintained a small piece of hope that someday things would be better. That one day he'd *belong* somewhere. Not in these accursed marshes, and certainly not in the stomach of this beast.

The rumbling sound of the murkstep reached a crescendo, bearing down on top of him.

Eyes snapping open, Ranluas fell backwards, his vision dominated by a mandible-filled face. Simultaneously, a familiar weight dropped into the sheath he wore on his right hip, his dagger coalescing there like morning dew on a blade of grass. In one fluid motion, Ranluas

unsheathed the returned blade and flung it towards the face of the murkstep, praying he timed the maneuver properly. Although the dagger flew towards open air, the creature had no time to alter its course and charged headlong into the blade's trajectory. With a satisfying squelch, the enchanted dagger buried itself into the beast's glassy black eye, its screams of pain redoubling, so intense that Ranluas had to clamp his hands over his semi-elven ears.

The creature was wounded, perhaps as much as he was now, but that made it all the more dangerous. It thrashed around on the path, rows of clawed feet tearing at the earth, ripping chunks of soil free and sending them flying in all directions. As the dirt rained down around him, he saw it as countless drops of molten fire, glowing with a deep, white heat. Ranluas flinched, expecting the droplets to eat away his flesh as they landed on him, but calmed as reason dispelled the hallucination. His dagger remained embedded in the creature's eye, it would be another ten seconds before it returned to him. He glanced at the cluster of mossy rocks where his bow and arrows lay, doubtful he could reach them in time.

This needed to end in the next exchange, the toxins now roaring through Ranluas' body. The world around him began to descend into a frightening amalgamation of bright color and swirling apparitions. He groaned as the image of the murkstep swam in and out of focus, serpentine body doubling in his vision. He tried to blink the mirror image away as he did after one too many Astorian ales, but the frustrating duplicate remained. The dagger returned to his belt, and he tightly wrapped his hand around the familiar pommel. Holding something undeniably tangible helped, the world stabilizing slightly.

Dragging his left leg behind him, Ranluas began to move towards the two creatures which were now crouched low to the ground, their remaining eyes watching his approach. His attention swung from one murkstep to the other, hunting for even the slightest inconsistency to determine which one was real. It was no good, the two were a perfect pair. *Fifty-fifty. I've had worse odds than that.* Only those times, his life hadn't been amongst the prize pool.

He picked up speed, adrenaline driving his left foot in front of his right, awkward walk growing to faltering run. Ahead, the two silver-scaled bodies limped forward to meet him like the world's most pathetic joust.

He had decided that the creature on the left was the real one, for no reason other than if he were meant to live, Ijun, Ashal god of luck, would bless his choice. At the moment of no return, once he had shifted his momentum towards the chosen murkstep, a cynical thought, that he had never even *prayed* to Ijun before, crossed his mind.

Well, he must have done something in his life to earn favor with the Trickster, as when he slammed his shoulder into the flat face of the murkstep, he connected with insectoid chiten. The creature faltered, its right row of legs buckling under the weight of its massive body. The initial wound left on its underbelly rolled into sight, and Ranluas plunged his dagger into it, running down the length of the creature with a wild scream. He tore upwards, then downwards, hopefully causing as much internal damage as possible. The dagger caught on a large vertebrae, tearing out of his hands as his body continued forward on only momentum.

Dark earth rushed up to meet him as his leg gave out, no energy left to catch himself as the side of his head smacked against hard-packed dirt. His vision swam again, a sharp ringing bouncing around his skull. Rolling onto his back, he watched as the murkstep—only one now—violently twitched ten feet away. His breath caught as the creature slowly rose onto its few functional feet. It turned, one good eye full of burning anger, stepped forward as if to finish him off, then collapsed in a twisted heap, motionless.

Ranluas blew out a sigh which turned into a bout of shuttering laughter. He had done it. A murkstep had fully gotten the drop on him, and he had come out on top. Gods, he was talented. And so, *so* lucky. He offered up his first ever prayer to Ijun, a thanks for the deity's guidance when he had needed it most. Ranluas was far from religious, but in this world, divine favor was as valuable as physical currency—if not more.

His head lolled to the side, catching one last glimpse of a honey-haired Elfkin smiling at him from afar before falling into unconsciousness.

Verseweaver's Note : I remember Ran telling me of his time in the Felbogs and how he viewed them as a place of intense pensiveness. He told me he enjoyed spending the burgeoning years of his adulthood there, although by then I could tell when my good friend was lying to me. He would never have admitted it, but this was the loneliest stretch of his life, I think.