



Ruins and Hopes

by Marc H. Wyman

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A Gushémal Story

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“Would ye mind bein’ a little less noisy?” the dwarf muttered.

“Sorry,” rumbled a voice about four feet above him. “I could catch the pig for you. That’s much easier.”

Koyson Seabourne snorted, sending shivers down his long, dark beard. “Yeah, right. Ye already caught three this morning, and all I got was half a leg. And stop dripping that blood all over me!”

Half leaning over him, the giant furrag shrugged. Nearly eight feet of whitefurred muscle, barely covered by thin leather straps that held his belongings, Vobul tore another bite off the raw meat he held in one claw and started munching loudly while he stuck the rest under one of his straps. His reddish eyes glinted joyously in the face that reminded some people of a goat’s. Provided that a goat’s snout held long rows of wicked fangs, and the curled horns on top were the splotty dark brown that looked as if gallons of blood had dried on them.

“Probably been scaring the hell out of the poor little piggies,” Koyson grumbled and slowly started again to creep through the underbrush towards the black boar some ten yards off. He dearly hoped it was still there, despite all the noise the furrag made. *How did I ever get hooked up with that big thing?* he wondered. *A good, honest caidwarf like me!*

The thought vanished from his thick, gray-skinned skull as he focused on proceeding as quietly as possible. He’d left his armor at their campsite; its constant *clinks* and *clonks* would have been too loud. So he only wore a cured leather shirt, trousers and his favorite boots, the ones that his father had left him. Koyson had no idea what the black material they were made of was; but they were sturdy enough to have lasted more than a decade of his own adventuring across Gushémal, and the dweorgh alone knew how long his father, Koy Banson Seabourne, had been wearing them.

He knew exactly how long the axe in his right hand had lasted. Twelve years since he had forged it on the day of his Ascension to Manhood, using the metal of his accursed shaving knife for the handle. It had been the only time he’d ever used a smithy, and Gareknard, Mount Eringard’s chief smith, had always stood by with a hammer to correct any mistakes Koyson had made, ever ready with sarcastic remarks. *May a shaft collapse on him!* Koyson had become a smith then, an adult dwarf, with the right to choose his own path in life – and with the right to let his beard grow freely.

The latter was starting to look very much like a piece of earth by now, with dry twigs twirled in-between, but Koyson paid it no heed. Just a little more, and he’d be able to see the boar. His grip tightened on the axe, as he envisioned waiting for the right moment to leap from the underbrush and sink his axe right at the neck of the boar. It’d struggle for a while, but he’d hold on, willing to let himself get carried about a moment. Let the boar smash him headfirst into a tree, if it would! A dwarf’s head could withstand a ton of rock collapsing on it, so what could the creature do to him?

And then the loss of blood would make the boar slow down, at which time Koyson could tear the axe free and hew out its brain. Then it would be all his! And he wouldn’t again make the mistake of

asking Vobul to carry the carcass to the fire at the campsite. The furrag would only eat most of the pig on the way, as usual.

The final leaves were blocking his sight. There was some noise beyond, some crunching sound. *The boar's still there*, Koyson reasoned, *still plowing up some roots from the ground*. Feelings of triumph scurrying through his body, he pushed the leaves aside – and gaped.

Vobul yawned, seated before a tree. Blood dripped from his fangs, suspiciously fresh blood. Well, there wasn't really any need for suspicion, since the dead body of the boar lay draped over his legs, its head about three feet aside from it.

"Ye're startin' to get on me nerves," Koyson complained as he joined Vobul and automatically checked the carcass for any sign of a snack the furrag had already taken.

"You always take too long at these things. Just let me do it, and you won't have to worry about your nerves."

"Just leave me nerves alone!" Nothing seemed to be missing from the pig, Koyson was glad to see, and before the furrag could interfere, he heaved the carcass onto his back and started heading back towards their campsite.

Vobul sighed, snatched the remaining meat from his leather straps and continued eating while he slowly got up and followed the dwarf. "You're just going to burn that meat," he complained. "How can you taste anything with all the ash in there? Dwarves!"

Koyson didn't answer. Any reply would have been hard to understand, anyway, considering the amount of saliva that was gathering in his mouth as he thought about the feast he'd be having soon. The fire was all set, including the spit for the pig. Quickly strip the carcass of the fur, put it on the spit and burn – no, *cook* – it before Vobul got hungry again. Hungrier, that is.

They had almost reached their campsite when strangely squeaky howls echoed through the forest. Koyson stopped dead in his tracks, turned his head in the direction the howls were coming from. "Ratpeople!"

"Yachh!" Vobul commented. "They taste awful!" As if to remove any memory of said taste he rapidly devoured the rest of the strips of meat he had stored under the leatherstraps.

The dwarf shrugged angrily. Ratpeople in the vicinity, that was bad news. They were a fearful lot, more like orcs. Though not half as smart, he added with a grin. Still, they had the unpleasant tendency to attack wanderers in their sleep. Koyson and Vobul had better get on their way as soon as possible; the dwarf had no intention at all of exploring the inside of a cookpot.

He adjusted the boar's weight on his shoulders and started moving again, when another kind of howl was added to the ratpeople's yells. A cry of pain.

A human cry.

"They're attacking people!" Koyson shouted, dropped the carcass and rushed forward.

Vobul stared after him for a brief moment then he leaned forward and tore a leg off the boar. "He always wastes good food." With that he shook his head and started following the dwarf.



The half-elf Ha'el Morhawk-Des'Epae slashed her sword at the ratcreatures that were trying to haul off Willett. The blade cut bushels of fur, no skin, no flesh, and another ratman leaped at her, propelled by its powerful hindlegs, the tusks and fangs flashing at her. All Ha'el could do was drop to the ground, smash her sword blindly at the creature.

The blade connected, but its steel cut through only a few inches of rough fur, stopped by the intangible mess that was the natural, smelly armor of the creature.

She rolled sideways, escaping the fangs, and slammed her knees upwards, into the midsection of the ratcreature. It howled again, rose to its full size of unimpressive five feet and drummed its short arms against its chest.

Ha'el slung her feet around the creature's legs, swiped it off its balance and swung her own torso up, sword slashing in a wide arc as it smashed straight in the ratman's chest. Blood squirted, splashed into her face.

And another set of fangs closed on her left shoulder. Pain shot through her, she screamed – and then the fangs were gone. Blood streaming down from the wound, she hurried to her feet, turned around. Just in time to see Markesh stabbing his *gladius* maniacally into the body of a ratman behind her, unwary of the creatures running toward him.

“Look out!” she screamed, waving her sword about to keep off the horde.

The ratpeople didn't care, and a moment later her blade had to bite into one of the creatures' hide once more. Markesh was hauled off his feet by the impact of one ratman leaping at him, its fangs uselessly clamped around his armored shoulder.

Ha'el had no time to pay more attention. She cleaved about her, hacked, slashed, tried to turn towards Markesh, maybe see him, maybe help him. The pain throbbed from her shoulder, more so when she thrashed about with it to keep off the ratpeople. Too many, she knew and cut on.

“Get yer fangs off'em!” an unfamiliar voice screamed, from far away.

She could not afford to think on that, concentrated on keeping the ratpeople at bay. More than once a claw sunk into her flesh, more than once dizziness assaulted her, but she kept on going. Markesh was to her right, he had to be. She turned around, hacked and slashed, and all she saw were furry hides and fangs. No Markesh. And no Willett. A ratman assailed her from behind, biting at her legs. She jumped up – but another creature leaped at her, tore her to the ground, its hands clawing at her, its fangs snapping.

Instinctively she dropped her blade, grabbed the ratman and hauled it off her.

And was surprised when the ratman made a gurgling sound instead of attacking her once again.

“Get up, gal, quick,” someone said and held her sword's handle toward her.

Without thinking she grabbed it, thankful that a hand reached down to help her to her feet. Subconsciously she realized that the hand had been very low, but then she saw more ratpeople coming on. And she saw Markesh going down under a pile of the creatures, flaying about with his *gladius* and shield, barely keeping the teeth away from him.

“Markesh!” Ha’el swung her sword at the next creature. It dodged, but she ran past it, waving her sword about. Ratpeople leaped aside from her, suddenly a path opened towards Markesh, a path she gladly took – never realizing that no more creatures attacked her from behind. She just took this for granted as she stabbed her blade into the first creature around Markesh. It blurted a squeaking noise, then it died.

Hope flashed through her when she managed to kill two more and saw Markesh, his face full of blood, but still thrashing his sword about. He injured one of the creatures, and for a moment Ha’el thought there might be a chance to survive the attack.

Then a blood-curdling scream echoed over them, a scream so ferocious and feral that even the ratpeople froze and fearfully looked at the source. Behind them, in the middle of the dirt road, a monster towered. A mountain of muscle and fury, its white fur splattered with gore and brains, deadly teeth flashing in a snout of terror. Two ratpeople squirmed in its fists, uselessly trying to escape the grasp.

“I’m huuuuuuungry,” the monster yelled and flicked out its tongue to lick some blood off its snout.

Ha’el dropped to the ground, all energy vanished. The ratpeople had been too much already. She had lost Willett; Markesh and she were the only ones left, and now this... She knew she would raise her sword again when the monster came near, but she also knew that she could never hope to injure the creature.

She stared as the beast came closer.

It had taken no more than one step when all the ratpeople vanished all of a sudden. Ha’el had no idea how they had left, all she knew was that they were gone. And there was only the monster, still holding two of the creatures in its paws.

“Throw’em over here, will ye? My axe is waiting!”

A sudden change passed over the monster’s snout, strangely transforming it into something that seemed intelligent and more like a... a face? “You have murdered enough, dwarf,” the monster said and let go of the ratpeople. The creatures never took the time to wonder about their fortune. The instant their feet touched the ground, they were running for the trees and vanishing in them.

“Oh, marvelous,” a dwarf said that suddenly appeared in her line of vision. “The great pacifist at work again. When are ye goin’ to learn that there’s times when ye just have to kill?”

The monster patiently shook its head. “Now, it seems to me that words were sufficient in this case. After all, the ratpeople are gone.”

Before the dwarf could reply – and by the near bursting veins on his neck, it would have been a furious answer, to be sure – Markesh yelled furiously and ran towards the monster, head bent down, the *gladius* preceding him like a lance.

And the monster stepped aside, lifted Markesh easily by his armor with one hand and used the other to gently wrest the sword from his hand. “Now, now, little one, I won’t hurt you,” he said softly. Markesh wailed wildly, started hammering his fist and shield against the creature’s rippling muscles, to no effect at all.

“All right, all right,” the dwarf muttered, “that’s two. Wasn’t there another one o’them kids around?”

The monster’s eyes suddenly flared. “Goats?! Where?!”

“Will ye stop thinkin’ ‘bout food all the time? I mean the *children!*”

“Oh,” the monster said, then pointed to a branch a little behind him. Ha’el breathed deeply when she saw Willett carefully draped across it, hanging some ten feet above the ground, safely out of the reach of any of the ratpeople.

The dwarf nodded, turned to Ha’el and asked angrily, “What’s the funny idea behind ye children runnin’ about Trebonshire Forest without any protection? Were ye out t’get yerselves killed?! This place is dangerous, didn’t yer parents warn ye about that?”

The barrage of accusations drove a painful stake through Ha’el’s heart as she suddenly remembered about her father at home, worrying constantly about her. Right now he was probably sitting at the window of their small cottage, staring outside, hoping that she would show up any minute. And he didn’t even know –

Anger suddenly welled up in her, and she shoved the dwarf back. “What gives you the right to talk to me like that?! I’m a grown woman, and I don’t have to listen to you. And you will tell your... your creature to drop my friend right this minute!”

“Oh, will I?” the dwarf cried, dropped his axe and smacked his open palms together. “Gal, ye’d better watch yer words, or *someone’s* gonna get her behind whooped.”

“You won’t *dare* touch me!” Ha’el shouted, retreated a step and drew her sword. “Just try it, dwarf!”

Clearly he would have tried so, but suddenly the monster was behind him, still holding Markesh in one hand – then the other paw grabbed the dwarf’s shirt and lifted him into the air as well. “Could we please,” the beast said, “talk like reasonable beings? Little one, put your sword away, there’s no need to use it.”

Ha’el just stared at the odd image in front of her. Markesh had stopped flailing about, instead he was staring incredulously at the monster holding him. And the dwarf – he had folded his arms in front of his chest, indignantly drumming his fingers on his arms. She couldn’t help it, she had to laugh. This was too unreal!

“Sir, uhh, Monster,” Markesh ventured cautiously, “would you please let me down?”

The creature glanced at him, reassuring himself that the young man had recovered his senses, then he put him carefully to the ground. “Certainly, little one. My name is Vobul, and I can assure you I am not a monster.”

“Just mad about lifting people into the air,” the irked dwarf muttered.

Vobul ignored the comment and said, “My friend’s name is Koyson. And he was right. You should not have come to Trebonshire Forest alone.”

“We had to go,” Markesh blurted out. “Sir Vobul, we couldn’t wait anymore, Sage Urquart would –“

“Markesh!” Ha’el interrupted him abruptly, rushed to his side and pressed his hand. “What he means to say is that the honored sage Urquart would have been upset if we had delayed our quest any longer. It was decided by the village elders, and we had to follow their commands.”

Koyson chuckled from his perch on the creature’s arm. “Don’t look like yer village elders had their wits t’gether if they chose ye three.”

It took all her strength to contain the instant rage in her, and she damned her elven heritage for always troubling her so. “Be that as it may, dear sirs, we are here, and I wish to thank you for aiding us in our peril. If you would be so kind as to return Willett to the ground, we can part ways.”

Markesh shook his head and asked, “What are you talking about? Ellie, these people saved our *lives!* They didn’t just walk by and sold us an apple or two. You’d better be grateful we’re still breathing!”

“I am, but that –“

“Personally, I would be happy about just getting down from this tree without breaking a leg,” Willett said at that time, finally conscious again. “Then, maybe, someone could tell me what the commotion here is all about.”



“A half-elf, a wizard and a novice priest of Darawk,” Koyson muttered half an hour later when they had all gathered around the fire at the campsite. The pig Vobul had caught was turning on the spit, tended by the furrag who was watching unhappily as the meat was turning brown and crispy. “Any of ye older than twenty?”

Ha’el snorted. “Of course. I am thirty-three.”

“Which don’t mean ye’re adult,” the dwarf retorted. “Ye’re half elf, an’ ye ought t’be home with yer family. As should be the rest o’ye.” He cast an angry glance at the other two youngsters, barely mollified by the contrite look on Markesh’s face and further irked by the self-assured look on Willett’s. The red-haired boy with the very beginnings of a – black – Van Dyke beard was a wizard, as he had calmly related, presenting a medallion from some nearby wizard tower as proof. Not even the wound to his head, bandaged by now, had dampened his spirits. And he was getting on Koyson’s nerves more seriously than the half-elf did. Ha’el at least had a temper – one that was begging for a good spanking.

Otherwise she comported herself quite well, the dwarf had to admit. She had brushed her long, cyan hair into order again, curling about her slim shoulders. Humans probably considered her pretty, with those long eyelashes, the small nose and the full, violet lips always on the verge of breaking into a smile. Well, that latter part was an assumption. All Koyson had seen of her thus far was angry self-composure.

Markesh, the novice, was far from composed. His face was scarred by teethmarks from the ratpeople. His god probably had been watching over him, otherwise how could none of them have been serious. Vobul had smeared some salve on the boy’s face, generous enough to make it shine, and

Koyson had truly enjoyed the look of fascination and terror on Markesh's face while the thick paws of the furrag were gently applying the salve.

He hadn't cried, though, for which Koyson was grateful. The boy was nervous nonetheless, and every now and then he wanted to speak up – only to find his words smothered by Ha'el interrupting him. By this time he was staring into the flames, shivering despite the heat from the fire and the warmth of the beginning spring day.

"Leave our families out of this," Ha'el said haughtily. "You have saved our lives, you share food with us, and we *are* grateful. But this is as far as it goes."

Before Koyson could comment on that, Willett laughed. "Oh, yeah, right. In case you haven't noticed, Ellie, it wasn't *you* who saved us. 'Never fear, my sword will protect us,' weren't those your words?"

"And wasn't it you who claimed your spells would keep us out of trouble?" Ha'el shot back.

Willett shrugged. "An unfortunate accident. Anyway, I'll keep a few spells at the ready on the rest of our journey."

"Which will lead where?" Koyson interjected drily. "Another ratpeople cookpot?"

Markesh looked up, ready to speak – then he saw Ha'el's stare. "All right," he muttered and returned his gaze to the flames.

The half-elf raised an eyebrow at the meekness of the novice, whether in discontent or approval, Koyson couldn't tell. After a moment she sighed and said, "Tell them, Markesh."

Joy flickered in the novice's eyes. "Well, it's –" he started, checked himself in wonder as he saw the curious eyes of both the dwarf and the furrag on him, not to mention the wary gaze of Ha'el's. He straightened his shoulders, then began anew, "Our home is the village of Clearspring, some fifty miles northeast of here, at the edge of Trebonshire Forest. The elders say Clearspring was founded after the Unholy Assault... Uhhh, I mean the Tonomai invasion of the Arrufat peninsula. Anyway, our ancestors once lived in a big city further north, but they were driven down here. An army protected them, led by the Falken family, it is said. With Trebonshire Forest so near, the ancestors decided that this was a place to stay and defend. That is, some of them did, and a goodly number moved on down to Ibrollene.

"Clearspring has never been very big. The elders claim that once there were many thousands of people living there, but there are no ruins, nothing to indicate that our population ever numbered more than the five hundred or so of today. Probably less in the beginning.

"Most of the Falkens moved on back then, on to Ibrollene. I suppose they're still there, some part of the aristocracy. Maybe one of them's even king!"

He stopped abruptly as Koyson cleared his throat sarcastically. "Well, gwan," the dwarf muttered then, not willing to explain.

"Uhh, apparently you know more than I do," Markesh said carefully. "Which is part of our problem. You see, ever since the days of the Assault, we scarcely heard any news from outside. It took until the arrival of Sage Urquart that we learned that the Tonomai had been repelled from the better part of the peninsula, and that our current sovereign reigns in the city of Freeport. We know

so little! And that... is dangerous. What if there were another Tonomai attack? We wouldn't know until the unholy hordes were before Clearspring's gates!

"And what about trade? There are mines around Clearspring where we have found valuable ores. Iron, silver, gold – and some other metal that seems much stronger than steel, that... Urquart claims it has to be *gadni*, a dwarven ore, which I suppose you know all about, Master Smith."

Koyson raised both eyebrows at being addressed correctly – so unusual to find a human who knew proper etiquette –, then he shrugged. "Yer people're wrong, lad. Nobody's found *gadni* this side of the Mine of the Gods, far as I know. Sounds interestin' nonetheless."

"Yes, it does," Markesh picked up the cue immediately. "But we can't do anything with it! Who could we trade with when we don't know where to turn? Who will pay us well, who will reject us, and who will rob us? We don't know *anything* about the world outside our village!"

He stopped, stared at the dwarf in hope of his understanding.

Koyson scratched his beard slowly, and obviously enjoying the feeling of *having* a beard. "Excuse me, but I don't really see yer problem. There are other villages all about the Wild Coast who ain't ever heard of the places thirty miles away from'em, an' they're doin' just fine. Trust me, I've seen at least half o'them!"

"And got thrown out by the majority," Vobul interjected while he stretched out a paw and tested the meat whether it was done.

The furrag earned a stinging glance by the dwarf. "Not like ye did any t'stop'em," he muttered, then focused on the youngsters once more. "Look, ye got plenty o'people back home, that's what ye're sayin'. Send out a few expeditions way around, lots o'folks in any group, an' hear what they're sayin' on their return. Then ye know what's about ye. An' if ye want trade, Freeport's the best place anyway. Yer 'sovereign'," Koyson violently suppressed a chuckle, "would be pleased."

"But would he pay the proper price?" Markesh asked furiously. "Or would he just *take* from us, *pleased* that his subjects provide for him. Master Smith, he's never done anything for us – why should we just give up what we worked hard for?!"

"The boy has a point," Vobul commented, "not that you would understand it, Koyson. If we have the time, I will explain the meaning of 'hard work' to you."

"Oh, will ye?" Koyson exploded. "I am the Lord Protector of Verishnat! I spent twenty years guardin' their holy shrine! Twenty years, without sleepin' more'n a few hours each day, an' usually fightin' off bandits every other day!"

The furrag kept his eyes trained on the pig as he answered, "Was that before or after you spent fifteen years in the siege of Herkoun? Or inbetween your odyssey around the Cape of Drowning? That took about twelve years as I believe you mentioned."

Koyson stared at him in outrage. "Ye bloody, furry –" he screamed, then suddenly composed himself and turned his seething face back towards the youngsters. "So, what's *yer* place in this story? Ye're clearly not goin' t'Freeport, which would be the other way around."

"No, we're not," Markesh conceded quickly. "About a day's journey from here, there is an old temple of Darawk, the Lord of Knowledge. It was razed by the Tonomai five centuries ago, that is

what the elders tell. None alive has seen it, ever, but once it was the center of all knowledge in the Arrufat peninsula. It is there we are headed, and there we will find the secret of the magiscribe which shall release Clearspring from its confinement.”

“Uh-huh,” Koyson grunted emptily. Beside him Vobul quietly continued turning the meat, snacking on a – raw – bit he had saved for himself.

“You... do...” Markesh stuttered, looking at Koyson. “You do know what a magiscribe is?”

“Of bloody course!” the dwarf yelled. “What do ye take me for? Messages written on one sheet that magically appear on another paper many miles away, hah! What I’m wonderin’ is what’s so fornicatin’ great about that! An’ don’t ye have a proper priest at home, anyway? That sage oughta know all ‘bout the magiscribe, anyway!”

Willett chuckled. “That’s what I said.”

“Please stay out of this, Willett,” Markesh said urgently and turned back to the dwarf. “Yes, that is true. But Sage Urquart left his home a long time ago for what he believed would be a short trip, without learning the deeper of knowledge of the priesthood. His ship sank before Freeport, where the galleons of our sovereign rescued him. Thereafter he travelled along the Wild Coast and finally came to stay in Clearspring, where he founded a shrine. That is where I was schooled and became a novice, along with Terstaguen.

“Sage Urquart has never learned how the magiscribe works, and that is why we are looking for the answer. With the magiscribe, we could instantly learn what transpires in far-away places. We could receive warning of attacks long before the invaders arrive at Clearspring. We could know who to trade with, we could know what people need to buy... It would solve *all* our troubles!”

Markesh’s eyes gleamed dreamily as he spoke, and finally he glanced about himself to find applause. Instead he got the quiet nods of his companions, but only dubious looks from Koyson and Vobul.

Finally the furrag shook his head slightly and said, “For that to work, you would need trustworthy people everywhere who would write regular reports to your home. Journeymen, perhaps.”

Ha’el nodded. “Yes, we know. And we are willing to take that task upon ourselves. For the good of our village.”

A smile brightened Markesh’s face at the unexpected support of the half-elf, and further brightened when Willett grunted and said, “I’m a wizard, which I take to mean that I journey about the continent and learn whatever I can about magic. Writing reports home to mum and dad, that’s fine with me. It’s,” he stopped and grinned when he copied Ha’el’s serious tone of voice, “for the good of our village.”

“Sounds nice and honest,” Koyson grunted, “but that’s takin’ a lot o’trouble on yer heads. An’ I don’t think ye really know just how much that is gonna be.”

Before any of the youngsters could cut in, Vobul said, “Everyone has to start somewhere.” He sighed. “Where is that temple you are looking for?”

Markesh smiled. "About a day's journey to the southeast. We had been hoping to reach it by noon tomorrow. Would you..." He stopped, looked at his companions briefly, then leaped up and bowed graciously. "Dear sirs, Sir Koyson Seabourne, Sir Vobul of the Furrag, would you grant us the pleasure of accompanying us thither? Your experience, your might, it would ensure the success of our mission, and you'd be sure of all our thanks!"

"Well, I –"

Koyson's gruff remark was quickly cut down by Ha'el who immediately shot to her feet and stared down Markesh. "You're still bent on that?! We decided to do this by ourselves, and we don't want any outsiders to interfere! You don't know anything about these people!"

"They helped us when we needed help!"

The wizard grunted. "He's right about that, Ellie. And, mind you, they have no problem speaking to a person of elven descent. So you shouldn't be troubled by them, either."

It was obvious that the remark stung Ha'el. Her pretty blue-skinned face tightened angrily. Markesh quickly stepped to her, gently grasped her arm and said, "Please, Ellie. This isn't like Hoordan's Crossing. Not everyone thinks that elves are evil by nature, not everyone hates you. Let them help us, please."

Ha'el stared at Koyson as if he were vermin. "Are you so certain?" she asked bitterly. "We don't need them."

Koyson looked at Vobul as if the young people had lost their minds. "When did we say that we were gonna –"

"Be silent," Vobul thundered and rose to his full eight feet. His giant shadow fell on Ha'el, and the tall half-elf suddenly felt like a tiny child. "You know little of the world. That much you have learned in your encounter with the ratpeople. You need to learn much more to live on your own. It would be wise to let the experienced guide your path."

"I don't need anybody!" Ha'el shouted – and suddenly her anger vanished when she realized how much she sounded like a petulant child indeed.

Willett chuckled. *He* understood it as well.

"Ha'el?" Markesh asked softly.

She stared at him, fully expecting to see him wilt down again, but this time the novice held her gaze with pleading eyes. "Oh, fine, have it your way!" she grumbled, then sank back to the ground.

Vobul nodded. "A good choice, and now," he turned to the roast pig with a look of disgust, "it is time to eat your burnt meat."



They journeyed on, all five of them. For a few hours they stayed on the path that the three young people from Clearspring had taken, then Markesh pointed to a map he had been carrying and explained that they had to go through the uncut forest. It had proved easier than any of them thought, for Vobul's powerful arms made short work of any obstacles such as branches or trees.

It was no more than a few miles to their destination when Koyson announced that it was time to lie down for the night. Neither of the Clearspring folks agreed, but the dwarf simply sat down and refused to move. “Ain’t no question o’ bein’ able to walk a couple more minutes,” he muttered. “It’s about conservin’ yer strengths at the right time. Ye couldnae do any good if ye reached that temple o’yers tonight, it’s way too dark. So ye’d better rest up, an’ tomorrow ye’ll be good as new.”

Markesh slowly nodded. He absolutely wanted to see the temple as soon as possible, but still... It *would* be better in the daytime. Willett only shrugged and joined the dwarf on the ground, ready to unpack his blanket for the night.

On the other hand, Ha’el’s eyes fired up. “You’re only lazy, dwarf! If your stubby legs can’t carry you any further, let the furrag carry you!”

“My *what?!*” Koyson shouted – and abruptly quieted down, glaring at her dangerously. “Yer spankin’ sounds ever more pleasant, gal.”

Not leaving the half-elf time to reply, Vobul said, “This is still a ratpeople area. Guards need to be posted at night. I suggest that you take first watch, Ha’el.” He motioned to the young men and said, “You should gather firewood now while I will fetch us some meat.” With that he suddenly vanished into the forest, eight feet of furrag gone within the blink of an eye.

Koyson calmly folded his legs and yawned. “Ratpeople ain’t good at sneakin’, Ha’el. Ye’d best watch out for’em squeaky noises. Sound like an owl what’s drunk on liquor. Got that, gal?”

She didn’t answer. Angrily she pulled her sword from its scabbard and took a stance some three yards away from the dwarf, staring intensely at the forest.



Ha’el’s anger lasted a long while. After a few minutes the furrag had returned with the carcass of a deer, one leg suspiciously missing, but the rest all wound up on the spit over their by now assembled fire. The others went to sleep after feasting on their meal, Markesh apparently famished even though having had at least as big a meal that morning.

At first she kept staring at the dim shadows of the forest with her fullest attention. The fire kept throwing shadows that to her eyes looked just like ratpeople about to leap at her. For moments, she could see clearly the outlines of the short bodies, the hindlegs of raw power, the stubby arms, and the long, cruel snouts – then they vanished, and she realized that nothing had been there.

Had the attack upset her that much?

It couldn’t be! All her life, as long as she could remember, she had been training to be a warrior, just like her mother. Father had never approved, not really. Oh, yes, he had given her a wooden sword on her sixth birthday, with that dour smile of his. Ha’el had laughed and gleefully proceeded to play with the sword for hours. She had fallen asleep with it in her hands, and the next morning discovered that it was put safely on the table next to her bed. (Not to mention that a blanket was draped over her as well.)

Of course Mother had never taught her anything. How could she? C'rinn Des'Epaes had only stayed in Clearspring until her daughter was weaned, then she had gone her own way, leaving Estebin Morhawk, her supposed husband, behind to care for the child. Father had never spoken much about that time. With good reason, Ha'el supposed. She remembered the early years, when Father had been an outcast in Clearspring.

She hadn't understood any of it at the time. All she knew was that none of the other children were allowed to play with her, that parents kept dragging them away, shouting strange things about dirty blue killers. To her, it had been cruel, but on the other hand, she had Father all for herself. All those marvelous stories he told her at night, the stories she took to her sleep and dreamed about! They still followed her to this day, especially those that featured her mother. How Father met her, how they fell in love, and how they slew the emperor dragon.

She also remembered hearing about the twin birth. Ha'el had been fourteen then, only beginning to learn about the secrets of life. Clearly the villagers had to be talking about twins, born by a single mother, she thought and wanted to find out everything. Confusingly they kept speaking about *two* mothers, so she snuck into every one of the houses mentioned to take a look at the babies. She had already been good at sneaking, so none of the parents ever knew she was there.

Twin birth. The present-day Ha'el chuckled slightly. The villagers had meant that two children had been born on the same day, within an hour of each other. It had taken her younger self months to understand it, but by that time she had already found herself caring about the two babies. Two boys who were practically raised together. The people of Clearspring thought the twin birth a sign that the gods had meant the two to be together.

Well, if that had been the intent of the gods, they had gotten more than their share. From the first moment that the toddlers were allowed into the streets, a blue-skinned guardian angel watched over them. The parents had tried chasing her away at first, never with much success, and finally they had allowed Ha'el near the children. They were too young to have ever heard about elves, about the incarnations of evil that they were, and the two boys happily accepted their new playmate – although their playing at first consisted mostly of riding on her back.

It became so natural for the twin-born boys to be seen with their half-elven companion that slowly the wall around Ha'el and Father broke down. People accepted them, and on her sixteenth birthday Ha'el was stunned to receive a gift from the parents of both the boys, a blue-silvery dress that suited her perfectly. It wasn't the gift that surprised her, not even the expense that the parents had gone to – she simply had never before received presents from anyone except Father.

Life was changing for her. No longer was Father the only person in her life, now there were two other persons, and thanks to them, the world – or at least the village of Clearspring – truly entered her awareness.

Markesh and Willett had been her first friends. To be honest, they were her only friends. Not for lack of trying, on either part. There had been enough boys in the village interested in her from a certain point onward, and she had also tried to start friendships with girls. (*And* boys, she sighed remembering. Father never found out, and Ha'el just as quickly discovered that life in this regard

wasn't easy at all.) But Markesh and Willett... Even today she hadn't found a way to describe her relationship to them.

Willett was so infuriatingly sure of himself! She remembered how he had cried when he had to leave for the wizard tower, and she recalled her own hot tears. But there were always the summers that they spent together, not to forget the joyous times around the winter solstice. And every time he had grown more convinced of his own might – yet there had never been a single moment of doubt that Markesh and Ha'el were the only people in his life he cared about.

And Markesh... He had always been in the village. When Sage Urquart opened the shrine, inviting all children to attend his school, he had quickly moved to the top of the class, exceeding Ha'el easily. She'd been upset – after all she was *fourteen* years older. Then Urquart asked him to become a novice, giving him extra schooling that took him away for so long each day.

Ha'el had been alone for the first time since the twin birth. Willett at the tower, Markesh at the shrine, there didn't seem to be anything left for her to do. Well, she had decided, then she would take up her own schooling and become a warrior, after all. She dug up the old sword, carved a wood shield for herself, and all the time that Markesh spent with Urquart *she* spent wielding her mock-up weapons.

But all of that paled compared to the evenings that Markesh came to her and eagerly told her of all the new things he had learned that day. After a while she realized that she was truly proud of Markesh. Proud in a way that she didn't fully understand.

She still didn't. Standing guard over the camp, listening to the snores of the men (including the noisy, earthshattering sounds of the furrag), she wondered whether it was all worth it. Going to that mythical temple they'd never seen, finding that magiscribe device – or scroll or whatever – and connecting Clearspring with the world.

Markesh was sure it was. This quest, it was burning in him like a fire. The passion to improve the life of Clearspring. The passion to do the right thing.

Even if it meant taking that ugly, obnoxious dwarf along.

Markesh's passion was so dear to her, she wondered. His pleas, they always cut straight to her heart. *Why?* she wondered, staring at the dark forest – and gave a start when something heavy touched her shoulders.

"Your watch is over, little one," Vobul whispered. "It is time for you to sleep."

Ha'el blinked, then nodded and joined the others at the fire.



After the uneventful night, they were roused by Vobul's happy crunching down on raw bones. The three youngsters rose and stared in wonder – and not a little bit of horror – at the furrag, covered once more with blood, as he chomped down on the half devoured carcass of a pig.

Koyson on the other hand pulled the blanket over his head, muttering inaudibly for a while before he launched himself to his feet. “Can’t ye ever let anyone sleep?!” he yelled. “An’ where do ye find’em pigs all the time? Ye’d think an entire generation was fillin’ yer stomach!”

“There’s always,” Vobul paused to stuff a giant piece of meat into his snout, munching it joyously, “room for another one.”

“Ugh,” the dwarf grunted, then snapped at the other ones, “Don’t ye just be gapin’ like a kid on ‘is first tour o’the shafts! Pack the bags!”

Willett and Ha’el hastened to follow his orders, quickly grabbing their gear and stuffing it into their backpacks – while Markesh stared in amazement at the sight of Vobul. A moment passed, then the furrag became aware of the novice priest’s attention and tore a slice off the remaining carcass with dark claws popping out of his fingers.

“Would you like some?” he asked graciously, offering the bloody piece to Markesh.

The novice swallowed drily. “Gotta pack!” he screamed with near terror, hurrying to join his friends.

Vobul shrugged, looked at the meat quizzically before dropping it into his mouth. “Can’t find anything wrong with it,” he wondered while his jaws reduced the meat in moments.

A few minutes later they were on their way towards the temple, the furrag leading the way. He had spent a short while preening himself, licking the blood off his fur with obvious delight, and now he was his old white-furred self, albeit rather wet looking. It made no difference to the branches and trees that found themselves torn off or uprooted to carve a path through the dense forest.

The land was sloping slightly, Koyson noted, and the slope was starting to get steeper. Markesh’s map seemed to be leading them towards a hill. Trebonshire Forest was mostly flat, still a goodly way off from the Secula Mountains, which meant that a hill was rather unusual. And valuable since it was easier to defend. Those ancient Darawk priests must have held quite some sway with the local lords, the dwarf thought, to have been allotted such a prized location for their academy.

He was walking in the rear, keeping an eye on the forest behind them. An assault by ratpeople was unlikely, he figured. Their party was too big, and Vobul’s presence was usually a sure-fire protection. But there were other dangers in Trebonshire Forest. Orc tribes might be in the vicinity, ranging out from their ancestral homes in the mountain chains. Bandits might have their lairs here, well off from the roads and path that the highwaymen preyed on. Not to mention some of the animal dangers. A week earlier Vobul and he had stumbled across two clawvoles, digging a nest kennel – Koyson’s right leg instantly smarted from the gash that the female had opened. He hadn’t been happy to slay the beast, pregnant as it was, but clawvoles never let up. They pursued anyone for miles, often tunneling underground and shooting out of the ground unexpectedly.

So there was plenty to divert his attention from the actual path they were following. That at least was no cause of trouble to the dwarf. In the couple of months he had journeyed along with the furrag, he had come to instinctively trust Vobul’s eyes – and nose – as much as his own.

“It can’t be much further,” Markesh said after a little while. The hill had grown steep and rocky by now, the trees growing far enough apart that Vobul needed no longer uprooting any obstacles. A

few bushes dotted the landscape, some mossy grass followed what looked to be ancient pathways leading up the slope. One or two of those old roads now sported a fully grown, old tree, which they clambered past with little effort.

Koyson had to admit he was getting excited. Oh, he didn't care much for temples, and that magiscribe idea of the kids seemed quite ridiculous to him. But their eagerness was infectious – Markesh and Ha'el both with glowing eyes, and even the supposedly self-sufficient Willett now walked with a spring in his step.

"There!" Markesh suddenly shouted and scampered up the hill for a better view. "There it is! Isn't it marvelous? The great old academy of Darawk, the temple of knowledge! The towers of observation, the study chambers. And there, the campus plaza with the steles! Oh, wonderful Lord of Knowledge, it is beautiful!"

Well, it better be, Koyson thought as he followed the others to the top of the hill where the three youngsters were staring in astonishment at the building looming over them.

The dwarf's own eyes widened in amazement as well, but for a quite different reason.

The structure didn't look like any Darawk temple he had ever seen before. It was ancient, decrepit, moss growing nearly everywhere; none of the walls was left intact, its stones had been ripped apart by the wind, scattered on the ground. But Koyson would have gladly eaten one of those stones, if this had once served the divine lord of knowledge.

Though Darawk's academies definitely held less interest to him than the temples devoted to Alyssa (they always had marvelous ale and food; the other pleasures offered there were none of his concern for there were no dwarven priestesses), he had noticed a couple of them in the last twelve years of travelling across the land. What Markesh had called the towers of observation looked very much like turrets to Koyson, with embrasures well suited to longbowmen. The walls were sturdy, made of solid, dark rock – from the Secola Mountains, if he caught the scent right, probably the south flank of Mt. Dunkelberg. And the supposed plaza, a wedge-shaped, flat area in front of the walls... In case of an assault, it naturally funneled the attackers into a column that was easy to pick off by the archers from the embrasures. Not to mention that the walls bulged considerably over that column, grooves opening out of the bulges every two or three feet. They were perfectly placed to pour hot oil over any assailants, while the curvature of each groove protected the defender.

"Call me a hopeless pessimist," he muttered loud enough for everyone to hear, "but this looks more like a fortress than a temple."

Markesh shook his head forcefully. "It cannot be! This is where the elders said Darawk's temple is!"

"Still looks like a fortress," Koyson grumbled, taking one more look at the dark ruin ahead of him, and carefully loosened the axe in his belt.



The wood of the gate had rotted away. Skeletized strips of rusty metal hang in grooves, the only remains of the gate. Vobul gave them a slight push, and they crumbled out of their holdings, fell apart as they dropped to the ground.

Beyond was a small courtyard that once had probably born a wooden roof. Some beams still remained, precariously crooked as if they were about to come crashing down. Grass grew on the ground, lush and rich. One or two bushes had found their perfect niches to catch the sunlight, and a small appletree stood a few yards behind the gate.

The group slowly entered, Markesh hastening about to look for any inscriptions on the walls or any markings, while Koyson walked over to the appletree. Its branches started well above his head, so he said, "Willett, could ye please fetch me one o'them apples?"

The wizard, standing closest, nodded and started to walk over – then he stopped and grinned mischievously. Koyson was frowning with sudden terror as he noted Willett mumbling something under his breath and making a cutting gesture with his right hand.

Something whirred above Koyson's head, and when he looked up – two dozen apples rained down on him.

Ha'el laughed at the sight of the dwarf screaming at the assault. Koyson found little mirthful about it which he immediately told the wizard in unmistakable terms.

"Sorry," Willett chuckled. "I've miscalculated the power of the spell. It's a new one, I just made it up a few days ago."

"A *new* spell?" Koyson yelled exasperatedly. "Meanin' ye could hae cut off me head rather than the apples?!"

Willett shook his head forcefully. "Absolutely not! I *know* magic."

"Sure ye do, an' sure I'm gonna –"

"Koyson!" Vobul called from further down the courtyard. "Please give me a hand with this."

The dwarf shot an angry glance at the wizard that promised an extensive conversation at a later time, then he walked over to the furrag who was standing in front of the interior gate. Or what apparently had once been the gate. Blocks of stone from the wall above had fallen down before it; one had smashed the wood, lying crooked on top of the other blocks. "Too heavy for ye, eh?" Koyson grinned. "That I could live long enough t'see this day!"

Vobul grimaced, shoving his lower jaw forward and exposing unpleasantly many of his teeth. "It's *not* too heavy for me. But I would like to know if the work is worth the effort. There might be more debris beyond, and we should perhaps find an easier way in."

"An' what do ye propose I should do? If ye recall, ye're a wee bit taller than –"

The furrag sighed noisily, reached down and plucked the dwarf up with both hands. Koyson struggled mightily, but quickly found himself straddling the top stone block, some ten feet above the ground. He turned carefully around, said, "Ye're really enjoying this kind o'thing, ain't ye?"

"Please *look* inside!" Vobul exploded. He wasn't a nice sight, so Koyson quickly turned back and crept towards the cracks between the gate's rim and the blocking stone. He had to stretch his head a good ways to get a decent look through them.

“Don’t look like there’s much blockin’ the other side,” he said, glancing down at first. Not much sunlight reached into that place, dim and murky twilight that took Koyson’s eyes a few moments to adjust. Fortunately a dwarf was designed for dim places such as mineshafts. A bit later, therefore, he could see the inside almost as clearly as the courtyard, and...

He suddenly rocked back and wiped his forehead. “Great dweorgh! Markesh,” he said slowly, “if that’s a temple, they practiced some pretty strange rites here.”



That, the others found out after Vobul and Koyson had cleared the stone from the gateway, was rather an understatement. The inside was a large hall that had been decorated with paintings and mosaics on the two stories high walls. Little remained of them but strips and pieces hanging loosely about. Two spiral staircases made of stone twirled their way up on the far side of the hall, presumably to the towers on that side. There had been a lot of furniture in this hall at some point, probably tables, chairs and such like. None of the visitors had the slightest chance of recognizing even one of them by the broken, scattered pieces.

Yet it hadn’t been the wear and tear of time alone that had broken the furniture.

The battle probably had helped, too.

For a battle had been waged in this hall, as the skeletons proved that lay all over the floor. Koyson stopped counting after the first dozen. Some of them still wore tatters of clothes, some pieces of rusty armor, and some still had a blade stuck between their ribs. A few seemed to be locked in wrestling grips, skeleton hands clasped around skeleton necks.

There was little to indicate whether anyone had won the battle. If so, the victor had been hurt too much that they could have taken their dead with them as they departed the object of their fight.

“What... happened here?” Markesh wondered, his eyes strangely dead as he stumbled through the hall, glancing everywhere and seeing no sign at all of the bright academy of Darawk he had been seeking.

Koyson frowned as he bent down and wrested a blade from one of the skeletons. The bones of its fingers were brittle, crumbling under the dwarf’s touch. “This here looks like a Tonomai scimitar. I’d say they razed the place five hundred years ago, durin’ their invasion. That ‘plaza’ o’yers outside must hae been littered with corpses, too, but I guess that animals got at’em an’ scattered the bones all across the hill.”

“Which means,” Ha’el said coldly, “no secret of the magiscribe. We came here for *nothing* at all.”

Off to the side Willett was examining one of the skeletons, trying to determine how exactly the man had died centuries earlier. At Ha’el’s words he calmly looked up and shrugged, “Oh, don’t say that, Ellie. There might be lots of interesting things around here. Some might even help Clearspring!”

“And how would a bunch of skeletons help our village? Or some rusty swords? Sweet Maidoyú, what do you think our parents will say? The bloody dwarf was right! This was a silly idea from the beginning! Markesh, this has never been a Darawk temple, and we’re leaving!”

Imperiously she waved the novice priest to the exit, but the boy was too engrossed in deciphering the insignia on the armor of one of the skeletons. “Markesh,” Ha’el repeated, a bit more softly.

“Just a minute,” the novice answered. “I think this was a member of the Falken family. You remember, the ones who protected our ancestors during the Unholy Assault? Maybe here is the answer to what has happened to them, all those years ago!”

“Oh, Markesh,” she sighed, “what use is that to us *today*?”

“But... it’s knowledge! Knowledge is power,” he protested. “A few hours more won’t change anything!”

Soon the three young people were engrossed in an avid discussion of whether to stay or leave right away, while Koyson cast a doubtful glance towards the furrag. Vobul’s mighty shoulders heaved. “Let them work it out,” he said softly.

Well, there wasn’t much to work out as far as the dwarf was concerned. This had once been a fortress, and the skeletons were not the nicest thing to see. But there might be some treasures in here, provided they weren’t looted a long time ago. A couple of doors led out of the hall, into other parts of the castle, and once the kids had come to some kind of conclusion, he’d be heading that way regardless of their decision. The hall held little to concern him, ancient swords and shields, broken tables, broken whatever, rustling bones and...

Rustling bones?

A chill ran down the dwarf’s spine as he focused his eyes on the hall once more. The skeletons were stirring. Bony hands reached for swords, grasped them and... “I think we have a more urgent problem here,” Koyson said and drew his axe.



The axe smashed into the spine of one of the rising skeletons, shattering it into millions of white pieces billowing up like a cloud of dust. Both hands firmly on the handle, Koyson half raised the axe again, swirled it about at hip level, grazing two of the skulls.

“Help!” Markesh screamed, and Koyson spared a brief moment to glance in the direction of the novice. The skeleton he had been inspecting had suddenly raised its arms, grasped the novice and was about to swing him into the waiting blades of other skeletons.

The dwarf jabbed his axe at the nearest undead, unhooking its right leg bone from the hip. It collapsed, and yet another bony creature took its place. One that unfortunately had a better idea of parrying axe blows.

Out of the edges of his eyes he saw Vobul hurrying toward the novice, prying him in a single swipe from the claws of the skeleton. Ha’el cleaved her sword madly about, carving a free circle about

her and Willett. Who barely managed to dodge the attacks of the skeletons – and had no weapon of his own.

Koyson ducked under his opponent's swing, leaped headfirst at its torso. He felt barely any resistance as he crashed through the bones, splintering them instantly. And beyond – pain rushed through his arm, nicked by some other blade. *Not enough to stop me!* He landed on the ground, dust swishing into his nose, and whirled his axe sideways, blindly aiming where the undead's blade had been. The axe battered a leg to dust, just as the dwarf scrambled to his own feet – and instantly let himself drop again. Three swords clanged together just where his head had been a second earlier. Koyson clasped his axe close to his chest, rolled sideways as fast as he could, unbalancing a skeleton or two during his wild motions.

"The staircase! Get to the right staircase!" Vobul's voice thundered through the hall, easily piercing the clangor.

Very funny, Koyson muttered in his mind while he was whirling his axe in as wide an arc as possible above his chest, just to get the room necessary to stand up again. The skeletons were so close, the clicking and clacking of their bones drummed a dreadful rhythm in his ears. And they were rather unimpressed by his axe, avoiding it with lithe motions – just every now and then the blade ate bone, grinding it to dust. And the triumphant grin on the dwarf's face was smothered when just another skeleton closed the gap.

"Koyson!" Vobul shouted again.

Why don't ye come here and fetch me yerself? He would have loved to shout that, but his breath lasted barely to yell, "I... bloody... can't!"

One of the skeletons collapsed, its legs sheared off by the axe. But the undead creature didn't give up, not when it was on the ground, just in reach of the dwarf. Keeping up the whirl of the blade, Koyson kicked out, just in time, to send the bony torso spinning off.

Its careening must have confused the skeletons, for a small gap opened that wasn't immediately filled – and he immediately pushed himself into the gap, rolling up to leap to his feet.

"No! Koyson, stay down!"

He dearly wanted to disobey that command, but something grabbed his ankles and violently pulled them back. Facefirst Koyson went down, instinctively kicking back right when he hit the ground and the breath was pressed out of him.

The next moment he felt an airy breeze *swooshing* just above him, and pieces of bone began to rain down on him, chipped to little more than dust.

The skeletons around him were headless, their skulls splintering as they hit the ground, only moments before the remaining bones fell apart.

That was his chance! But there was still that thing holding on to his ankle – he twisted his upper body around, swinging the axe in a wide arc, and smashed straight into the spine of the legless skeleton. The impact disintegrated the ribcage, ripped the arm apart – yet the fingers were still closed tight around his ankle.

Koyson didn't care. Without the arm attached, they barely slowed him down as he finally got to his feet, oriented himself and started running toward the staircase. Subconsciously he realized that the rest of the party had already gathered there, but his awareness was otherwise consumed by the flurry of skeletons he crashed into, dodged, skeetered across, leaped over – until he got close enough to the staircase that Vobul's long arms could pluck him from mid-air during one of his jumps and dropped the dwarf onto the cold stone steps.

“And you complained about my new spell,” Willett cheerfully said next to Koyson. “It worked beautifully with those skeletons, didn't it? How did you like *those* apples?”



The skeletons from the hall were trying their best to clamber up onto the staircase. Ha'el and Markesh, on the other hand, did their best to keep them back. Blades clanged onto blades, and for the moment the assault of the undead was stopped.

But the skeletons didn't tire, Koyson recognized. Markesh was already slowing down, so that Ha'el had to pick up the slack. At least there wasn't that much slack, for the novice's *gladius* was a short, stabbing sword – hardly a match in this fight for the half-elf's longsword sweeping swathes into the undead rows.

“Gotta get outta here,” the dwarf muttered, casting a glance up the staircase. It spiraled up one more story, led onto a short balustrade. A round opening led into rooms beyond – there probably had been a gate, too, but it had rotted away completely.

“A splendid idea,” Willett agreed and hurried up the stairs, followed by the dwarf who called for the others to retreat.

The wizard had just reached the top of the stairs – when five skeletons spilled out of the doorway and started hewing at him with halberds. They wore the tattered remains of dresses, but their one-time femininity did not slow the ferocious assault of their undead selves.

Koyson dived for Willett's legs, snagged them, and both went tumbling down the stairs – but well out of the halberds' reach.

Coming to a stop at Vobul's feet – the furrag proved to be an excellent barrier on the staircase – Koyson bounded up instantly, the axe in both his hands and already swinging at the skeletons hastening down the stairs. The blade cut through the first two easily, the bones crumbling all around them, and the dwarf raced up two more stairs to assail the next one.

That one had probably been a noblewoman, judging by the gold necklace still around her neck. Her halbard slammed against the dwarf's axe with a force almost equal to Koyson's superhuman strength. He grinned in sudden exhilaration, jammed the halbard aside and jabbed his head at the exposed torso. The skeleton crashed back against the stairs, raising her halbard immediately to block Koyson's next blow.

The remaining two skeletons had reached them by now, their halberds aiming for the dwarf's head. Koyson dropped down the stairs for a moment – the halberds didn't smash into each other, but missed, kept going – and crashed into their opposite number's bones.

Bones exploded under the force, the halberds clattered to the stones.

The noblewoman's skeleton swung her halbard at Koyson. He blocked it, holding the axe with one hand, used the other to grab the bony arm and tear at it with all his strength. The bone splintered all too easily, the weapon bounding off to the ground below. But the skeleton wasn't finished yet, as her remaining arm fired at Koyson, its fingers closing around his throat with crushing force.

He slammed his axe back, smashed the handle through the skeleton's spine. It disintegrated yet the hand still choked his throat. Koyson dropped the axe, grabbed the unattached bones around his neck and pried them loose as quickly as he could. "Up yer shaft, lady!" he cried as soon as he had pressed some air into his lungs.

"There are more coming!" Willett yelled, and Koyson saw with dismay some seven skeletons hurrying out onto the balustrade, wearing intact armor – warriors, not inexperienced fighters.

And he was still too out of breath to fight with full strength, so – "Willett, yer magic! Cut'em apples down!"

Koyson didn't know if the wizard had heard – or understood -, and he fought to fetch his axe from the stairs. His hands weren't working right, or his vision was still too blurred, or his feeling of time was skewered, but it seemed like an eternity for him to grasp the handle, close his fingers around it, bring it up to face the skeletons.

He started up the stairs just when he felt that same breeze of air *swoosh* over his head, barely missing his hair. The armored skeletons had just started down the stairs – when their heads suddenly disattached from their bodies, the skulls hanging in the air for a brief moment while the rest of the bodies moved further down. Then the skulls dropped to the ground, and the skeletons, battered by an invisible force, exploded, raining their bony fragments all over the dwarf.

"Yeah, *that's* using magic!"

"*Wielding* magic," Willett corrected calmly, "that is the proper description."

"Whatever ye say," Koyson yelled, turned to the wizard and smacked his hand against Willett's hip. "Now use it on'em skeletons down there. Cut'em down, an' let's get the blazes outta here!"

The wizard looked at him with a strange air of exhaustion and desperation. "I... can't. There's not enough magic left in me to do that."

"What?!"

Willett stooped over, leaned his arms on his knees. "I'm empty. I *can't* cast any more spells!"

Koyson gaped. The wizard's magic had seemed so wonderful just a moment earlier, but now... Without any magic, they were down to blades once more. And the skeletons... Who knew how many more were within the fortress, aside from the bloody hordes down in the hall?

Now there was only... "Vobul, for the dweorgh's sake, start usin' yer strength! We're gonna die if ye don't bloody bowl'em fornicatin' skeletons over!"

The furrag was standing halfway down the stairs, apparently unconcerned by Ha'el and Markesh fighting off the undead at the bottom or Koyson and Willett panting above him. But it took the dwarf only a moment to see that he was concentrated on something down the hall, something beside the obvious assault battering down on the two youngsters.

“Vobul!”

Finally the furrag acknowledged Koyson's call, turned around and looked at him with his red, maniacal eyes. “Not all the skeletons have been raised,” he announced calmly. “Only those who apparently were the defenders of this place. The Tonomai dead are still down.”

“So bloody what?!” Koyson yelled. “They're still gonna kill us!”

Vobul frowned. “Apparently they were ensorceled to defend the castle from further Tonomai attacks. Or any other heathen attacks. If we could tell them that we believe in the defenders' gods as well, perhaps that would stop the spell.”

“Ye're daft!” Koyson shouted. “These are just bloody skeletons out to –“ The dwarf's anger suddenly vanished as he noticed that the furrag was right. Quite a number of skeletons were still on the floor, unmoving, and most of them had been carrying scimitars in their lifetimes.

Five hundred years ago, during the invasion of the Tonomai, when the entire Arrufat peninsula was conquered in a few years, when their single god's banner was raised everywhere – the sign of the true gods was what kept the defenders' spirits intact, what identified the armies as the ones on the good side.

But how in the names of all the four dweorgh could they raise such a sign?! Vobul had his own gods, and dwarves had rejected *their* gods at the beginning of time – which left only the three young people, one of whom was a wizard, one of whom was a half-elf, and one was...

“Markesh!” Koyson yelled, pushing past the furrag and dragging the novice bodily away from Ha'el's side. The novice's eyes were confused, all the cracks on his face that the ratpeople had left behind bleeding once more, but Koyson didn't care. “Ye've gotta *bless* this place! Make it sacred ground, do ye understand?!”

“But...” Markesh stuttered. “I'm just a novice, not a full priest, I can't cast any...”

“Call out to yer god, yer great Darawk! *Ask* him t'grant ye this blessin'!”

“It's impossible!”

“Just *do* it!” Koyson's yell echoed through the hall, but the dwarf had already turned around, hastened down the stairs to swing his axe against the skeletons who were trying to break through Ha'el's desperate defense. One pulverized under his swing, another two rocked back, trying to adapt to the sudden appearance of another defender.

Koyson left them little time. He hewed at one of them, caught its sword and swung it far into the air. The skeleton stared at it empty, as if in confusion, and then the axe's top smashed its skull to dust.

More were coming, consuming all of Koyson's attention as he weaved his blade about, forming a web of blurry, glittering motions that cut through blades and bones – and all too much empty air. But he kept on, feeling his own strength accelerated by the energy of battle, drawing on all the force

of his tough dwarven ancestors. *I'm not gonna bloody die in this place!* his mind yelled desperately, kept going all the time.

Out of the rims of his eyes he saw that the one skeleton with the markings of the Falken family was coming closer, roughly pushing the other skeletons out of the way. By now it had drawn a sword of its own, glowing furiously, just like the helmet on its head. Magic, he knew, and a part down within Koysen knew that this one skeleton would be the one to best the dwarf. His axe was solid steel, forged from the best metal of Mt. Eringard, so precious that his brethren sold it up to bloody Chazevo, halfway across the continent.

One blow from the magical sword would turn it into scrap metal, and the next would cleave the dwarf apart.

Understanding that his fate was so close only infuriated Koysen, and with renewed strength he hit at the next skeleton. With such force he hit that his blow not only pulverized that skeleton but severed the next one's spine as well. "Let's do it!" he yelled at the Falken skeleton, whirled his axe about to carve a path to his ultimate opponent.

It seemed as if a smile lit on the undead Falken's skull, understanding what the dwarf was doing, and the skeleton became all the rougher pushing the other warriors out of its way, closing in on Koysen and the great battle that would ensue.

Then, moments before the blades would meet, Markesh's voice sounded. "Great Darawk, great seeker of knowledge, magnificent protector of the mind, please hear thine lowly supporter. Mine mind is small, mine will is weak, yet I seek thine help. Thou art the one whose understanding surpasses that of any mortal, thou art the one whom I am craving to aid, whose comprehension I seek to expand. Grant me the strength, grant me the power to make this place another abode of thine splendor. Let wisdom expand and *bless these halls!*"

A wave of light shot out from the novice, rippling and blinding as it passed through the bodies of the party, of the skeletons, the walls, encompassing everything. Brightness lit the hall, so strong that Koysen dropped his axe, raised his hands to protect his eyes.

It still flashed through his fingers, highlighting his bones like slim, dark lines.

"Sweet Maidoyú!" Ha'el exclaimed.

Markesh whispered, too low to be heard over the noise. But there was no noise left. "I don't... believe it."

Koysen lowered his hands from his eyes. It took him so incredibly long to adjust his eyes to the dim twilight that once more had conquered the hall, but then... All the skeletons had fallen down, laying as still on the ground as if they never had risen from their deaths, peaceful, markers of a battle waged centuries ago.

All save for the skeleton of the Falken family.

It was still standing, its eyeholes glimmering in faint red. "Thank you, honored sage," a voice from the grave issued, hallowing from far away, in quiet relief. "So long it has been. Decades, probably. We have held the castle for so long, three years against the heathens. Three years since

Han left for Ibrollene. But we had to stay. There were those people, the refugees, dependant on us... they who stayed despite the heathens. How long has it been, please, tell me!"

So surreal it was that Koyson was surprised to find his own voice speak out, "It has been five centuries since the Tonomai invasion. They conquered all of the peninsula, turned it into part of the Tonomai Empire. But the refugees stayed and they founded their own village which remains to this time. Today, the Tonomai have been driven back to the outermost coasts of Arrufat, and the old, the true gods rule over most of the peninsula once more. Your fight has not been fr naught."

The skeleton stared at him for a while, focussing its gleaming, red eyeholes. "That is good. Thank you, Sir Caidwarf, for telling me. You are honest and brave, you are a true son of Arrufat. Please, forgive the spell that my lordpriest, Namuras, cast over the defenders of my castle. It was to hold back the invaders, to save the refugees." It paused for a moment, put its magic sword's tip to the ground and leaned on it. "I am Carawlk Falken, nephew of the lord of the house. All that we own – that we owned in the past –, it is yours to command, Sir Caidwarf, but, please, would you tell me your name that I may take it into the world beyond and tell the gods of your glory?"

Koyson nodded, not even fully aware of the meaning of the Falken skeleton's words. "I am Lionheart Koyson Seabourne, Slayer of Dragons and Trolls, Heir of the Kingdom of Tevenshire, Lord Protector of Verishnat, son of Koy Banson Seabourne, the Lancelord of Albinavia, the first knight of King Owain Ddaintgwynn the Bear who is the One King of the land, whose knights saved the island from the Sassenach fright."

The glow in the skeleton's eyes intensified, and Koyson would have sworn it smiled. "Yes, Sir Koyson, it is good that one of your might is the one to liberate our castle. I will gladly tell my ancestors of you, and I will tell the gods that here is one who is worthy of their attention."

With that, the glow vanished – and the skeleton fell to the ground, as unremarkable as all the others strewn around it. Tonomai invaders, following the call of their bloodthirsty One God. Arrufatian defenders, who fought to protect those who could not protect themselves. Defenders who had given their lives to the fight, and who had sold their souls to fight on even after their deaths.

"Rest now," Koyson whispered, "ye have earned yer rest."



The sunlight seemed strangely bright when they left the castle. Trebonshire Forest's trees were so calm, so green, an ocean of calmness stretching to the very horizon. Odd, after what they had experienced. Koyson sat down on a rocky outcropping, holding the magical helmet and sword of Carawlk Falken in his hands, contemplating them silently. The man who had given more than just his life in defense of this patch of ground had given rise to an odd legend. The people of Clearspring must have remembered the name of Carawlk, but over the decades and centuries it was changed into Darawlk, and the legend of a lost Academy of the God of Knowledge had been born. "What would ye have said t'that, eh?" he muttered towards the blade, remembering the relieved voice of the skeleton Carawlk.

Behind the dwarf, Vobul came out of the gate carrying a large bag full of jewels and valuables they had found within.

Ha'el stepped upfront, turning back to take a good look at the castle. "I don't understand it. We haven't found the magiscribe, but I feel so... satisfied."

The other youngsters joined her, their faces holding no more understanding than hers.

"We have put these people back to rest," Willett said. "They gave their all to save our ancestors, and now they know it was all worth it. That, perhaps, is more important."

Markesh cleared his throat. It was a choked noise, mixed with tears running down across his cheeks. "I am a priest now. Darawk heard me, and it was through his grace that we allowed these warriors to find their ways to the afterlife. It is..." He stopped, checked himself and looked at his friends. "I feel so good now, don't you?"

"Yes," Ha'el said slowly.

Moments passed that stretched into minutes and perhaps hours as the three friends looked at each other, sharing a communion beyond their mortal understanding. It was then that they were bonded to each other in a way that would hold all their lives. What bonds they had known before, the twin birth, the half-elf's friendship, it all withered away, and they knew that for all the time they would be together – just like the defenders of the castle, just like Carawlk and his companions.

"So," Markesh said after a while, a smile still pasted on his face, "what do we do now? We have nothing to bring home to Clearspring."

"No, we haven't", Ha'el grinned and then waved her hand about, encompassing Trebonshire Forest and the world beyond. "But there is so much out there. We will find *something* to help our village. We *will* help our families, and our friends, and we will bring happiness to them."

Willett smirked. "Maybe they'll even forgive us for running away."

"Yes, perhaps," Ha'el nodded, then cast a glance at the dwarf and the furrag. "Forgive us for lying to you. No, forgive *me*, please. The village elders never knew what we were doing, nor did our parents. Everyone was afraid of leaving the village, of facing the dangers out here. Clearspring is wasting so many opportunities, and we wanted to make our people proud and rich. Not for us, but for them. The opportunities had to be taken, and so we left for here, to make it happen for them."

She stopped, waiting for any accusations. When none came, she sighed and said, "I didn't trust you. I am sorry, Sir Dwarf, Sir Furrag."

Koyson grinned. "Mighty big o'ye, gal. Ye're a good one, too."

Standing beside the dwarf, one paw on Koyson's shoulder, Vobul solemnly nodded. "We never believed your story, little ones. The village elders would have had to be very," he twisted his snout into a smile, glancing at Koyson, "*daft* to send you on this mission. But you have the hearts for this journey."

"Ye will find what ye're seekin'," the dwarf muttered and raised the sword and helmet in his hands. "An' this oughta help ye from dyin' along the way."

The eyes of the young people widened, and even more so when Vobul took the sword and offered it to Ha'el. She frowned for a moment, staring at the steel glazing with embedded magic. Then a smile flashed over her lips, and she took the blade.

Markesh smiled at her happily. "It looks good on you, Ellie."

"It actually does," Willett grumbled – and found himself shortcut when the magical helmet landed on his head.

"If you are unconscious," Vobul said, "your magic will do your friends no good. So you had better keep your head safe."

"Bloody –" Willett cursed. Then he checked the seat of the helmet on his head and found it was so light that it didn't bother him at all. "Well, I'll be... I mean, thank you."

Markesh chuckled. "Now this is a new one to me. Willett, you actually said 'Thank you!'"

"Oh, shut up, will you... *priest?*"

"If you say so, wizard," Markesh answered, unable to wipe the grin from his face.

Ha'el cleared her throat, the magical sword still in her hands. "Why don't we start now? There's a lot of space to cover, and I... I feel like starting right now."

"Right!" the twin-born boys agreed in unison, startled by this almost as much as the half-elf was.

They quickly said their good-byes to the dwarf and the furrag, apologetic at hurrying but in no way encumbered by it. Within moments they had stowed away all their belongings, including their newly acquired ones, and had vanished down the hill.

The two travellers watched their descent and kept staring after them wistfully for a while, before Koyson slowly clambered to his feet. "Well, now," he said with a pat on the bag on Vobul's back, "this seems to have been a worthwhile day, hasn't it? Let's go to the next town and find out how much we can get for this little find here, what do ye say?"

"I say," Vobul rumbled, "that I'm hungry."

"Oh, very well," Koyson laughed. "Let's get a pig down there, first. If ye left any alive, ye big boar-eatin' monster!"

The furrag licked his lips. "I must have left one or two at least. Maybe there'll even be some parts left for you to burn, dwarf."

"Hopefully! Let's go!"

THE END
