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**Opening Extract from...**

# **The Dark Defiles**

Written by Richard Morgan

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## TWO

He'd paid the whores for the whole afternoon, but in the end couldn't summon much enthusiasm for a third go round. Usually, two women at once solved that kind of problem for him, but not today. Maybe it was the smell of damp wool that still clung to their bodies even after they'd peeled naked for him, maybe the fact he caught the mask of fake arousal falling off the face of the younger one a couple too many times in the act. That kind of thing stabbed at him, took him out of the moment. He knew he was paying, but he didn't like to be reminded of the fact, and back in Yhelteht he wouldn't have been.

*What's the matter, Dragonbane? You never fucking happy? Up on the steppe, you craved all that southern sophistication you'd left behind. Put you back in the imperial city and you wish you could have the simple life again. Now here you are with simple whores in a simple little town, and that's not right for you either.*

Ye Gods, he missed Imrana.

Wasn't talking to the bitch currently, but missed her still.

So when the young one knelt before him on the floor and slipped his flaccid cock into her mouth, while her older companion sat on a stool in the corner, legs apart, lifting one pendulous tit at a time and tonguing the nipple with leering glances in his direction, he just grunted and shook his head. Hoisted the girl bodily from her knees – his cock slipped back out of her mouth, still pretty much flaccid – and set her aside. The older whore eyed him warily as he got up off the dishevelled bed. He read her thoughts as if they were tattooed across her face. No telling what any paying customer might do when they couldn't get it up, and this one here was big and battle-scarred, and a foreigner to boot. Harsh alien accent and hair all tangled up with talismans in iron. Lurid tales of the Majak had percolated right across the continent in the last couple of centuries – they'd doubtless got as far as the Hironish Isles long ago. *Bloody steppe savages, disembowel a girl and cook her on a spit soon as look at her most likely if they got out of bed the wrong side one morning . . .*

He forced a reassuring grimace and went to stare out of the window. Heard them move behind him with alacrity, start gathering up their clothes and the coin he'd left on the table. Light-footed, they left in what seemed like seconds and the door of his room clunked shut. He felt the relief it brought go through his whole frame. He slumped against the window, rested his head on cool glass. Outside, a light rain was falling into the street, clogging up daylight that was already past its best. A couple

of children went past, splashing deliberately in the puddles and yattering some rhyme he could barely make out. He'd learnt the League tongue, more or less, while on campaign in the north during the war, but the Hironish accent was hard work.

*Yeah, like their fucking awful food and their fucking awful weather and their fucking awful whores. Five weeks in this shit-hole already, and still no—*

Commotion downstairs. A woman shrieked. Furniture went over.

He frowned. Cocked his head at the sound.

Another shriek. Coarse laughter, and men calling to each other. The words were indistinct, but the rhythms were Majak.

*Uh-ob.*

He grabbed his breeches off the bed, trod hurriedly into them on his way to the door. Shirt off the table as he passed, out into the corridor still bare-chested. Shouldered into the garment as he went down the stairs. No time for boots or other refinement, because—

He arrived on the ground floor of the inn, barefoot and undone. Surveyed the scene before him. Thin crop of locals at tables and bar, gazes fixed steadfastly down on their drinks, eyes averted from the quick chaos erupting in their midst, the new arrivals . . .

There were three of them. Shendanak's men, just in from the street by the look of it, felt coats still buttoned up and damp across the shoulders from the rain. One had the younger of Egar's whores grasped firmly by the crotch and one tit, was nuzzling and licking at her neck. The other two seemed engaged in facing down the innkeeper.

'Oi!' Egar barked, in Majak. 'Fuck do you think you're doing?'

The one holding the whore looked up. 'Dragonbane!' he bawled. 'Brother! We were just looking for you! Get your drinking boots on! 's time to light this shit-hole town *right* the fuck up – Majak style!'

Egar nodded slowly. 'I see. Whose idea was that, then?'

'Old Klarn, mate! The man himself.' The whore bucked and twisted in the speaker's grip. She sank teeth into his forearm. He winced and grinned, let go of her crotch, used the free hand to squeeze her jaws open and force her head back, clear of his flesh. Looked like she'd left a pretty distinct bite there in the thick muscle behind the wrist, welling blood and everything, but the Majak's voice barely wavered from its previous slurring good cheer. Egar estimated he'd been drinking a while. 'Fucking bitch. Yeah, Klarn says we've been soft-soaping around these fish-fuckers for long enough. Time to get steppe-handed on their arses. In't that right, boys?'

Growls of approval from the other two. By now they had the innkeeper bent back over his own bar with the flat of a knife blade tapping under his chin and his feet dangling a couple of inches off the sawdusted floor. They flashed cheery, inclusive grins at the Dragonbane.

Egar jerked his chin at the girl. 'That's my whore you've got there. Let her go.'

'Your whore?' The other Majak's face was suddenly a lot less friendly. 'Who says she's yours? She's down here wagging her tits and arse in grown men's faces, she—'

'She's paid until sunset.' Egar shifted his stance a little, squaring up. He nodded at the older whore. 'They both are. They're down here getting me a drink and a platter. So let her go. And you two – let him up as well. How's the poor cunt supposed to pull me a pint if you have him pinned?'

The two Majak at the bar were happy enough to obey. Maybe they'd been drinking less, maybe they were just more intelligent men. They nodded amiably, backed off the innkeeper and let him scramble loose. The one with the knife put his weapon away with a sheepish grin. But the guy with his arm round the whore was going to be a harder push. As Egar watched, he tightened his grip.

'My coin's as good as anybody's,' he growled.

Egar took a casual step forward. Measured the room without seeming to. 'Then get in the queue with it. Or find yourself another whore. You're not having mine.'

The other Majak's hand strayed down towards his belt and the big-hilted killing knife sheathed there. He barely seemed aware of the motion.

'You've got 'til sunset,' he said gruffly, almost reasonably, as if trying to put the case to some court in his own head. 'I'll not need long.'

'I'm not going to tell you again. *Let her go.*'

Egar saw the other man make his decision, saw it in his eyes even before he went for the knife. His hand clamped down on the hilt, but the Dragonbane was already in motion. Across the scant space between them, bottle snatched up off the table to his right, sweeping in, and a braining stroke across the Majak's head. He gave it all he had, was actually a bit surprised when the bottle didn't break first time. The other man reeled from the blow, Egar stepped in after him, swung again, back-handed, and this time – *yes!* – the glass came apart in a bright burst of shards and cheap wine. The Majak went down, bleeding from multiple gouges in his forehead. The whore got loose and scurried behind her colleague; the injured man crawled dizzily about on the floor, blood running into his eyes. Egar curled one foot back, mindful of his naked toes, and kicked the Majak hard in the face before he could get up. He brandished the business end of the shattered bottle admonishingly at the other two.

'You boys plan to paint the town, you aren't going to start in here. Got it?'

Quiet. Wine dripped wetly off the jagged angles of the bottle stump.

The two remaining Majak looked at their companion, curled up on the floor and twitching, then back to the wet gleam of Egar's makeshift weapon. Rage and confusion struggled on their faces, but that was as far as it went. He saw they were both pretty young, reckoned he might be able to brazen this one out. He waited. Watched one of them rake a hand perplexedly back through his hair and make an angry gesture.

‘Look, Dragonbane, we thought—’

‘Then you thought wrong.’ He had his reputation and his age – things that would have counted for something among Majak back on the steppe, and might play here, if these two hadn’t been away from home too long.

If not, well . . .

If not, he had bare feet and a broken bottle. And glass shards on the floor.

*Nice going, Dragonbane.*

*Better make this good.*

He put on his best clanmaster voice. ‘I am *guesting here*, you herd-end fuckwits. My bond with these people *compels* me, under the eyes of the Dwellers, to defend them. Or don’t the shamans teach you that shit anymore when you’re coming up?’

The two young men looked at each other. It was a dodgy interpretation of Majak practice at best – outside of some small ritual gifts, you didn’t *pay* for guesting out on the steppe. And lodging at a tavern or a rooming house, say, in Ishlin-ichan, wasn’t considered the same thing at all. But Egar was Skaranak and these two were border Ishlinak, and they might not know enough about their northerly cousins to be sure, and in the end, hey, this old guy killed a fucking *dragon* back in the day, so . . .

The one on the floor groaned and tried groggily to prop himself up.

Time running out.

Egar pointed downward with the bottle. Played out his high cards. ‘And what do your clan elders have to say about *this* shit? Stealing another man’s whore out from under his nose? That okay, is it?’

‘He didn’t kn—’

‘Pulling a *knife* on a brother? That okay with you, is it?’

‘But you—’

‘*I’m done fucking talking about this!*’ Egar let the bottle hang at his side, like he had no need for it at all. He stabbed a finger at them instead, played the irascible clan elder to the hilt. ‘Now you get him up, and you get him the fuck out of my sight. Get him out of here while I’m still in a good mood.’

They dithered. He barked. ‘Go on! Take your fucking party somewhere else!’

Something gave in their faces. Their companion stirred on the floor again and they hurried to him. Egar gave them the space, relieved. Bottle still ready at his side. They propped the injured man up between them, got his arms over their shoulders, and turned for the door. One of them found some small piece of face-saving bravado on the way out. He twisted awkwardly about with his half of the burden. The anger still hadn’t won out on his face, but it was hardening that way.

‘You know, Klarn isn’t going to wear this.’

Egar jutted his chin again. ‘Try him. Klarn Shendanak is steppe to the

bone. He's going to see this exactly the way it is – a lack of fucking respect where it's due. Now *get out.*'

They went out, into the rain, left the door swinging wide in their wake. The Dragonbane found himself alone in a room full of staring locals.

Presently, someone got up from a table and shut the door. Still, no one spoke, still they went on staring at him. He realised the whole exchange had been in Majak, would have been incomprehensible to everybody there.

He was still holding the jag-ended bottle stump.

He laid it down – on the table he'd swiped the bottle from in the first place. Its owner flinched back in his chair. Egar sighed. Looked over at the innkeeper.

'You'd better keep that door barred for the time being,' he said in Naomic. To the room more generally, he added: 'Anyone has family home alone right now, you might want to drink up and get on back to them.'

There was some shuffling among the men, some muttering back and forth, but no one actually got up or moved for the door. They were all still intent on him, the barefoot old thug with iron in his hair and his shirt hanging open on a pelt going grey.

They were all still trying to understand what had just happened.

He sympathised. He'd sort of hoped—

*Fucking Shendanak.*

He picked his way carefully through the shards of broken glass on the floor, past the stares, and went upstairs to get properly dressed.

He wanted his boots on for the next round.

He found Shendanak holding court outside the big inn on League Street where he'd taken rooms. The Majak-turned-imperial-merchant had ordered a rough wooden table brought out into the middle of the street, and he was sat there in the filtering rain, a flagon of something at his elbow, watching three of his men beat up a Hironish islander. He saw Egar approaching and raised the flagon in his direction.

'Dragonbane.'

'Klarn.' Egar stepped around the roughing up, fended his way past an overthrown punch that skidded inexpertly off the islander's skull. He shoved the tangle of men impatiently aside. 'You want to tell me what the fuck's going on?'

Shendanak surfaced from the flagon and wiped his whiskers. 'Not my idea, brother. Tand's getting his tackle in a knot, shouting about how these fish-fuckers know something they're not telling us. Starts in on how I'm too soft to do what it takes to find out what we need to know. Come on, what am I supposed to do? Can't take that lying down, can I? Not from Tand.'

'So instead, you're going to take orders from him?'

'Nah, it's not like that. It's a competition, isn't it, boys?' The Majak warriors stopped what they were doing to the islander for a moment. Looked

up like dogs called off. Shendanak waved them back to the task. ‘Tand sets his mercenaries to interrogating. I do the same with the brothers. See who finds out where that grave and that treasure is first. Thousand elemental pay-off and a public obeisance for the winner.’

‘Right.’ Egar sat on the edge of the table and watched as two of the Majak held the islander up while a third planted heavy punches into his stomach and ribs. ‘Menith Tand’s a piece-of-shit slave trader with a hard-on for hurting people, and he’s bored. What’s your excuse?’

Shendanak squinted at him thoughtfully.

‘Heard about your little run in with Nabak. You really bottled him over some fishwife whore you wouldn’t share? Doesn’t sound like you.’

‘I bottled him because he pulled a knife on me. You need to keep a tighter grip on your cousins, Klarn.’

‘Oh, indeed.’

It was hard to read what was in Shendanak’s voice. Abruptly, his eyes widened and he grabbed the flagon again, lifted it off the table top as the islander staggered back into the table and clung there, panting. The man was bleeding from the mouth and nose, his lips were split and torn where they’d been smashed repeatedly into his teeth. Both his eyes were blackening closed and his right hand looked to have been badly stomped. Still, he pushed himself up off the table with a snarl. The Majak bracketed him, dragged him—

‘You know what,’ said Shendanak brightly. He gestured with the flagon ‘I really don’t think this one knows anything. Why don’t you let him go? Just leave him there. Go on and have a drink before we start on the next one. It’s thirsty work, this.’

The Majak looked surprised, but they shrugged and did as they were told. One of them gave the beaten man a savage kick behind the knee and then spat on him as he collapsed in the street. Laughter, barked and bitten off. The three of them went back into the inn, shaking out their scraped knuckles and talking up the blows they’d dealt. Shendanak watched them through the door, waited for it to close before he looked back at Egar.

‘My cousins are getting restless, Dragonbane. They were promised an adventure in a floating alien city and a battle to the death against a black shaman warrior king. So far, both those things have been conspicuous by their absence.’

‘And you think beating the shit out of the local populace is going to help?’

‘No, of course not.’ Shendanak leaned up and peered over the table at where the islander lay collapsed on the greasy cobbles. He settled back in his seat. ‘But it will let the men work out some of their frustration. It will exercise them. And anyway, like I said, I really can’t lose face to a sack of shit like Menith Tand.’

‘I’m going to talk to Tand,’ growled Egar. ‘Right now.’

Shendanak shrugged. ‘Do that. But I think you’ll find he doesn’t believe



these interrogations are going to help any more than I do. That's not what this is about. Tand's men are better trained than mine, but in the end they're soldiers just the same. And you and I both know what soldiers are like. They need the violence. They crave it, and if you starve them of it for long enough, you're going to have trouble.'

'Trouble.' Egar spoke the word as if he was weighing it up. 'So let me get this straight – you and Tand are doing this because you want to *avoid* trouble?'

'In essence, yes.'

'In *essence*, is it?' *Fucking court-crawling wannabe excuse for a . . .* He held it down. Measured his tone. 'Let me tell you a little war story, Klarn. You know, the war you managed to sit out, back in the capital with your horse farms and your investments?'

'Oh, here we fucking go.'

'Yeah, well. You talk about soldiers like you ever were one, so I thought I'd better set you straight. Back in the war, when we came down out of the mountains at Gallows Gap, I had this little half-pint guy marching at my side. League volunteer, never knew his name. But we talked some, the way you do. He told me he came from the Hironish Isles, cursed the day he ever left. You want to know why?'

Shendanak sighed. 'I guess you're going to tell me.'

'He left the islands, married a League woman and made a home in Rajal. When the Scaled Folk came, he saw his wife and kids roasted and eaten. Only made it out himself because the roasting pit collapsed in on itself that night and he got buried in the ash. You want to try and imagine that for a moment? Lying there choking in hot ash, in silence, surrounded by the picked bones of your family, until the lizards fuck off to dig another pit. He burnt his bonds off in the embers – I saw the scarring on his arms – then he crawled a quarter of a mile along Rajal beach through the battle dead to get away. Are you listening to me, you brigand fuckwit?'

Shendanak's gaze kindled, but he never moved from the chair. Horse thief, bandit and cut-throat in his youth, he'd likely still be handy in a scrap, despite his advancing years and the prodigious belly he'd grown. But they both knew how it'd come out if he and the Dragonbane clashed. He made a pained face, sat back and folded his arms.

'Yes, Dragonbane, I'm listening to you.'

'At Gallows Gap, that same little guy saved my life. He took down a pair of reptile peons that got the jump on me. Lost his axe to the first one, he split its skull and while it was thrashing about dying, it tore the haft right out of his grip. So he took the other one down *with his bare hands*. He died with his arm stuffed down its throat to block the bite. Tore out its tongue before he bled out. Am I getting through to you at all?'

'He was from here. Tough little motherfucker. Yeah, I get it.'

'Yeah. If you or Tand stir these people up, you're going to have a local peasant uprising on your hands. We won't cope with that, we're not an

army of occupation. In fact,' Egar's lip curled, 'we're not an army of any kind. And we are a long way from home.'

'We have the marines, and the Throne Eternal.'

'Oh, don't be a fucking idiot. Even with Tand's mercenaries and your thug cousins, we have a fighting muster under two hundred men. That's not even garrison strength for a town this size. These people know the countryside, they know the in-shore waters. They'll melt out of Ornley and the hamlets, they'll disappear, and then start picking us off at their leisure. We'll be forced back to the ships – if some fisher crew doesn't manage to sneak in and burn those to the waterline as well – and we haven't even provisioned for the trip back yet. It's better than three weeks south to Gergis, and I don't know about you, but I don't want to do it on skewered rat and rainwater.'

'Well, now.' Shendanak made a show of examining his nails – it was pure court performance, something he must have picked up on the long climb to wealth and power back in Yhelteth. It made Egar want to crush his skull. 'Getting a bit precious about our campaigning in our old age, aren't we? Tell me, did you *really* kill that dragon back in the war? I mean, it's just – you don't *talk* much like a spit-blood-and-die dragon-slayer.'

Egar bared his teeth in a rictus grin. 'You want a spanking, Klarn, right in front of your men? I'll be happy to oblige. Just keep riding me.'

Again, the glint of suppressed rage in Shendanak's eye. His jaw set, his voice came out soft and silky.

'Don't get carried away here, Dragonbane. You're not your faggot friend, you know. And he's not here to back you up, either.'

Egar swore later, if it hadn't been for that last comment, he would have let it slide.