

Tales
Volume 2

KENDER, GULLY DWARVES, and GNOMES

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featuring "Wanna Bet?"
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PENGUIN BOOKS

Foreword

"Tas? Tasslehoff Burrfoot!" we shout sternly, peering down the road. "Come back with our magical time-traveling device, you doorknob of a kender!"

"I'll come out," shouts Tas, "if you tell me some more stories!"

"Promise?" we ask, peering behind bushes and into ravines.

"Oh, yes. I promise!" says Tas cheerfully. "Just let me get comfortable." There is a tremendous sound of rustling and tree-branch cracking. Then, "All right, I'm ready. Go ahead. I love stories, you know. Did I ever tell you about the time I saved Sturm's life - "

Tas goes on to tell US the first story in this new anthology set in the world of Krynn. "Snowsong," by Nancy Varian Berberick, relates an early adventure of the companions. Sturm and Tanis, lost in a blizzard, have only one hope of being rescued - Tasslehoff Burrfoot!

"The Wizard's Spectacles," by Morris Simon, is a "what-if" story. Tas always SAID he found the Glasses of Arcanist in the dwarven kingdom. But what if ...

A storyteller tells his tales not wisely but too well in "The Storyteller," by Barbara Siegel and Scott Siegel.

"There's a lesson you could learn from that!" we yell to Tas, but he ignores us and goes on to relate "A Shaggy Dog's Tail," by Danny Peary. It is a kender favorite, undoubtedly passed down from generation to generation although Tas, of course, swears that he knew EVERYONE involved PERSONALLY!

Next, we hear the TRUE story of the demise of Lord Toede in "Lord Toede's Disastrous Hunt," by Harold Bakst.

The minotaur race is the subject of "Definitions of Honor," by Rick Knaak. A young knight of Solamnia rides to the rescue of a village, only to discover that his enemy threatens more than his life.

"Hearth Cat and Winter Wren," by Nancy Varian Berberick, tells another of the Companions' early adventures in which a young Raistlin uses his ingenuity to fight a powerful, evil wizard.

"All right, Tas!" we call. "Will you come out now? We

really MUST be going!"

"Those were truly wonderful stories," yells the kender shrilly from his hiding place. "But I want to hear more about Palin and his brothers. You remember. You told me the story last time about how Raistlin gave Palin his magic staff. What happens next?"

Settling ourselves down on a sun-warmed, comfortable boulder, we relate "Wanna Bet?", Palin's very first adventure as a young mage. And certainly NOT the type of heroic quest the brothers expected!

Still sitting on the boulder, we are somewhat startled to be suddenly confronted by a gnome, who thrusts a manuscript at us. "Here, you! Tell the TRUE story about the so-called Heroes of the Lance!" the gnome snarls and runs off. We are truly delighted to present for your enjoyment, therefore, "Into the Heart of the Story," a "treatise" by Michael Williams.

"Now, Tas!" we call threateningly.

"Just one more?" he pleads.

"All right, but this is the last!" we add severely. "Dagger-Flight," by Nick O'Donohoe, is a retelling of the beginning of DRAGONS OF AUTUMN TWILIGHT as seen from a weird and deadly viewpoint - that of a sentient dagger!

"Tas, come out now!" we shout. "You promised."

Silence.

"Tas?"

No answer.

Looking at each other, we smile, shrug, and continue on our way through Krynn. So much for kender promises!

SNOWSONG

Nancy Varian Berberick

Tanis let the hinged lid of the wood bin fall. Its hollow thud might have been the sound of a tomb's closing. Hope, cherished for all the long hours of the trek up the mountain, fell abruptly dead. The wood bin was empty.

A brawling wind shrieked around the gaping walls of the crude shelter, whirling in through the doorless entry and the broken roof. The storm had caught Tan-is and his friends unaware at midday. Far below, in the warmer valleys, the autumn had not yet withered under winter's icy cloak. But here in the mountains autumn had suddenly become nothing more substantial than a memory. Esker was a day and a half's journey behind them. Haven was a two-day trek ahead. Their only hope of weathering the storm had been this shelter, one of the few maintained by the folk of Esker and Haven as a sanctuary for storm-caught travelers. But now, with the blizzard raging harder, it seemed that their hope might be as hollow as the empty wood bin.

Behind him the half-elf could hear Tas poking around the bleak shelter, his bright kender spirit undaunted by the toll of the journey. There wasn't much to find. Shards of crockery lay scattered around the hard-packed dirt floor. The one narrow table that had been the shelter's only furnishing was now a heap of broken boards and splintered wood. After a moment Tanis heard the tuneless notes of the

shepherd's pipe that Tas had been trying to play since he came by it several weeks ago. The kender had never succeeded in coaxing anything from the shabby old instrument that didn't sound like a goat in agony. But he tried, every chance he got, maintaining - every chance he got - that the pipe was enchanted. Tanis was certain that the pipe had as much likelihood of being enchanted as he had now of getting warm sometime soon.

"Oh, wonderful - the dreaded pipe," Flint growled. "Tas! Not now!"

As though he hadn't heard, Tas went on piping.

With a weary sigh Tanis turned to see Flint sitting on his pack, trying with cold-numbed hands to thaw the frozen snow from his beard. The old dwarf's muttered curses were a fine testament to the sting of the ice's freezing pull.

Only Sturm was silent. He leaned against the door jamb, staring out into the blizzard as though taking the measure of an opponent held, for a time, at bay.

"Sturm?"

The boy turned his back on the waning day. "No wood?"

"None." Tanis shivered, and it had little to do with the cold. "Flint," he called, "Tas, come here."

Grumbling, Flint rose from his pack.

Tas reluctantly abandoned his pipe and made a curious foray past the empty wood bin. He'd gamboled through snow as high as his waist today, been hauled, laughing like some gleeful snow sprite, out of drifts so deep that only the pennon of his brown topknot marked the place where he'd sunk. Still his brown eyes were alight with questions in a face polished red by the bite of the wind.

"Tanis, there's no wood in the bins," he said. "Where do they keep it?"

"In the bins - when it's here. There is none, Tas."

"None? What do you suppose happened to it? Do you think the storm came up so suddenly that they didn't have a chance to stock the bin? Or do you suppose they're not stocking the shelters anymore? From the look of this place no one's been here in a while. THAT would be a shame, wouldn't it? It's going to be a long, cold night without a fire."

"Aye," Flint growled. "Maybe not as long as you think."

Behind him Tanis heard Sturm draw a short, sharp breath. If Tas had romped through the blizzard, Sturm had forged through with all the earnest determination he could muster. Each time Tas foundered, Sturm was right beside Tanis to pull him out. His innate chivalry kept him always ahead of Flint, blocking the wind's icy sting, breaking a broader path than he might have for the old dwarf whose muttering and grumbling would never become a plea for assistance.

But for all that, Tanis knew, the youth had never seen a blizzard like this one. He's acquitted himself well, and more's the pity that I'll have to take him out with me yet again, the half-elf thought to himself.

A roaring wind drove from the north, wet and bitter with snow. The climb to this tireless shelter had left Tanis stiff and aching, numb and clumsy with the cold. He wanted

nothing less than to venture out into the screaming storm again. But his choices were between sure death in the long black cold of night and one more trip into the storm. It was not, in the end, a difficult choice to make.

"It won't come to that, Flint. We're going to have a fire."

Flint's doubt was written in the hard set of his face. Tas looked from the wood bin to Tanis. "But there's no wood, Tanis. I don't see how we're going to have a fire without wood."

Tanis drew a long breath against rising impatience.

"We'll get wood. There was a stand of pine trees along our way up. No doubt Sturm and I can get enough from there and be back before nightfall."

Tas brightened then. Now there would be something to do besides spending a long cold night wondering what it would feel like to freeze solid. Shrugging closer into the warmth of his furred vest, he started for the doorway. "I'll come, too," he announced, confident that his offer would be gratefully accepted.

"Oh, no." Tanis clamped both hands on the kender's shoulders and caught him back. "You're staying here with Flint."

"But, Tanis - "

"No. I mean it, Tas. The snow is drifting too high. This is something that Sturm and I will do."

"But you'll NEED my help, Tanis. I can carry wood, and we're going to need a lot of it if we're not to freeze here tonight."

Tanis glanced at Flint. He thought he might hear a similar argument from his old friend. He forestalled it with a grim shake of his head, and Flint, recognizing but not liking the wisdom of Tanis's decision, nodded agreement. With a dour sigh Flint went to gather up the splintered wood that had once been the shelter's table.

"It's something," he muttered. "Sturm, come give me a hand."

Alone with Tas, Tanis went down on his heels. Mutiny lurked in Tas's long brown eyes. There was a stubborn set to his jaw that told Tanis that the only way he'd get the kender to stay behind would be to give him a charge that he considered, if not as interesting, at least as important as the task of gathering fuel for a fire.

"Tas, now listen to me. We don't have many choices. I've never seen a storm like this one come up so suddenly or so early. But it's here, and tonight it will be so cold that we will not survive without a fire."

"I know! That's why - "

"No. Let me finish. I need you to stay here with Flint. It's going to be a dangerous trip out for wood. The tracks we made only a short while ago are gone. I'll barely be able to find the landmarks I need to get back to the pines. I have to know that you'll both be here if we need you."

"But, Tanis, you'll NEED me to help with the wood-gathering."

The offer, Tanis knew, was sincere . . . for the moment. But as clearly as he might see through a stream to the sparkling sand below, that clearly did he see the

mischievous kender-logic dancing in Tas's brown eyes. Tas had no fear of the killing cold, the battering winds. The prospect of the journey back to the pines held only joyous anticipation and a chance to satisfy some of that unquenchable curiosity that had brought the kender to the crumbling edge of many a catastrophe before now.

Well, I'm afraid! he thought. And it won't hurt for Tas to know why if it keeps him here.

"Tas, the best way to make certain we don't survive this night is to scatter, all four of us, all over this mountain. That will be the fastest way to die. We're going to be careful. But Sturm and I have to be able to depend on you two being here just in case one of us needs to come back for help. Understand?"

Tas nodded slowly, trying to ease his disappointment with the sudden understanding that Tanis was trusting him, depending on him.

"And I can count on you?"

"Yes, you can count on me," Tas said solemnly.

Privately he thought that staying behind, no matter how virtuous it made him feel right now, might be just the least bit boring.

Despite the cold and the bitter wind chasing snow in through the open doorway, Tanis found a smile for the kender. "Good. Now why don't you give Flint a hand, and tell Sturm that we should be leaving."

For a moment it seemed to Tanis that his charge wouldn't hold. He saw the struggle between what Tas wanted to do and what he'd promised to do written on his face as easily as though he were reading one of the kender's precious maps. But it was a brief war, and in the end, Tas's promise won out.

Sturm emptied both his and Tanis's packs. He took up two small hand axes, tested their blades, and prepared to leave. Tanis, preferring his bow and quiver if danger should arise, left his sword with Flint.

"I won't need the extra weight, I think," he said, handing the weapon to the old dwarf.

"Tanis, isn't there another way? I don't like this."

Tanis dropped a hand onto his friend's shoulder. "You'd be alone if you did like it. Rest easy; it's too cold out there to keep us gone long. Just keep Tas safe here with you. He promised, but . . ."

Flint laughed grimly. "Aye, BUT. Don't worry. We'll both be here when you get back." A high squealing, Tas at the pipe, tore around the shelter. Flint winced. "Although whether both of us will yet be sane is another matter."

With grave misdoubt Flint watched Tanis and Sturm leave. Tas sidled up beside him, standing close to the old dwarf. He called good luck after them but he didn't think that they could hear him above the storm's cry.

"Come along, then," Flint growled. "No sense standing any closer to the wind than we have to. We might as well find the best kindling from that wood. When those two get back they'll be fair frozen and needing a fire as quickly as we can make one."

Tas stood in the breached doorway for a long moment.

The white and screaming storm quickly swallowed all trace of Sturm and Tanis. Already he had begun to regret his promise to stay behind.

I could find those trees straight off! he thought. For Tas, to think was to do. He tucked his pipe into his belt and stepped out into the blinding storm. The wind caught him hard, and he laughed from the sheer pleasure of feeling its bullying push, hearing its thundering roar. He hadn't taken many steps, however, before two hard hands grabbed him by the back of his vest and dragged him back inside.

"No, you DON'T!"

"But, Flint - "

The fire in the old dwarf's eyes could have warmed a company of men. His face, Tas thought, certainly shouldn't be that interesting shade of red now that he was out of the wind.

"I only want to go a little way, Flint. I'll come right back, I promise."

Flint snorted. "The same way you promised Tanis to stay here in the first place? That lad is a fool to put stock in a kender's promise." He glared from Tas to the storm raging without. "But he CAN put stock in mine. I said I'd keep you here, and here you'll stay."

Tas wondered if there would be a way to get around the old dwarf standing between him and the doorway. Well, there might be, he thought, considering a quick run under Flint's arm. Grinning, he braced for the dash, but then caught the darkly dangerous look in Flint's eyes and decided against it. There was, after all, his promise to Tanis, spider-web thin but still holding after a fashion. And he could, he supposed, manage to pass the time trying to find the magic in his pipe.

It was going to be, each thought, a very long, cold afternoon.

Under the sheltering wings of the broad-branched pines the storm seemed distant, deflected by the thick growing trunks and the sweep of a rising hill. Deadfalls littered the little stand. Tanis made right for the heart of the pines where the snow was a thinner mantle covering the ground and the fallen trees.

"Gather what you can first," he told Sturm. "It will be easier if we don't have to cut any wood."

It had taken longer than he had hoped to reach the pines. Though he could see little difference in the light under the trees, he knew from some sure instinct that night had fallen. The driving snow was no longer daytime gray, but brighter. Only an hour ago the sky had been the color of wet slate. Now it was an unreflecting, unforgiving black. It FELT like a night sky for all that Tanis could see no moons, no stars. The air was as cold and sharp as frozen blades.

They worked as fast as awkward hands would permit, filling their packs with as much wood as they could carry. Carefully used it would be enough to keep them from freezing in the night.

Tanis shoved the last of the wood into his pack, lashed it tight, and looked around for Sturm. He was a dark figure hunched against the cold, kneeling over his own pack.

"Ready?" Tanis called.

Sturm looked around. "Aye, if you'll give me a hand getting this on."

It was the work of a few moments to help Sturm with the heavily laden pack. "Set?" Tanis asked, watching the boy brace and find a comfortable balance.

"Set. Your turn."

The half-elf clenched his jaw and bit back a groan as Sturm settled the burden on his shoulders. "Gods," he whispered, "if I could wish for anything, it would be that I were a pack mule strong enough to carry this with ease!"

For the first time that day Sturm smiled, his white teeth flashing in the gloom beneath the pines. "It is an odd wish, Tanis. But were it granted, I promise I would lead you gently."

Tanis laughed and, for a moment, he forgot the cold. Sturm's smile was like the sun breaking from behind dark clouds, always welcome for coming so seldom. At the beginning of the trip Tanis had wondered about the wisdom of taking the youth along. It had been Flint, to Tanis's surprise, who had urged that Sturm be included in the party.

"You argue his inexperience," the dwarf had said, "but I'd like to know how he's to come by any if he spends all his time in Solace."

It was, Tanis thought at the time, a telling point. But he had not been swayed until he heard in Flint's careful silence the echo of memories of another inexperienced youth: himself. That was no argument against which he might win. In the end he had been persuaded to include Sturm among the party. It was, after all, to have been a brief trip, with no diversions.

And Sturm, to his credit, did not rail against the hardships of the unlooked-for storm, but accepted the challenge and deferred, with a solemn and graceful courtesy that contrasted oddly with his youth, to Tanis's leadership.

Well, we've certainly been diverted now, the half-elf thought, settling his pack and stamping numb feet in the snow in a vain effort to urge into sluggish circulation the blood that surely must be near frozen.

"Come on, Sturm. The sooner we get back, the happier we'll all be. Tas's promise to stay behind will only hold for so long. Were you inclined to gamble, I'd wager you anything you like that though we've a long trudge ahead of us, it is Flint who is beset with the worse trial."

When they stepped out into the rage of the storm again, Tanis thought that were wishes to be granted he would forsake a mule's strong back and ask instead for a dog's finely developed instinct for finding home. The wind had erased any tracks they'd made coming into the stand.

Flint glared out into the night, thinking, as Tanis had, that this was to have been an easy trip. It had been a journey of only a few days to reach Esker. The wealthy headman of the village had welcomed them eagerly and been well pleased with the pair of silver goblets he'd commissioned the previous summer. The goblets, with their elegantly shaped stems, gilded interiors, and jeweled cups,

were to be a wedding gift for the man's beloved daughter. Flint had labored long over their design, obtaining the finest jewels for their decoration and the purest silver for their execution. His client had been well pleased with them and not inclined toward even the ritual dickering over their cost.

Aye, Flint thought now, they were beauties. And like to cost us our lives.

The weird, atonal wailing of Tas's shepherd's pipe keened through the shelter, rivaling the whine of the storm, drawing Flint's nerves tighter with each moment that passed. It never seemed to find a tune, never seemed to settle into anything he recognized as even remotely resembling music.

"Tas!" he snapped. "If you're bound to fuss with that wretched thing, can't you at least find a tune and play it?"

The piping stopped abruptly. Tas got to his feet and joined Flint near the door. "I would if I could. But this is the best I can do."

Before Flint could protest, Tas began to play again. The awful screech rose in pitch, splintering his temper, never very strong where Tas was concerned, into shards as sharp and hard as needles of ice.

"Enough!" he snatched the pipe from Tas's hand. But before he could fling it across the shelter, the kender leaped up and caught it back handily.

"No, Flint! My magic pipe!"

"Magic! Don't tell me you're going to start that again. There's no more magic than music in that thing."

"But there is, Flint. The shepherd told me that I'd find the magic when I found the music. And I'd find the music when I wanted it most. I really do want it now, but I don't seem to be able to find it."

Flint had heard the story before. Though the circumstances and some finer details varied from one telling to the next, the core of the tale was always the same: a shepherd had given Tas the pipe, swearing that it was enchanted. But he wouldn't tell the kender what the magical property of the pipe was.

"You will discover its use," he'd supposedly said, "when you unlock the music. And when it has served you, you must pass it on, as I have to you, for the magic can be used only once by each who frees it."

Like as not, Flint thought, the instrument had been acquired the same way a kender comes by most anything. A quick, plausible distraction, a subtle movement of the hand, and a shepherd spends the next hour searching for his pipe. He probably should have counted himself lucky that half his flock hadn't vanished as well!

"There's no magic in this," Flint said. "More likely there's a flaw in the making. Give over now, Tas, and let me wait in peace."

With a sigh that seemed to come straight from his toes, Tas went back to where he'd been piping. He dropped onto the frozen dirt floor and propped his back up against his pack. In his head he could hear the song he wanted his pipe to sing. In some places it was soft and wistful. Yet, in others it was bright, almost playful. It would be a pretty

tune, a song for the snow. Why, he wondered, couldn't the pipe play the music?

The blizzard raged, shaking the walls of the little shelter. Night now held the mountain in its freezing grip. It occurred to Tas that Sturm and Tanis had been gone much longer than they should have been.

Likely, he thought, drifting with the memory of the tune he heard but couldn't play, it only SEEMED that the waiting was long. Probably Tanis and Sturm had only been gone a few hours at most. It would take them that long to get to where the trees were, find the wood, and fill their packs. He was certain, though, that if he'd been with them, it wouldn't take nearly that long to get back. And three could carry more wood than two. Tanis's reasons for extracting his promise seemed less clear to Tas now. He wished he had gone with them!

It might have been the cold that set him to shivering deep down in his bones. Or the sudden strange turn that the storm's song took. Whatever it was, Tas found that his music had faded and left him.

The wind roared and screamed. The snow, falling more heavily now than it had in the afternoon, was like a gray woolen curtain. Frustrated, Tas laid aside his pipe and went to stand by the door.

"Doesn't the wind sound strange?"

Flint did not answer, but stayed still where he sat, peering out into the storm.

"Flint?"

"I heard you."

"It sounds like ... I don't know." Tas cocked his head to listen. "Like wolves howling."

"It's not wolves. It's only the wind."

"I've never heard the wind sound like that. Well, once I heard it sound ALMOST like wolves. But it was really more like a dog. Sometimes you hear a dog howling in the night and you think it's a wolf but it's not because wolves really do sound different. More ferocious, not so lonesome. This does sound like wolves, Flint, don't you think? But I've never heard of wolves hunting in a blizzard unless they were REALLY starving." Tas frowned, remembering a story he'd heard once. "There was a village way up in the mountains in Khur that was attacked by wolves in a blizzard. I didn't see it. But my father did, and he told me about it. He said it was really interesting the way the wolves came down after dark and stalked anything that looked like good food. And he said it was AMAZING what wolves consider good food when they're starving - "

"Will you hush! And while you're at it, stop imagining things that aren't there!" Gritting his teeth against his anger and the fear that the kender's tale of starving wolves and blizzards fanned, Flint climbed to his feet. He was stiff and aching with the cold. "If you must do something, come help me start a fire."

"With what. Flint?"

"With those old boards and - " Flint thought of the blocks of wood in his pack. He sighed heavily, regretting the loss of his whittling wood. "And whatever I have in my

pack."

"All right." But Tas lingered at the doorway. It WAS wolves howling, he decided firmly, and not the wind. In his mind's eye he could see them: big, heavy-chested brutes, gray as a storm sky, eyes bright with hunger, fangs as sharp as the blade of his own small dagger. They would leap across the drifts and slink through the hollows, pause to taste the air with their noses, howl in eerie mourning for their empty bellies, and lope on again.

His father had also told him that the big gray wolves could be almost invisible against a snowy sky. Lifting his head to listen, he thought the howling was closer now. He wouldn't have to go very far to get just a quick glimpse of the beasts. Forgetting his promise to Tanis, forgetting the uncooperative pipe, Tas decided that he simply had to see - or not see - the wolves.

Checking to be sure that Flint was not watching, Tas grinned happily and slipped out into the storm.

"Tanis!" He was but an arm's length behind the half-elf yet Sturm could see Tanis only as a vague, dark shadow. He hardly heard his own voice, bellow though he did above the wind's scream, and he knew that Tanis had not heard him at all. He caught Tanis's arm and pulled him to a halt.

"Listen!" Sturm shouldered his pack to an easier perch on his back and moved in close. "You're not going to tell me again about how that's the wind, are you? Those are wolves!"

They were indeed. The fiction of the wind had been partly for Sturm's sake, partly for his own. Tanis abandoned it as useless now. "I know! But we have to push on, Sturm! We can't let them get between us and the shelter!"

"Run? You want us to run?" The thought of fleeing from danger sent a spasm of disgust across the youth's face. Beneath that revulsion, though, was an instinctive fear. It was not hidden, Tanis saw, as well as Sturm might have hoped.

Tanis's humorless laughter was caught by the wind and flung away. "I do! But the best we can do is slog on. There is no shame in this retreat, Sturm. We're no match for a pack, and Flint and Tas won't appreciate our courage at all if they have to consider it while freezing to death."

Though carefully given, it was a reprimand. Sturm recognized it and took it with considered grace. "I'm not accustomed to flight, Tanis," he said gravely. "But neither am I accustomed to abandoning friends. Lead on."

Sturm, Tanis thought, seeking his bearings, you're too solemn by half for your years! But, aye, I'll lead on ...

And that was another matter. How far had they come? Tanis could no longer tell. He was storm-blind now, hardly able to keep his eyes open for the merciless bite of wind-driven snow and ice. The bitter wind had battered at their backs when they'd left the shelter. As long as it roared and screamed in their faces, clawing at their skin, tearing at their clothing, he could be fairly certain that they were moving in the right direction. He did not like to think what might happen should the storm suddenly change direction.

Likely someone would find our bones in spring and wonder and pity. Putting aside the grim thought, Tan-is hunched his shoulders and bowed his head before the storm's blast, protecting his eyes as best he could. His legs were heavier and harder to move with each step. His neck and shoulders ached beneath his burden of wood. And the wolves were howling closer.

It only SEEMS A never-ending journey, he told himself as he waded through still another drift. Before the night was much older they would be back at the shelter. Then the storm could tear across the mountains, then the wolves could howl until they were hoarse. It wouldn't matter. Tanis could almost hear Flint scolding and grumbling about two young fools who couldn't come right back, but must linger to catch their deaths in the storm. Beneath it all would run Tas's chattering and incessant, never-ending questions. Their miserable burdens of fuel would feed a crackling fire to thaw hands and feet they could no longer feel.

Thinking to share the encouragement with Sturm toiling silently behind, he turned, squinting into the blinding snow.

"Sturm! Soon!" he shouted.

Sturm looked up. Ice rimmed his hair, long streaks of white scored his face where the cold had bitten. "What?"

"Soon! We're almost - "

It might have been instinct that made Tanis slip immediately out of his pack and reach for his bow and quiver. Or it might have been the look of wide-eyed horror on Sturm's face. He never heard the wolf's roar, or the slaverling snarl of its mate. He only felt the heavy weight where it caught him behind the knees and drove him with all the force of its hundred pounds face first into the snow.

His bow was beneath him, his dagger still sheathed at his belt. Fear raced through him like a hot river. He shoved his chin tight to his chest and locked his hands behind his head, protecting his neck and throat. The wolf's hot breath, stinking of its last kill, gagged him. Powerful jaws snapping, unable to reach his neck or throat, the wolf fastened on his shoulder, worrying at the thick cloth of his cloak, tearing through it and his leather tunic to lay his flesh bare to dripping fangs. Its eyes were gleaming green fire, its mouth a roaring crimson maw.

Bucking and kicking, his mind empty of all thought but survival, Tanis heaved onto his back. His head still low, he freed his hands and found his dagger. The wolf rose up, scrambling to regain position, belly exposed for an instant. Tanis gripped his dagger hard. The icy air stung in his lungs. He thrust upward with all his strength. The blade drove into the wolf's belly to the hilt. Gasping hard, he dragged until he struck breastbone. The beast fell away, dead as it hit the snow.

Shuddering, locked for one painful moment in the rictus of fear, Tanis lay on his back. Sweat froze on his face, nausea churned in his belly. His breath, ragged and hurting, sounded like the pumping of a bellows. Dark blood pooled, steaming in the freezing night.

Behind and above him another wolf roared. That challenge was followed swiftly by deadly snarling and then

a shocked scream of pain. So horrible was the sound that Tanis could not tell if it had come from the lungs of man or beast.

Sturm! Coppery, musty, the stench of fresh blood filled the air. Tanis scrambled to his feet. The storm wind blinded him, tore at him. He couldn't see!

Though he'd always wielded his blade well in practice bouts with a confidence seldom disappointed, Sturm had only blooded his sword once and that against a human opponent whose moves could, to some extent, be gauged. Could he have gone against a wolf who would charge in under a sword's reach with the desperation of a predator starving?

Sliding in the freezing snow, Tanis ran to where he imagined the scent of blood was strongest. He crashed to his knees and, cursing, regained his feet.

"Sturm!" he howled. He thought in that moment that no blizzard wind could sound a cry as desolate. "Sturm! Where are you?"

Tanis found him sitting in the snow, bending over drawn up knees. The second wolf lay sprawled behind him, its head nearly severed from its neck. Beside it, slick with rapidly congealing blood, lay Sturm's sword. Tanis slid to his knees beside his friend. The rest of the pack had to be nearby! They had to get out of here!

"Sturm, are you hurt?"

The boy braced and straightened. The leather of his tunic had been shredded by the wolf's fangs. A trail of blood and ragged wounds whose edges were even now freezing white showed Tanis where fangs had raked from collarbone to breast. His hands trembling, the half-elf tried to gently separate leather from freezing blood. A hiss of indrawn breath, Sturm's only protest against the handling, made Tanis wince for the pain he caused.

"A moment, lad, just a moment longer. There." The leather came away, and Tanis heaved a long sigh of relief. The wound was ugly and long. But though he had dreaded to see the white glare of bone or the dark shadow of exposed muscle, he did not. Working with hands made awkward by the cold, Tanis tore thick strips of cloth from his cloak and made a bandage.

"If we can bless the cold for anything, it's that it will prevent you from bleeding overlong. Can you move your arm?"

Sturm lifted his shoulder, tried to reach. He managed a grim smile. "Yes," he said, his voice rough with the effort not to groan. "But I'll not be lifting a sword for a time."

Tanis shook his head. "The gods willing, you won't have to. Sturm, we have to go on. Those two cannot have been hunting alone. Can you walk?"

For an answer Sturm got to his feet. He stumbled a little, but righted himself quickly. The hard gleam in his eyes told Tanis what he needed to know. But when he made to reach for his pack, Tanis stopped him.

"No. Leave it. We have to get out of here. It will only slow us down."

"Tanis, we need the wood."

"DAMN the wood!"

"Tanis, no! The need for fire is still the same. And without a guard fire, won't we have to face the rest of the pack at the shelter? I can drag the wood."

Sturm was right. Tanis snatched up his pack and shouldered it with a snarled oath. He retrieved Sturm's sword, wiped it clean on his cloak, and helped the youth to scabbard it. An arrow lay ready against the bow's string. Don't rush! he told himself. Get your bearings now!

But that was not so easily done. The wind no longer pushed from any one direction, but seemed to bellow and thunder from all four. Tanis cast about him, searched the snow to see if he could tell by the tracks where he'd been standing when the wolves attacked.

There was no sign.

"Which way, Tanis?"

"I - I can't tell. No, wait. Up, we were moving up the hill." He squinted into the wind. "There! That way."

Behind them, silent phantoms in the night, the rest of the wolf pack moved in to do a starving predator's grisly honor to fallen comrades. *****

Flint roared curses into the screaming wind. That wretched, straw-brained Tas! If there was a god of mischief and deviltry, he would be no god at all but a kender! He'd not turned his back for a moment! But a moment, he thought bitterly, was all it took to send Tas out into the snow. What had he been off after? Tanis and Sturm? Likely not. That would have been too sensible a motive to ascribe to a kender.

"Tas!" he shouted, flinging up an arm to protect his eyes against the wind's teeth. "Tas!"

The surest way to die, Tanis had said, was to scatter all over the mountain. "Well and fine, and here we are," Flint snarled, kicking furiously at the snow drifting past his knees. "Scattered all over the mountain. If I had half the brains I curse that kender for NOT having, I'd leave him out here to freeze as a warning to the rest of his empty-headed kind."

Then he heard, mourning above the wind, the howling of the wolves he'd thought to deny. Fear shivered through the old dwarf. They were close now. He hunched his shoulders against the wind.

Wolves! Aye, and likely hungry enough not to turn aside from stone-headed kender or young idiots who can't hie themselves back from a simple wood-gathering trip in decent time. . . .

"Tas! Where ARE you?!"

The snow erupted right at Flint's feet. Scrambling for balance he slipped, tried to catch himself and, tripping over a snow-mantled boulder, tumbled into a drift.

"Flint! Wait! Flint! Where'd you go?"

His long brown eyes ablaze with laughter, his face bright with merriment, Tas leaped into the drift, narrowly missing Flint's head. Tugging and pulling, then shoving and pushing, he got the dwarf righted and on his feet again.

"Flint, it's a little cold for playing games, don't you think? Look at you, I can't find your beard for the snow!"

His impish laughter skirled high above the wind's roar. "What are you doing out here, Flint? I thought you said we were to wait at the shelter. You know, you're really going to be sorry later. There might not be a fire, after all, and you're so wet you'll freeze solid. You should have stayed inside."

There WERE words, Flint thought later, to express his fury. And a pity it was that he could not have found them when he needed them; they would easily have melted the last inch of snow from the mountain.

"I should have stayed inside?" Flint took a quick swipe at the kender's head, missed, and slipped to his knees. "I should have stayed?" He flung off the hand that Tas offered him and climbed to his feet again. "I'd not be out here at all if it weren't for you!"

"Me?" Tas's eyes went round with surprise. "You came out after me? But I'm fine, Flint. I just went out for a look. I thought I might be able to see a wolf. Or not see one. They say they're almost invisible against a storm, you know." His eyes darkened for a moment with disappointment. "But I didn't see any. Or I didn't NOT see any. I'm not sure which. And I didn't get very far. You know, Tanis was right. You can hardly see where you've been out here. You certainly can't see where you're going. On the whole," he decided, reaching out a tentative hand to help Flint dust the snow from his back, "I'd really rather be inside where it's warmer."

The logic was too tortuous for Flint to follow, and he was too cold and wet - nearly frozen to death, he thought furiously - to work it out now. He turned and stamped back toward the shelter, growling and cursing.

Cold, but undaunted, frolicking like a half-grown pup taken to play, Tas scampered ahead. "You'll feel better once we get inside," he called back. "It's not much warmer there, but it is drier. And I've been thinking about my magic pipe while I was out looking for the wolves. I think I'd be able to find the music if I tried just a little harder."

Oh, fine, Flint thought, trudging stiffly behind, the dreaded pipe! It wasn't enough that he had to contend with blizzards and promises to people who haven't the sense to come in out of a storm, with brainless kender and wolves. No. On top of all of that had to be laid a "magic" pipe.

When he stumbled, shaking and wet, into the shelter he saw Tas sitting crosslegged and absent-eyed, hunched over his pipe. The high, tortured wailing that had tormented Flint all afternoon filled the air, rising almost loud enough to compete with the wind and the wolves' howls.

"The dreaded pipe," he sighed.

He returned to his task of coaxing a fire from the broken boards and fine, smooth blocks of his whittling wood. It would barely be enough to thaw his frozen clothing. It would not be enough to light the lost back to safety.

Tanis negotiated the gently descending slope as though it were a vertical cliff face, and slid to a ragged halt at the bottom. Sturm skidded past him, overbalanced by his pack, and dropped to his knees in a drift that seemed to swallow him to the shoulders. Tanis helped his friend to his feet. His

stomach lurched in fear when he saw a dark red spot of fresh blood on Sturm's bandage.

"Don't stop!" he cried above the wind's scream. "We've got to go on!"

"Aye, Tanis, we do! But WHERE? We're lost!"

They were. Or they might be. Tanis didn't know any more. He was fairly certain of his direction. This hollow was familiar, more filled with snow and drifts, but still familiar. Or was that only hope, the last thing inside him that hadn't frozen yet? He could not see ahead the length of his arm. Had they come to the shelter? Had they passed it? He couldn't think, and he did not see anymore how it mattered. Now it only mattered that they keep moving.

The deadly lethargy of freezing had been dogging them with patient tenacity. To give in now to aching limbs, to sit down just once to rest, to ease the burning of their lungs, the fire licking behind their eyes, would be to die.

And we'll not freeze to death an arm's length from that damned shelter! Tanis vowed.

But Sturm went down a few moments later and did not rise. He tried, foundered in a drift, and fell back. For a moment fury blazed so bright in his brown eyes that Tanis could see it despite the blizzard's concealing curtain.

He dropped to his knees beside his friend, shouted and tried again to pull him to his feet. He could get no purchase in the drifted snow, no grip with his frozen hands.

"Tanis, no."

How could he have heard Sturm's whisper above the wind's scream? Or was it that he read the protest in the boy's eyes?

"Tanis . . . take the wood . . . go."

"No! We'll rest. Just for a moment. We'll rest." There was more danger, he knew, in resting than in going on. The very wind that tore at them now would carry the scent of fresh blood to the wolves who must be trailing behind. But he, too, was not accustomed to abandoning his friends.

Tanis went down on his knees again in the snow and drew Sturm as close to him as he could, hoping to protect the boy from the worst of the piercing wind. Just for a moment, he promised himself. Just until Sturm can recoup.

So gentle is the paradoxical warmth that suffuses a man just before freezing, so entrancing, that Tanis did not recognize it for what it was. He only wondered briefly that he had enough body warmth left to feel, then closed his eyes wearily and forgot to open them.

The note, coming suddenly amid the squeaks and protests of the pipe, startled Tas. It was soft, gentle, and reminded him of the sigh of a mourning dove. He moved his numb fingers over the holes, drew another breath, and found the note again. And then he found another, higher, and a third, lower. Almost it was a tune, and Tas caught the change. He tried again.

There was a rabbit in the storm. Caught away from its burrow, too young to know that it must dig into the snow for its insulating warmth, it scurried this way and that, as though it might outrun the cold. Home! screamed through

the rabbit's veins with the frantic pumping of panic-driven blood. Home! But home, a burrow snug and warm, smelling of good brown earth and the comforting odor of safety, was too far away.

Tas heard the rabbit's frightened squeak above the faltering tune he played. How could he have heard the rabbit's cry? He didn't know, but he squeezed his eyes tightly shut, let the pipe fall silent, and lost the image and the sound. Before he could think of absurdity, before he could decide that the pipe had nothing to do with the rabbit, he hunched over it again and continued to play.

There was a deer, its antlers almost too heavy with the snow's burden to bear. There was a mountain goat, foundered in a drift, its bleating protest wailing and lost in the biting wind.

Tas drew a sharp breath, knowing that the deer would soon go to its knees in surrender, that the mountain goat would thrash and surge against its snowy restraints and surely break a leg.

If his attention was a vagrant thing, his heart was a kind one. Poor rabbit! he thought, poor brave deer! He wanted, as much as he had ever wanted anything, to go out to find them, to show them a way out of the storm. He wanted this more than he'd wanted anything before. More, even, than he'd wanted to find the magic in his little pipe.

In Tas's mind there was something dark and still. It was a man - it was Sturm! And beside him knelt Tan-is! They might have been ice sculptures so cold and motionless were they.

Though it was no doing of his - and yet perhaps it was - a long ache of sadness drifted through Tas's music when he realized that they might be dead. Like the rabbit or the deer or the mountain goat, there was no way to tell where they were, near or far, no way to find them and help. There was only the pipe. He played, then, with all his heart and trusted to the magic that it would not be a song of farewell.

There was a rabbit in the doorway. Ears aslant, pink nose twitching, it paused for a second beneath the slight overhang of the roof as though asking permission to enter. Where he sat before a fire dwindled to meager embers and dying coals, Flint saw the ice frozen on its back, the snow clumped between its toes. Part of him sighed for pity, and part decided he must bid his wits goodbye.

And behind him the horrible squealing of Tas's pipe settled gently into a sweet, low song.

The rabbit moved then, hunched forward, and fell onto its side, eyes wide as though it could no more believe that it now waited a foot away from the old dwarf than Flint could.

The storm, Flint told himself, it's only seeking shelter. . . . Easier to believe that than to believe that his wits had frozen solid around some mad dream. Moving slowly, he reached his hand out to the rabbit. He had not Tanis's way with animals. That lad could call a bird to hand, silence a chattering squirrel in the tree with a whisper. Or so it had often seemed to Flint. But the rabbit accepted the old

dwarf's touch and quivered only a little.

He gathered up the little creature in both hands, felt the quick race of its heart, and moved his thumb carefully over its broad feet. The snow fell away. Under the warmth of his hands the ice melted from the rabbit's back.

"There," he whispered, amazed. He turned the rabbit back toward the door. "Off with you."

But the rabbit did not, as Flint had expected, dart away in fear. It paused in the doorway, seemed for a moment to consider the storm, and turned, bounding back past Flint and into the shelter. Flint saw it scamper into the shadows behind him and vanish into the darkness. Tas, still bent over his pipe, looked up only briefly to laugh.

Puzzled, Flint turned back to the door and gasped. Looming like some dream beast was a rough-coated mountain goat. To the left of the goat, its antlers heavy with snow, a dark-eyed deer waited.

Dipping its antlers - courteous beast, Flint thought and so thinking abandoned his sense and logic - the deer stepped into the shelter. The goat, as though hanging back to await the passage of mountain royal ty, entered last.

Nothing Flint had ever seen was brighter than the delight shining in Tas's eyes. His pipe still in hand, the kender leaped to his feet, ducked around the deer, patted the goat, and scurried to the door.

"Flint! Look! Do you see? I brought them here!"

Flint shook his head. I can't be seeing this! he thought, stubbornly. And I'm not!

"It's the pipe! It's the pipe, Flint! Listen!"

Again that enticing, gentle song. Behind him Flint heard the thick flap of wings. He ducked only in time to miss being struck by a wide-eyed owl. Two white-bellied mice darted past his feet, saw the owl, and dove screaming behind Tas's pack.

"Tas! Stop!"

"No, Flint! It's the magic! They heard it! I wanted them to hear, and they did."

Magic? Flint turned this way and that, and everywhere he looked he saw what he knew he shouldn't be seeing. Sputtering protest, stammering questions, he received no answers from Tas.

The kender was on the floor again, bent over his pipe, his eyes squeezed shut in fierce concentration. He'd brought the rabbit and the deer. The mountain goat had heard and found him. And two mice and an owl. Soon, surely, his song would bring Tanis and Sturm.

Numbly, too stunned to know where to look first, Flint clapped his hands to his ears. After a moment he closed his eyes because there was a deer pawing at the frozen dirt floor, an owl preening its wings in the rafters, and a goat nibbling delicately at the straps of the dwarf's pack. He felt something soft and warm touch him and looked down to see the rabbit asleep against his foot.

He'd never heard that one of the first signs of freezing was a wild slipping away of the wits. But he imagined that it probably was because he still could not believe that what he saw was real.

Get up, the words whispered. Get up! Come back, they urged. Come back! Lies, they sighed. The cold is telling lies! Like dreams of a blazing hearth seen through frosted windows, the words wandered through Tanis's mind. Gently they coaxed and encouraged. Beneath the simple words danced the light, bright notes of a shepherd's pipe. Behind the tune, beyond the words, flickered images of a place where the cold had no power to touch him.

The wind, he thought, pulling away from Sturm. Or just my sanity slipping away . . .

But there was no wind. Its howl was silenced. And when he lifted his face to the night sky he no longer felt the snow's deadly kiss. Beside him Sturm moved, slowly, but with the deliberate care of a man marshalling strength.

"Tanis, do you hear?"

"The wind - it's died down."

"Aye," Sturm agreed, as though it had only just come to his attention. "That, too."

Tanis looked at him in surprise. "You hear music?"

"Yes. It sounds like a shepherd's pipe. . . ." His words wandered away, lost in surprise and sudden realization.

"Tas's pipe, Tanis! We must be near the shelter!"

Tas's pipe! But that poor, crippled little instrument, the "dreaded pipe" Flint called it, had never given Tas music this sweet. And yet, what other could it be? Tanis climbed wearily to his feet and helped Sturm to rise.

"We'll follow it," he said. "No, leave your pack. If the shelter is that close, I can come back for the wood. And I've still got mine." HOME, the music sang, COME HOME. . . .

Snow ghosts! The spirits of the storm-killed. Or so they would have been called in the faraway mountains of his homeland. Flint watched the eerie blue race of breaking clouds across the white mantle of the snow. He shivered, more from the memory of an old legend than from the cold. Behind him Tas's pipe faltered, then fell silent.

In an odd little exodus, as soon as the snow had stopped falling, moments after the wind finally died, Tas's strangely assorted menagerie of storm refugees had filed past him into the night. Still, even after the last creature had left, Tas had continued to play, hoping that Tanis and Sturm would hear the pipe's music, feel the call of its magic.

Magic! Flint thought now. The word felt bitter and hard in his mind. He told himself that he never had believed. Some wild coincidence, some quirk had led the animals to the shelter. It hadn't been, after all, any of the pipe's doing. Though he could still feel, in memory, the frightened race of the rabbit's heart against his palms, and later the confiding warmth of it where it lay against his foot. Nonsense! The poor little beast was too exhausted and frozen to care where it finally collapsed. He refused to remember the deer and the goat, the mice or the owl. He sighed and kicked at the blackened embers of the fire. We can go out and look now, he thought. He would not allow himself to think further. He did not want to consider what

they must find.

"They're home." Tas's voice was oddly hollow.

Flint turned slowly, the skin on the back of his neck prickling. "What did you say?"

The kender's face was white, etched with weariness. But his eyes were bright with some pleasure or satisfaction that Flint did not understand. "They're home, Flint. They're back." He put his pipe aside. Wobbling to his feet, he went to stand beside the dwarf. He was tired, but it was the best tired he'd ever felt.

Flint peered out into the night. Two shadows intersected those pouring across the gleaming snow. They were darker and more solid than that weird blue flow. Snow ghosts?

Shivering, the old dwarf squinted harder. Not yet! he thought triumphantly. Not yet, they're not! But one of them was staggering, leaning on the other.

Flint grasped Tas's shoulders and hurried him back inside the shelter. "Stay here, Tas. STAY HERE. They're back!"

Tas smiled and nodded. "Of course they're back. I TOLD you they were. They heard the pipe, they felt the magic - Flint! Where are you going?"

Yawning mightily, forgetting Flint's warning to stay inside the shelter, Tas retrieved his pipe and jogged out into the snow.

As he had for the past two mornings, Tanis leaned against the door jamb, smiling at the winter sun as though hailing a well-met friend. Beside him Sturm gingerly lifted his pack.

"You're certain you are well enough to travel?"

The youth nodded once. "Yes." He was pale yet, but the dressing covering his wound had come away clean with its last two changings.

"You did well, Sturm."

Sturm's solemn eyes lighted, then darkened. "No. I almost cost you your life, Tanis. I couldn't go on, and you stayed."

"I did. It was my choice. And," he said quickly, forestalling further protest, "it was a choice, at the time, of freezing with you or a few yards farther on. Where you did well was in another place altogether."

"I don't understand."

"You are a good companion, lad, and one I would not hesitate to travel with again."

Plainly Sturm still did not understand. But he took the compliment with a notable absence of youthful awkwardness.

In the silence fallen between them Tanis heard the beginnings of an argument between Tas and Flint that had become all too familiar these last two days.

"There was no mountain goat," Flint growled.

But Tas was insistent. "Yes, there WAS. And not only that, there was a deer - "

"There was no deer."

Grinning, Tanis went to join them.

"Flint, there WAS! You saw them. And the field mice,

and the owl. And what about the rabbit, Flint? It slept against your foot all the time."

This time Flint made no firm denial. "Kender stories," he snorted. He glanced sidelong at Tanis and veered sharply away from the subject of magic pipes. "Are you certain Sturm is ready to travel?"

"So he says, and I think he is."

"I'd like to check that bandage once more."

Tas watched him leave, then reached over to finger a broken pack strap that had been giving the old dwarf trouble. "Look, Tanis."

"Frayed, but it should hold with repair."

"No. Look. It's not frayed. The goat chewed it."

"Yes, well. . ." Tanis smiled and quietly relieved Tas of Flint's small whittling knife. "Fell out of the pack, did it?"

Tas's eyes widened innocently. "Oh! I guess it did. Good thing I found it. Flint wouldn't have been happy to leave it behind. But what about the pack strap?"

"It looks frayed to me." He patted Tas's shoulder. "Come on, now. It's time to go."

"I don't know why no one believes me, Tanis."

Tanis wished then, for the sake of the wistful hope in the kender's voice, that he could believe in the magic pipe. But it sounded too much like all of Tas's fantastic stories. Some, doubtless, were true. But Tan-is had never been able to separate those from the soaring flights of imagination that Tas passed off as adventures.

"You know," he said kindly, "enchanted or not, your piping saved our lives. If we hadn't heard it, Sturm and I would have died out there."

"I'm glad it did, Tanis, I really am. But, still, I wish someone would believe I found the magic. I don't know why Flint won't. He saw the deer and the goat and the mice and the owl. And the rabbit WAS sleeping against his foot."

That rabbit, Tanis realized then, was not among the things that Flint denied. In matters of magic, that might be, where Flint was concerned, considered avowal.

When he looked up again Tas had gone. Rising to join the others, he caught sight of something small and abandoned on the floor. "Tas, you forgot your pipe." He picked it up and then saw words carved into the wood that he had not seen before.

FIND THE MUSIC, FIND THE MAGIC.

"Did you carve this?"

Tas did not turn. "Yes," he said, reluctantly. "I have to leave it."

"But, Tas, why?"

Tas squared his shoulders as though firming some resolve. But still he did not turn. "Because the shepherd said that it could only be used once. That's why I can't get the pipe to play that song again - or any song. I've used the magic." He took a deep breath and went on. "And he said that once I found the magic I had to pass the pipe on." He paused and then he did turn, a scamp's humor in his long brown eyes. "It's going to be a long winter. I'm going to leave it here for someone else to find."

Suddenly, as sharply as though he was yet there, the

half-elf saw himself crouched in the snow, too aching and exhausted to move. He felt again the bitter whip of the wind, the life-draining cold. He heard, very faintly, the coaxing tune that had called him back from freezing. Maybe, he thought, seeing the earnest belief in the kender's brown eyes. Maybe . . .

But no. If there were any magic in the shabby little pipe at all, it lay in the fact that Tas, that inveterate and inevitable collector, could be induced to believe that he must leave behind a pipe he swore was enchanted.

Tanis grinned again. That, he supposed, was magic enough for one pipe.

The Wizard's Spectacles Morris Simon

Nugold Lodston shook a gnarled fist at his youthful tormentors.

"Get away! Pester somebody else! Leave me alone!"

The old hermit shielded his face with his forearm from another flurry of pebbles amid the laughter of the dirty street urchins and their audience of amused onlookers. He despised these trips into Digfel and longed for the quiet solitude of his cave on the banks of the Meltstone River.

"We don't want your kind in Digfel, you old miser. Go home to Hylar where you belong, and take your worthless gold with you!"

The aged dwarf squinted in the general direction of the adult voice. His eyesight was terrible, even for his four hundred years. A blurry outline of a heavy human figure loomed in front of him, barring his way into Milo Martin's shop. It was obvious that he had to either push past the abusive speaker or retreat through his delinquent henchmen without buying winter provisions.

"Remove your carcass from my path, and take your ill-bred issue with you!" Lodston shouted. Several of the spectators laughed at the old hermit's taunt. The blurry-faced speaker leaned closer, revealing his florid cheeks and filthy, tobacco-stained mouth to the dwarf's faded eyes.

"You heard what I said, scum! Get out of Digfel before I feed your scrawny bones to my dogs!" blustered the fat townsman. Lodston smelled the odors of stale wine and unwashed human skin even before he could see the man's quivering red jowls. He grinned and gestured toward the beggar children.

"If those are your mongrels, you ought to be more careful when you mate. You'll ruin your bloodline!" Lodston sneered and shook his quarterstaff in the drunk's face, which was darkening with rage as the catcalls grew louder.

"You gonna let him talk to you like that, Joss?" someone goaded the drunk.

"Kick that uppity dwarf in the teeth, if he's got any!" yelled one of the urchins.

The drunken bully sputtered a curse and raised a beefy hand. In the same instant, Lodston muttered a single word with his bearded mouth pressed against the smooth shaft of

his heavy staff. The stick of rare bronzewood glowed suddenly with an inner light and began to vibrate in the hermit's hand. The old dwarf seemed almost as surprised as everyone else by the force within the enchanted weapon and nearly dropped it. He clutched its shaft more tightly, feeling its inner power throbbing as it lifted itself in the air above the bully's head.

Suddenly the staff descended repeatedly, faster than the eye could see, upon the head of Nugold Lodston's assailant. It appeared to the astonished onlookers as if it were a drumstick in the hands of a practiced drummer. Each blow landed with vicious force and accuracy, producing lacerations and bruises on the startled bully's scalp and face.

"Run, Joss! It's a magical staff! He'll kill you!" The bully's eyes were blinded with his own blood from the wounds on his forehead. He backed away from Lodston's flashing staff, his hands raised in front of his face to ward off the unerring blows of the enchanted weapon. To the hermit's failing eyes, the scene was a muddled image of fleeing shapes as the street emptied. Digfel was a superstitious town, especially in the rough section where Milo Martin kept his store.

"Get in here, Nugold, before they come back!" Martin's rotund figure was standing in the doorway of his shop. He was gesturing frantically for the hermit to come inside. The staff had already lost the aura summoned by the ancient command word, but the merchant's bulging eyes were staring greedily at it.

The hermit grunted a minor dwarvish epithet to himself and pushed past the excited shopkeeper into the store. Smells of candlewax, oil, and soap mingled with those of wood smoke, spices, and leather - the comfortable and familiar odors of Martin's General Store. Lodston came to Digfel no more than four or five times a year, and this was one of the few places he liked to shop for provisions. Digfel was a rowdy human mining town on the outskirts of the dwarven mountains, steeped in fears and prejudices dating to the Cataclysm. Milo Martin's shop had a reputation as a brief haven amid the turmoil of the times, perhaps because Martin himself was such a tolerant man. The jolly but enterprising little merchant sold his goods to anyone with iron coins in his pockets, whether dwarf, human, or elf. Only kender, those notorious shoplifters, were unwelcome in his store.

"You old fool! Don't you know you can't fight all of those bumpkins by yourself, with or without a magic staff?" Milo's gentle reprimand was undercut by an excited sparkle in his crisp blue eyes. The merchant was thrilled at the promise of something new to talk about at the Pig Iron Alehouse. He was also bursting with curiosity about the mysterious bronzewood stick that seemed to have a life of its own.

"Bah!" spat the dwarf. "You humans think that you know everything. My people mined these mountains before you farmers learned how to grow your nauseating vegetables. We dig more than potatoes out of the dirt, I'll tell you that much!"

Martin nodded judiciously, although he knew that the old hermit's dwarven pride was only momentary. Lodston lived alone because he had alienated his own people as much as he had the humans in Digfel. The merchant wanted to divert the conversation toward the staff. He certainly did not want to provoke a long-winded discourse on past dwarven glories and present human frailties.

"That's a fascinating quarterstaff, Nugold," he probed. "If you tell me how you came by it, I might pay good iron ingots for it. I've been needing a fine old stick like that!" Lodston's bearded mouth curled in a sly smirk. Martin's face was a mere blur to him, but the silkiness in the wily human's voice betrayed his usual greed.

"How much?" he demanded quickly, cocking his head at the shopkeeper's fuzzy features.

"Enough to pay what you owe me, and maybe for this trip as well - IF the staff is worth that much," Martin added shrewdly.

"Oh, it's worth ten times the trash you sell in this place," vowed the dwarf. "I got it from an elven wizard!"

If the hermit's vision had been sharper, he might have recognized the immediate frown on the shop keeper's face as a look of disbelief.

"There aren't any elves in Hylar! No elf I've ever met would have anything to do with a dwarf!"

"There's one who would, all right, and he lives in my cave!" Lodston retorted defiantly. The hermit pulled a small keg of pickled fish closer to the fireplace and sat on it. He clutched the magical staff in front of him as if he were guarding it from the merchant's covetous gaze. Then he reached into a pocket and handed Martin a crumpled piece of parchment.

"He wrote down what we need. You fetch all those things while I rest my legs, and I'll tell you the strangest tale you'll ever hear in this ugly town of simpletons."

Milo Martin's frown deepened as he grabbed the list from the hermit's filthy fingers. He expected to see a barely literate scrawl, and was astonished when he recognized the fine penmanship of a scholar on the crude parchment. Each character was fashioned with elegant swirls, while the spelling and phrases were archaic.

"'Balls of twyne, a sette of three;

"Grinded millett, so fyne as to pass through a tea sieve;

"Twin hyves of honey, with compleat combs for the waxe"

It was obvious that the old dwarf hadn't written the list. Martin doubted if the hermit was literate at all, and he was positive that those gnarled hands and failing vision would be incapable of such careful strokes of a nib.

"This is quite a list, Nugold," he admitted. "I might not have it all. Tell me about this 'elven wizard' who lives in your cave while I gather whatever I can to suit you and your guest."

"His name's Dalamar," the dwarf began. "I found him on the riverbank last month, half-starved and out of his head. I knew he was strange, because of his white skin and long

hair as jet black as his sorcerer's robe. 'This ain't no human,' I says to myself. Then I drug him into my cave and made him a bed by the fire. When he woke up, I thought he'd be afraid, but he was just as calm as he could be. He acted like he knew where he was, and like he knew me, too. Even called me by name, he did!"

Milo Martin paused with some candles in his hand.

"Black hair, you say? Not just dark?"

"Nay!" Lodston replied irritably. "I said black, and I meant it! It be black as soot, and his skin like white linen, so white that it shines like a full moon in a night sky."

The merchant stroked his chubby chin, considering the dwarf's words. "Well, if he's an elf as you say, I'd guess that he was from Sylvanesti. I've heard that the eastern elves look like that, but I've never seen one of them."

The dwarf nodded excitedly. "That's it!" he exclaimed.

"Sylvanesti is where he said he was from! You beat all I've ever seen with those wild guesses, Milo!"

The shopkeeper shrugged. It was no guess, but he decided to let the hermit believe that he possessed such an unpredictable skill. People were more reluctant to cheat someone who could "outguess" them.

"Go on with your story. Tell me about the staff," urged Martin as he turned toward his shelves to collect more items on the list.

"Well, he asks me right off if I found his box. When I tell him not to fret about some box after I save him from drowning, he doesn't say anything. He just stares at the fire for a long time. Then he gets up and heads for the door.

'Wait!' I calls. 'You ain't fit enough to walk!'

'Come to the river with me,' he says in this strange voice. It was like his words were stronger than I was! Before I knew what I was doing, I was up to my ankles in mud, helping the elf find this staff and that danged box."

"What kind of box?" Milo Martin had stopped gathering items from the list and was leaning against his counter. His curiosity had grown too great to bother hiding.

"A little wooden chest bound with brass strips," Lodston replied. "I carried it back to the cave after we found the staff. When we both was dry and warm again, he told me his name and said he used to be a wizard for some king named 'Lorac.' "

The name meant nothing to Martin. The enthralled shopkeeper motioned for Lodston to continue.

"Dalamar said he got into some kind of trouble back at this Sylvanesti place for changing his robes from white to black or something like that. Said he had to leave before the king killed him. When I told him I didn't think a king'd worry that much about the color of a man's clothes, he just smiled and laid his head back against the hearth."

Martin knew very little about magic and wizards, but he did know more than old Lodston. The shopkeeper's pudgy face flushed as he flaunted his superior knowledge of matters arcane.

"Idiot! Don't you even know the difference between white-robed and black-robed sorcerers? You ever heard of an evil elf, much less an evil elven wizard?"

"Evil?" demanded the hermit. "You mean like Joss out there and his scum-brained kids?"

"No!" Martin growled. "I don't mean simple pickpockets and drunks. If you'd ever got out of that cave of yours, you'd know that some dark force is sweeping over Krynn, and it sounds to me like your new buddy is part of it!"

The shopkeeper's crisp eyes clouded. The normally jolly and mercurial man seemed suddenly overwhelmed with melancholia. "I thought Digfel was too little to get involved in this thing," he muttered sadly. "I thought everybody would leave us alone as long as we supplied them with steel for their swords and spears."

"What in Reorx's name are you mumbling about?" Lodston demanded.

"I'm talking about that guest of yours!" Martin replied angrily. "He and his evil friends will bring the war to Digfel!"

"War? What war? I don't understand what . . ."

"Go on with your story," the shopkeeper urged, interrupting the dwarf's flurry of questions in a calmer voice. The hermit's naive ignorance of the outside world was incorrigible. Martin could barely explain the sinister events of recent years to himself, much less to the reclusive dwarf.

"Harrumph!" snorted Lodston. He was too old and battle-weary to listen to human war stories. Vivid memories of THE war still lingered in his aged brain, the war which had forced the mountain dwarves from their traditional homes.

"Well, as I was saying," he continued, "Dalamar's been wandering around in the west ever since they threw him out of this Sylvanesti place. He said he had to take some kind of 'test' at Wayreth to be a wizard, and it made him sick. I asked him if his stomach hurt, but he just said I wouldn't understand if he told me. He was up at Solace when a Seeker priest tried to kill him. So he made this raft and sneaked away on the river just before they came to bum him as a witch."

"Are they after him now?" Martin demanded quickly. Digfel had been free of the Seeker insanity, and he hoped that Lodston's refugee would not attract the zealous witch-hunters to this rough but quiet corner of Krynn.

"You got me there," Lodston replied. "I think they lost his trail during the storm that wrecked his raft. Nobody'd ever believe that he could have drifted this far downstream, all the way through the Qualinesti woods. I told him I'd hide him from them maniacs till he was well enough to take care of himself. He didn't thank me or anything, just rolled over and went to sleep."

"Did you search his belongings while he was sleeping?" Milo Martin asked eagerly. The opportunistic shopkeeper was imagining what he would have done under the same circumstances.

"What am I, a kender?" cried the insulted dwarf. "Anyway, I didn't need to snoop. He showed me what was in his box."

The hermit paused to retrieve a blackened clay pipe

from beneath his fur cloak and gestured toward the tobacco jar on the counter.

"How's about some of that weed, the kind you sprinkle with honey wine? And maybe a little ale and biscuits to go with it," he added as Martin fetched the tobacco. The hermit might have been nearly blind, but he knew when he had hooked a listener on a story. The shopkeeper thrust a foaming mug of freshly brewed stout at the dwarf, who waited until his pipe was well-fired before accepting it. He was enjoying tempting Milo Martin's curiosity.

"Ahhh!" exclaimed the hermit, wiping ale from his mouth with a sleeve.

"Get on with it!" demanded the impatient shopkeeper.

"What was in the chest?"

"Scrolls and books!" Lodston replied in a coarse whisper.

"Dozens of them! And a pair of funny old glasses with wire rims."

"What was on the scrolls?" cried Martin.

"Spells, I reckon," growled the dwarf. "How should I know? I can't read!"

The shopkeeper's pudgy face clouded. "Then how do you know they were magic?"

" 'Cause I saw Dalamar using one to see the future!"

Martin said nothing for several moments. His eyes were wide with imagination as he speculated to himself about the value of such a treasure - if the old dwarf was telling the truth.

"It was a couple of nights ago. We just ate some fish stew and bread. I'm sitting by the fire smoking some wild tobacco, nothing like this stuff, when Dalamar puts on them glasses. He unrolls a piece of parchment like it was holy and stares at the fire for a long time before he starts to read it. I ask him what he's doing, but he acts like he don't hear me."

Lodston took a long swig of ale and a few more puffs of the fragrant cured tobacco before resuming his story.

"Dalamar reads the words out loud, but they's in a language I never heard before. The words had a lot of 'ssss' and 'ffff' sounds that ended in 'i's or 'o's. You ever hear somebody talking like that?"

"No!" blurted his impatient listener. "Forget the language! What happened then?"

"Settle down, and let me finish the story! There was this light, kind of a white glow like moonshine, that got stronger with every word he read. It was coming from the scroll, but it spread all over his body. By the time he finished reading them words, it got so bright in my cave that it hurt my eyes to look at him."

"How long did it last?" Milo Martin asked breathlessly.

"I reckon not more than two or three minutes after he stopped reading," said the hermit. "Soon as it was gone, he stands up and heads for the door. He steps outside and looks around the cave, like he's checking the ground for footprints or something. 'What are you doing?' I asks him. 'What was that bright light in there?'

" 'They're not here yet,' he says.

" 'Who's not here?' I asks him, but he just comes back

inside and sits by the fire again. That's when I looked at the scroll he was reading."

"Well? What did it look like?" Martin prompted.

"Nothing," the dwarf answered. "There was nothing on it at all. Dalamar wrote that list on it this mom-ing!"

The startled shopkeeper dropped the parchment onto the counter as if it were a hot coal. Then he retrieved it and studied the writing more carefully. He even held it near a candle to see if the heat would reveal hidden characters of any kind. Regardless of the events at the hermit's cave, the "magic scroll" was now nothing more than a grocery list.

"See what I told you?" said Lodston. "The spellwords are gone. All I know is that whatever he saw last night scared him."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because he didn't go right to sleep. He made a sign with some ashes on the inside of the door and then bolted it like he thought somebody was going to try to break in. In the morning, he gave me that list and told me to get the stuff in a hurry. He handed me his staff and said I needed to take it with me; that's when he whispered the secret word in my ear to make it work."

"What secret word?" demanded Martin, his eyes riveted to the enchanted weapon.

"None of your business," replied the dwarf, "and I can't give you this staff. It's the elf's, not mine. Now give me those goods, and let me get back to the cave before dark. I don't know why he wanted all this stuff, but he told me to hurry."

"You promised me . . ."

"I never promised you anything, Milo Martin!" countered the hermit. "But if you want me to tell Dalamar that you wouldn't loan him the things on that list . . ."

"All right, all right!" growled the cautious merchant. Martin was angry with himself for letting Nugold Lodston trick him into another extension of his credit, but he was also hoping to find a way to acquire much more than just the staff.

"Tell this Dalamar that I want to meet him," the shopkeeper said in a calmer voice. "I have a few business ideas that may interest him. Knowledge like this can be a valuable piece of merchandise. I know of several people who would pay fortunes to get a single glimpse of the future."

"Like you?" Lodston snorted sarcastically. He collected the provisions in a bulky sack and headed for the door.

"Don't forget to tell him what I said!" Martin called as the hermit stumbled into the empty street without looking back.

Lodston's "cave" was actually an abandoned dwarven gold mine. For centuries before he was born, the hermit's people had tunneled into the mountainside near the Meltstone River, enriching both themselves and the local human merchants with great amounts of the yellow metal. When iron ingots replaced gold and silver as the most precious substance on Krynn - to make weapons of steel - the rich Hylar dwarves near Digfel became paupers. Only a handful

of the sturdy miners remained in human towns in the foothills of the dwarven highlands, becoming blacksmiths and armorers. Human prospectors took their place as miners, but of iron ore rather than softer metals such as gold and silver.

Nugold Lodston chose to remain in the Hylar hills, making cheap golden toys and baubles for local children. He cherished the gleaming metal more than he had ever loved anyone, dwarf or human. He also could not bear the tedium of toiling over a blistering iron forge to produce weapons and tools of burnished steel. Humans craving such products of the dwarven metallurgists regarded Lodston as a traitor, one who had critical skills but refused to use them. Even the few of his own race left in Digfel spat on the ground whenever he passed, a sign of ultimate rejection among the Hylar dwarves.

"Dalamar! Come help me!" the hermit called from the trail by the river. "I've carried these things far enough already!"

Lodston waited, staring up the riverbank toward the entrance to the mine shaft, but there was no sign of movement. Then he noticed that the door was ajar. The worried elf had slammed and barred the thick portal behind him seconds after Lodston had left for Digfel. Why would Dalamar be leaving the door open now?

Dropping the heavy cloth sack on the sandy trail, the old hermit broke into a doddering run up the hill to his cave. He sensed that some terrible event had befallen the elven sorcerer even before he saw the footprints in the dirt outside the shaft entrance. There were scores of boot marks with low heelprints in the soft earth, as well as the tracks of several large hounds. The dwarf dropped closer to the ground to focus his failing sight on the muddy threshold where the searchers had entered his home. Four large symbols had been drawn in black soot on the timber over the gaping door, but the illiterate hermit could not understand the inscriptions.

"Dalamar!" he called softly, hesitant to push the door. In his nightmares, unseen evils always lurked within silent doorways like this one. "Are you in there?"

Only the constant sound of the river below the shaft broke the ominous silence. Lodston finally mustered the courage to squelch his imagination and kicked the door open wide enough to peer into the antechamber of the ancient mine shaft.

It was empty. The fire was still warm, and a lamp had been lit beside the small table. There were no remnants of death and dismemberment, as he had expected to see - not even a sign of a struggle. The door leading into the abandoned network of shafts was bolted securely on the antechamber side. Dalamar and his box of scrolls had vanished, perhaps taken without a struggle by the strangers with the dogs. The enchanted staff in Lodston's gnarled hands seemed to be all that remained of his strange guest.

The hermit scrambled down the steep bank in the failing light of dusk and retrieved the sack of provisions. When he returned to the mine shaft, he slammed the door and slid the

heavy wooden bar into place to guard it from whomever had come for the elven sorcerer. Then he threw another log on the fire and fumbled among the large ingots of gold in a basket beside the table for one to melt into a toy figure. He saw the end of a parchment case as soon as he moved the first bar of gold. It was one of the elf's scrolls!

"Ah! They left one behind!" he exclaimed aloud. The familiar echoes of his own voice inside the mine's entry chamber was a friendly, reassuring sound. Lodston's tension melted, giving way to excitement. The old hermit fumbled clumsily with the scroll case, finally managing to dump the neatly rolled white parchment into his filthy hand.

Trembling with anticipation, he pressed an end of the scroll to the table and unrolled it beneath the light of the lamp. There was a hasty line drawing at the top of the page, just above some undecipherable characters in Dalamar's flourishing script.

"Hey, that's me!" Lodston croaked, peering at the drawing. Sure enough, Dalamar had drawn a crude caricature of the hermit's profile. The bulbous nose and bushy eyebrows were unmistakable. Beside the face, the wizard had drawn his own spectacles, equally obvious because of their curious hexagonal lenses and wire rims. A dotted arrow led from the glasses to Lodston's profile, and a solid arrow from his eyes to the text below the drawing. Even a child could understand the simple diagram.

"He wants me to put on his glasses, but where are they?" muttered the hermit.

He began rummaging through the room, his excited imagination blossoming into full-blown frenzy. After searching inside, under and on top of everything in the sparsely furnished chamber, the only thing he discovered was the absence of his oldest cloak, a tattered, floor-length garment of crudely woven wool. He sat down heavily in the chair and stared once more at the elf's drawing.

Suddenly he knew where the glasses had to be. He whirled around toward the basket of gold ore and began tossing the heavy nuggets on the floor. The wire-rimmed spectacles were at the bottom of the pile, wrapped in thick goatskin and wedged into a crevice between two huge nuggets to protect them from the weight of the ore. Lodston thrust the wire rims around his hairy ears and peered again at the parchment.

The black characters beneath the drawing began to swim and wriggle before his eyes. The motion was so distracting at first that Lodston felt a little lightheaded and dizzy. Soon, though, the characters settled into firmer images, more in the dwarf's mind than on the scroll.

"I can't read," he muttered in amazement, "yet I know exactly what this says!" The elf's message in wizard-scrrawl was brief but clear:

THE QUALINESTI MAGE HAS FOUND ME.
GUARD MY SCROLLS AND BOOKS WITH YOUR
LIFE. IF I FAIL TO RETURN WITHIN A MONTH, YOU
MUST TAKE THEM TO LADONNA, MISTRESS OF
BLACK ARTS IN THE TOWER OF HIGH SORCERY AT

WAYRETH. YOU WILL FIND THEM BEHIND THE
OLD DOOR. GO INTO THE TUNNEL AND TURN
LEFT AT THE FOURTH PASSAGE. WALK TWELVE
PACES AND LOOK UP. MY STAFF AND THESE
DWARVEN GLASSES OF TRUE SEEING WILL REPAY
YOU FOR YOUR PAST AND FUTURE KINDNESSES.

DO NOT TRY TO READ THE OTHER
PARCHMENTS! THEIR POWER WOULD DESTROY
YOU AND ATTRACT MY ENEMIES.

DALAMAR

Lodston removed the enchanted glasses, only to see the magical writing encode itself again in his mind. He experimented with them a few more times, feeling the message swim in and out of his awareness each time he donned and removed the spectacles. He also noticed that he could see his surroundings perfectly whenever he was wearing the magical lenses.

" 'Glasses of True Seeing,' huh? Now that's some piece of sorcery!" he exclaimed aloud. "Healing an old dwarf's eyesight and teaching him to read secret spells all at the same time!" Lodston could not have known that the "healing" effects were accidental. The lenses, which some unknown dwarven wizard had used to fashion the enchanted spectacles, just happened to have the right angle of refraction to improve Lodston's failing vision.

The jubilant hermit unbolted the inner door and ran into the tunnels, following Dalamar's directions to the letter. At the twelfth step in the fourth passageway, he looked upward, using the lamplight and his wondrous new glasses to study the shadows of the ceiling. The small chest was wedged between the tunnel roof and a loose timber, just as the parchment had promised. He quickly pried it loose and scurried back to the antechamber to study his newfound treasure.

Lodston opened the unlocked lid of the chest and dumped its contents on the table in the lamplight. Dalamar's voluminous robe tumbled onto the rough wooden surface, forming a black cushion for dozens of small parchment cases and several slender books covered in purple silk and bound with leather straps.

"So he traded me his fine black robe for my old cloak, huh? Sorcerers might be brainy, but they're short on common sense," Lodston muttered to himself. The hermit picked up each scroll separately, weighing it in his hands and examining it with his powerful new spectacles. Still he saw nothing unusual about any of them.

"Why didn't he put labels on them?" mumbled the curious dwarf. "What good are enchanted glasses if there's nothing to read with them? At least they should have titles so I'd know what I'm guarding 'with my life.' "

For several minutes of agonizing temptation, Lodston stared first at the scrolls, then at the note from Dalamar. Finally, he snorted and started returning the cases, one-by-one, to the chest. He held the last one in his hand a moment too long, letting curiosity win the battle with judgment. With a muffled growl of surrender, he squinted behind the

tiny glasses perched upon his huge nose and opened the scroll case.

Once again, the magical glyphs on the parchment writhed into a meaningful form, the words of an incantation in some unknown language forcing themselves from the dwarf's throat.

"DRISH FETTS, DRISH FETTS, LORGON TRITS," he heard his own voice pronouncing, but he could not understand what he was saying.

Lodston found it difficult to recall which of several things happened first at the instant he uttered the last syllable of the strange incantation. The scroll itself flared with a yellow light, then disintegrated into fine ashes in his hands. At the same time (it seemed) a huge sphere of orange flames formed itself from the yellow glow of the scroll and shot forward, away from the hermit. In a blinding, deafening explosion, the fireball struck the pantry wall with such stunning force that Lodston was slammed to the rock floor of the antechamber.

"Great Reorx!" he swore when he was able to stagger to his feet. The pantry, with its dirty dishes and utensils, plus some sacks of food, had been completely destroyed! The nearest corner of the ancient mine chamber was charred and bare of everything. The wooden shelves had disintegrated into smoking embers on the floor. Lodston looked at the pile of seemingly harmless scroll-cases in the chest and slammed its lid shut with a fearful cry.

"I won't touch another one of the damnable things!" he vowed in a ringing shout, as if he were promising the absent Dalamar that he would never disobey him again. "You and this 'Ladonna' can have these evil things to yourselves!"

The old dwarf's dreams that first night were filled with images of black-robed sorcerers who were fighting him with deadly magic. He had no way of imagining Dalamar's enemy, this "Qualinesti mage," but his mind constructed a spectral figure in a hooded white robe, the face hidden by the cowl except for terrible red eyes gleaming from its shadows. Lodston woke from his nightmare with a shudder and lay awake staring at the dying embers in the fireplace.

"What am I supposed to do if this mage from Qualinesti comes for your scrolls and books?" he cried in a hushed voice, as if Dalamar could hear and advise him. "I don't know anything about magic. I wouldn't even know which spell to read until it was too late. Why should I have to fight your enemy when you ran away from him yourself?"

The silence that followed his desperate cry for help offered no solace. Lodston fumbled in the darkness for the staff and the glasses. When he had found both magical items, he crawled to the door. The only thing he could do, it seemed, was leave this business to Dalamar and the mage from Qualinesti, whoever he was. He remembered stories from his childhood about the Kinslayer Wars between different elven clans and wondered fleetingly if that was the "war" that Milo Martin had mentioned.

"It's none of my business, any way you look at it!" he muttered at the door. Then he slid the wooden bar aside and

stepped into the darkness outside his dwarf-made cave. By the silver light of the white moon, he could see the curious inscription on his front door which he hadn't been able to read before. The runes flowed together under the power of the Glasses of True Seeing, startling the hermit with their stark warning.

DEATH TO TRAITORS AND TO THOSE WHO HIDE
THEM! it read.

Lodston felt his skin prickle with fear as he read his own death sentence. He whirled around and probed the darkness with the aid of his new glasses, hoping to spot one of Dalamar's enemies in the thick shadows of the cliff side bushes.

"And death to you!" he shouted into the darkness with a shake of the quarterstaff. "This is my home! Leave me alone! I want nothing to do with elven squabbles!"

The old dwarf tensed himself, prepared to fight anyone who responded to his challenge, but the stillness remained unbroken save for the steady gurgle of the Meltstone River below him.

"Well, if magic's your game, then that's what you'll get from Nugold Lodston!" the hermit shouted into the night. With that burst of bravado, he darted back inside the mine chamber and bolted the door behind him. Then he opened the chest and looked at the mute wooden scroll cases. Finally he shut his eyes behind the wizard's spectacles and reached inside for another parchment.

He was more cautious this time. The gnarled fingers shook as he unfurled an inch or two of the scroll's top edge and examined its surface carefully with the aid of his enchanted spectacles. A single line of glyphs began to twist themselves into a meaningful phrase in his mind.

TISNOLLO'S WONDROUS INCANTATION OF
SUGGESTION read the parchment's title.

Encouraged by the fact that nothing dangerous had happened, Lodston unrolled another few inches of the scroll and continued to read.

"To win powerful control over the thoughts and body of one's subject, the adept must focus his occult energies upon the . . ."

Aha! Wait until I spring this one on Milo! he thought gleefully. Lodston's childish excitement stifled his immediate curiosity. He re-rolled the parchment tightly and returned it to its case. Then he made a small mark on the polished wood with a charred stick from the fireplace. He couldn't write, but he might at least mark the scrolls to distinguish those which seemed safe from those which were more dangerous. Then he reached for another of the powerful parchments.

By sunrise, the would-be wizard had catalogued each of the scrolls into one of four categories: "tricks," which meant (he thought) harmless spells he wanted to use on people he knew, such as Milo Martin; "guard spells," which seemed to protect their caster from harm; "attack spells," whose titles suggested more aggressive results; and "unknown spells," whose results the untrained hermit could not predict even by reading and understanding the first few lines.

A sorcerer needs a sorcerer's robe, Lodston thought, delighted with the promise of new and unusual powers. He lifted Dalamar's black robe from the table and let it fall loosely over his head. A blend of cloying fragrances stormed his nostrils from the hundreds of hidden pockets which had contained the wizard's spell components and ingredients for herbal potions. The pockets were empty now, but residue of their exotic contents remained to perfume the silken fabric.

The hermit had planned to gather the voluminous garment at the waist to adjust its length, but the robe seemed to sense his shorter height. At the moment the light but strong fabric settled on his shoulders, Lodston felt Dalamar's power surging in the robe and spreading into his own body. The flawless stitches seemed to shrink closer together, drawing the garment's hem from the floor until it barely covered the dwarfs boots.

Suddenly, the dark elf's lingering dweomer flooded Lodston's mind with alien thoughts and impulses, confusing the dwarf with flashing images of fire, pain, and dark presences. Just as the psychic turmoil was becoming unbearable, it stopped. The powerful memories melted and receded into Lodston's aged brain, merging with his own dim recollections of the past. A wave of energy swept into his arthritic limbs, dulling their pain and moving him toward the door. The black-robed figure that descended the cliff and strode confidently toward Digfel bore little resemblance to the reclusive dwarf who made golden toys for children.

Four days later, the Pig Iron Alehouse was buzzing with gossip about Lodston and his guest from Sylvanesti.

"He must be an evil sorcerer, part of that trouble in the north," someone whispered.

"Nobody's ever seen him, but look at old Lodston!"

"I saw him reading a spell from a scroll!" claimed one witness. "He called up a lightning bolt and set the blacksmith's shop on fire, just because the smith spat on the ground when he walked past! Old Lodston always was an ornery cuss, but never that mean. I think that elf has cast an evil spell on him."

"Dwarves don't know anything about magic," scoffed a less superstitious townsman. "I heard that was some kind of family feud - something to do with the old gold mine. The hermit probably kept the blacksmith busy while the elf set the fire."

"I know what I saw!" protested the witness. "He had on some funny glasses and was reading from a piece of parchment when the lightning came right out of his hands just before the scroll blew up!"

"I heard Lodston tell Tidbore Ummer that his sheep were going to die, and they did - every one of them! Tidbore said the old fool told him he read the future from a magic scroll."

"That old gold-hound can't read!"

"Read? By Paladine, he can't even see!"

"Well, he can now! I heard that this elf is a healer, not a

wizard, and that he made some glasses to heal the dwarf's eyesight," someone whispered.

There was a nervous titter as a flurry of gossip about healing spectacles spread among the tables.

"If that were true, the Seekers from Solace would be crawling all over us. A healer in Krynn? Don't be a fool!"

"To me, the biggest puzzle is why a dwarf would take up with an elf. They're supposed to hate each other, you know."

"That wouldn't be a special problem for Nugold Lodston. He hates everybody and everything, except gold, that is!"

"That's not any harder to believe than an elf in black robes, I tell you. If you ask me, it's got something to do with all that mess in the north."

"Maybe he and this Dalamar like something else about each other, if you know what I mean!"

The drunken insinuation cut through the underlying tension of the conversation, causing peals of laughter to fill the tavern. During the raucous outbreak of crude jokes about Lodston and Dalamar, a man clad in a rough wool cloak flipped the hood closer around his face. Then he tossed an iron coin on the table and left the tavern.

While the patrons of the Pig Iron Alehouse were debating over the nature of his relationship with Dalamar, Nugold Lodston was on the other side of Digfel, shaking his stick in Milo Martin's flushed face. Even his voice had changed in the last several days, developing an impatient edge and a curious clipped accent.

"You heard what we want! We'll expect delivery, as usual, before nightfall!"

"I can't do that, Nugold," Martin insisted. "My cart was in the blacksmith's shop when you . . . uh, when it caught fire. It'll be a week before I'm able to bring all this stuff out to you. Tell Dalamar it's not my fault!"

Martin looked away from the dwarf's angry gaze behind the curious hexagonal glasses. Though he had never met the elf, he now feared Lodston's guest. The powers which the elven wizard had bestowed upon his unlikely dwarven friend were more than the shopkeeper wanted to face. Hadn't they changed the irascible but harmless old hermit into a fearsome sorcerer with a more dangerous temper? Hadn't the elf somehow healed the dwarf's failing vision with the enchanted spectacles perched upon Lodston's huge nose?

"Well, bring it as soon as you get your cart fixed," growled the dwarf as he turned to leave Martin's shop. "Just remember what I said about the door, if you value your life!"

"I know, I know!" the man mumbled. "You and the elf have placed a curse on it. No thief in his right mind would try to steal anything from you or your new 'friend.' "

Lodston smirked behind his whiskers and stepped through the doorway onto the street. The curious little glasses perched on his thick nose sparkled in the late morning sun. The bully, Joss, interrupted a conspiratorial discussion with a pair of teenaged pickpockets and muttered a hasty warning. The unscrupulous trio darted into the shadows,

away from Lodston's path. The hermit scowled in their direction, wishing he had a suitably vindictive spell to cast upon the fleeing threesome.

I've used all the scrolls I understand, he mused on his way home. I guess I'll just have to take a chance on a strange one, if I mean to keep these human clods on their toes.

When he reached the mine, Lodston headed immediately for the chest. He had already used all of the "fun" and "attack" spells and was ready to risk reading one or two incantations in his "unknown" category in order to strengthen his image in Digfel as a dangerous sorcerer. The hermit unrolled the first scroll he found with four black marks and began to read it.

HAPGAMMITON'S MODE OF INTERPLANAR GATING

TO SUMMON OTHER INTELLIGENCES RESIDING
ON OTHER PLANES OF EXISTENCE, IT IS
ESSENTIAL FOR THE CASTER TO PREPARE
HIMSELF FOR FIVE CONSECUTIVE NIGHTS PRIOR
TO UTTERING THE INCANTATION. FAILURE TO
PURIFY HIMSELF BEFOREHAND WILL RENDER
THE INCANTATION EITHER POWERLESS OR
UNPREDICTABLE.

Bah! I already knew it was unpredictable! Lodston thought. The worst that can come of it is that it'll fail. In that case, I can just pick another one. Undaunted, the amateur wizard skipped the rest of the page and began reading the ancient words at the bottom of the parchment.

His pronunciation and understanding of the forgotten elvish dialect had grown more accurate with each reading of Dalamar's scroll's. This time, his dwarven accents had dwindled to a mere trace, as had much of his original personality before it was dominated by the dark elf's spells and robe. Lodston intoned the ancient words perfectly, letting the scroll's dweomer fuse with the vestiges of Dalamar's power within his mind and body.

MARGASH JORAS NOLLEN
GRATH GRISSIT DORSI, GRISSIT
BLUDE;
ITEL FOMA DRILID SHUDE;
MARGASH NEPPS U HALLEM GRATH!

OBEY THESE WORDS OF POWER
WATCHERS OF THE THRESHOLD, WATCHERS AT
THE GATE,
UNBAR THE GUARDED DOOR;
OBEY THE COMMAND OF THIS SERVANT OF
POWER!

Beneath the dwarf's feet, the firm rock floor seemed to quiver as he spoke the final spellwords. Lodston's untrained concentration shattered completely when a thin stream of opaque light seemed to slice through both floor and ceiling of his sturdy artificial cave. The frightened hermit collapsed

in a babbling heap on the floor, shielding his face from the intensifying light.

Suddenly the beam began to split, as if a doorway were opening onto a new yet darker dimension. Peering through his trembling fingers, Lodston saw moving forms just inside the opening, monstrous forms with scaly appendages and tentacles writhing and lurching toward the threshold produced by Dalamar's scroll.

The dwarf began to moan and crawled toward the door. Just as he was reaching for the bar, the stout wooden timbers exploded from some terrible force on the outside. The blast drove scores of thick splinters into the dwarf's head and chest and dashed him against the far wall with such force that he crumpled to the floor in a daze. The Glasses of True Seeing fell from his face into his lap, adding natural blindness to the old hermit's stupor. He could still see the gaping doorway because of the sunlight outside the entrance. He could also see a bulky figure clad and cowled in rough wool framed by the shattered sill.

"Idiot! What have you done?"

Dalamar's distinctive accent boomed in the small chamber.

"Dalamar!" the hermit tried to cry. "Help . . ."

"Quiet, you ignorant fool! I must try to undo what you've done before the gate widens!"

Blood from several gashes in his head blinded the dwarf even more. He was growing weaker and was clutching desperately to consciousness. Through the haze, he could barely see Dalamar marking the floor with a bit of chalk. Tentacled paws and stranger appendages were probing the air above the dark elf's head while he began chanting a singsong phrase over and over again from within the sanctuary of the hastily drawn pentagram.

For a moment it seemed that the horde of unearthly creatures Lodston had freed would swarm into the chamber and engulf the wizard. Yet he faced the monstrous beings with unflinching, intense concentration until the "gate" began to close. Then Dalamar raised both hands and his voice, crying the same phrase as loudly as he could. The final surge of energy was enough to dissipate the rest of the ethereal light. Silence and semidarkness enveloped the hermit's fading thoughts.

Dalamar glanced first at the dwarf and then at the crude table that held the open chest with his spellbooks and the remaining scrolls. The dark elf began removing the magical writings from the chest, examining each one for signs of damage.

"H ... H ... Help me, D ... D ... Dalamar," Lodston pleaded weakly. He crawled forward, trailing blood from his many wounds, until he could grasp the elf's ankle in his gnarled hand. "I n ... n ... need some w ... w ... water."

Dalamar pulled his leg firmly away from the hermit's clutching fingers.

"You'll need nothing in a moment or two, old dwarf," he told the hermit. "You will have peace, but you will have paid dearly for your disobedience. Already the dweomer of your bumbling incantations has spread northward to

Qualinesti, if not farther. This quiet village will be drawn into the Dark Queen's war, thanks to you and your meddling. But you will have peace."

Dalamar watched in grim silence while Lodston's grasping fingers relaxed on the floor at his feet. Then he threw the hermit's crude cloak to one side and stooped to retrieve his black robe from the dwarf's body.

Milo Martin could see that something was very wrong the moment he arrived at the riverside trail leading to Lodston's gold mine. He left the sacks of provisions on the trail and picked his way stealthily among the bushes until he could see the darkened entrance.

Fragments of the heavy door were hanging from its sill by only one hinge. Some terrible force had blasted the thick portal inward, shattering it as if it had been an eggshell. The nervous storekeeper crept closer to examine the ground for tracks. The sandy soil was riddled with hundreds of footprints, tracks of boots with low heels, the kind commonly worn by elves. He also noted pawprints of large dogs, possibly bloodhounds used to track criminals. Satisfied that none of Lodston's visitors were still in the vicinity of the mine, Martin crossed warily to the gaping doorway. Then he called in a low, halting voice, as though he dreaded either an answer or no answer at all.

"Nugold! Nugold Lodston! It's Milo Martin, with your goods!"

Somehow the silence seemed more ominous than a reply might have to the cautious shopkeeper. He entered the murky chamber, stepping over the debris from what had been the door. The chamber had been ransacked, and the stench of rotten flesh nearly sickened him. Packages of food from his own store were broken and scattered everywhere. A fine layer of flour had settled throughout the antechamber, lending an eerie white cast to everything in the room.

Martin lit a lamp he found on a small table. Its light shone through the haze of flour which he had disturbed when he entered. At the rear of the room, he saw another shattered door leading into a pitch-black tunnel. Whatever force had blasted the heavy timbers of those doors was more than a mere batteringram. In fact, the inner door appeared to have been blown completely off its hinges.

The merchant was just starting toward the tunnel when his feet stumbled over something soft beside the table. He held the lamp closer and realized that it was the old dwarf's tattered woolen cloak. It was draped over something much firmer, something which was the obvious source of the stench in the small chamber. Martin lifted a corner of the filthy rag just enough to verify what he suspected. The old hermit's rotting body was lying inside some kind of mystical diagram with its bloated face staring vacantly at the ceiling. The head and chest were riddled with sharp splinters from the outer door, and the back of the scalp was badly gashed and bruised.

"What did they do to you, old friend? Where's your fine sorcerer's robe now?" Martin mumbled sourly, a few tears

moistening his blue eyes. Despite Lodston's crankiness, the merchant knew that he'd miss the dwarfs trips to Digfel. "You were playing with fire when you let that elven wizard teach you magic!" he scolded the silent corpse.

Martin shook his head and turned away from Lodston's body. Being a practical man, he found an empty flour sack and began to rummage through the rubble, looking for anything of value which he might resell in his store. He found a metal cup and spoon in a scorched corner, as well as several half-finished golden figurines and a bit of cheap tobacco he could soak in wine to disguise its harshness. In the lamplight, he could see footprints where the searchers from Qualinesti had tracked flour into the mine. Just inside the mine passage, he could see a sturdy little chest lying empty on its side.

Whatever might have been in that box, magic or otherwise, belongs to the dark elf or his friends now, Martin thought grimly. Just as he was leaving, he noticed the light from the doorway glinting on something under the table, something made of metal and glass.

"Aha! The famous healing spectacles, I'll wager," Martin muttered. He wiped them free of flour and gore from the bloody floor, then balanced them on his nose. The thick lenses distorted his vision so badly that his head began to hurt almost instantly.

Humph! I don't know anybody in Digfel with eyesight bad enough for these glasses. What a waste of good workmanship! he thought. Still, some traveler might have a need for them. Martin frowned and removed the glasses, sticking them impulsively into one of his trouser pockets. Then he turned toward the failing sunlight outside Lodston's shattered door.

The Storyteller By Barbara Siegel & Scott Siegel

Spinner Kenro, you're under arrest!" announced the dragonarmy officer, the point of his blade at my throat.

I swallowed hard, hoping my bobbing adam's apple wouldn't be sliced by the edge of his sword. Struggling to keep my voice from quivering, I said, "I haven't broken any laws. On what charge are you arresting me?"

The officer, a human, his face a mottled mass of burn scars surrounding dead, gray eyes, growled, "You were warned, Kenro, to stop telling your stories. The Highlord doesn't give second chances."

I was standing near the fireplace in the main room of the Paw's Mark Inn. I had just finished telling one of my tales to the assembled audience. How strange it was to see them all in one place; the kender, with their comically bright-colored clothes, stood out like stars in a dark sky against the somber gray beards of the fastidious dwarves and the earthy brown skin of the ever-so diligent gnomes.

The dragonarmy officer seemed to pay them no mind. I suppose he had little fear because his fellow soldiers had entered the inn just behind him and had stationed themselves at every exit.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw the kender, Quinby Cull, strut forward. His face had turned red, and his cheeks were puffed out. Though Quinby was unarmed and half the size of the dragonarmy officer, he seemed thoroughly unafraid. I wish I could have said the same for myself.

"Spinner is our friend, and you've no right to arrest him!" declared Quinby.

"There's room for you in the Highlord's prison, too, kender," the dragonarmy officer said darkly.

Quinby seemed to mull that over before he innocently asked, "How much room is there in the Highlord's prison? I thought it was already full."

The officer pulled the edge of his sword away from my throat and stepped forward to threaten Quinby.

I grabbed the officer's arm. "He doesn't mean anything by it," I quickly said. "Leave him be."

Quinby had become a good friend since I arrived in Flotsam just a few short weeks ago. I had been disheveled and my spirit nearly broken until my long, meandering journey from the outskirts of Solace ended in this dark, forbidding city. I had traveled more than half a continent searching for an audience for my stories. And here, at last, I had found one. But more than that, I had found friendship. .

"Please," I begged, hanging onto the soldier's arm.

The dragonarmy officer slowly lowered his sword.

"It's all right, Quinby," I said. "I'll go with this soldier and get everything straightened out. I'm sure," I added with more confidence than I felt, "that I'll be free by morning."

A dwarf named Vigre Arch suddenly stepped up beside Quinby and said boldly, "I don't like this. You'd better stay here with us, Spinner."

The dragonarmy officer's eyebrows raised in alarm. Dwarves and kender in agreement? "The Highlord was right," he muttered.

"Right about what?" I asked.

"That you're a dangerous man. Enough of this talk. Let's go, Kenro, or I'll lop off your head right now. That'd put a quick end to your storytelling, now, wouldn't it?" he sneered.

Not having any choice, I started following the officer out of the inn. Both Quinby and Vigre Arch were shouldered aside, but there was a growing rumble among the crowd.

"Where are you taking Spinner?" one of the kender cried.

"We want another story!" shouted a dwarf at the far side of the room. "Let Spinner go!"

"Yeah! Let Spinner go," yelled a young gnome, taking up the cry.

Soon everyone in the room - except, of course, the dragonarmy soldiers - began to chant, "Let Spinner go! Let Spinner go!"

The kender, dwarves, and gnomes who crammed the inn had never joined together for anything - except to fight among themselves - and that had made it easy for the Highlord to rule. But the dragonarmy soldiers were seeing something that opened their eyes to a new and startling

reality. The three races had united in my defense!

Frankly, it amazed me, too.

The angry crowd - they easily numbered more than two hundred - began to surge forward.

"Tell them to stop!" ordered the officer.

I saw the dragonarmy soldiers raise their crossbows.

This was madness.

"Listen," I said to the officer, "let me tell them a story. It will calm them down."

The soldier looked at the ugly mob and his nervous troops. He shrugged and then reluctantly said, "Make it a short one."

I held up my hands for quiet.

Everyone quickly settled down into an expectant silence. I was relieved. And so was the officer.

"I have to go with these men, but first let me tell you a simple tale to end this rather remarkable afternoon." I pointedly glanced at the officer who still had not sheathed his sword. He glared back at me.

I took a deep breath and began, "This is a story as old as time but as short as man's memory. It's a story of three orphans growing up in a city not unlike Flotsam."

"It's a sad story," sighed Vigre Arch. "I love it when Spinner makes me cry."

There was a sniffle in the audience as several dwarves began to weep in anticipation of my tale.

"Yes, it's a sad story," I said, "but there is a lesson to be learned in it. You see," I continued, "the orphans were starving, and they fought each other over every scrap of food they found. This was not a poor city, mind you, no. This was a city rich with power, wealth, and finery. Only not for our three little wretches. They were looked down upon, spat upon, and abused by the city elders."

The dragonarmy officer eyed me closely. His knuckles turned white on his sword handle.

I hurried on with my story.

"One day, the three orphans were at the edge of the city. And it was there that they came upon a Great Red Clarion, that fierce and magical bird that even some of the smaller dragons fear. If they could catch the Clarion and hold its magic in their hands, the orphans would never be laughed at or go hungry ever again.

"The Clarion's wing was broken, and it couldn't fly away. But its talons were sharp, and its beak made a formidable weapon.

"Here, finally, was a chance for the three orphans to make new lives for themselves, and all they had to do was work together to capture the magical bird."

I swept my arm out in front of my body and pointed at my audience. "But did they work together to capture the Clarion's magic? No!" I declared. "So hungry, so desperate, were these poor orphans that they didn't even think of joining forces. Instead, they fought each other over the Clarion. And while they fought, the city elders sneaked up behind them and captured the bird - and its magic - for themselves!"

"Oh, how could those orphans be so foolish and stupid!"

cried Quinby.

"It's a terrible shame!" declared Vigre, agreeing with the kender. "The three orphans should have known better." The dwarf saw Barsh wiping tears from his eyes. He gently patted the leader of the gnomes on the shoulder.

The gnomes looked up to Barsh, not because he was the tallest of them, but because he was the greatest, most inspired of their inventors. Vigre, on the other hand, thought of Barsh as a hopelessly confused creator of useless, impossible machines. But at that moment, Vigre and Barsh were of the same mind.

Barsh turned to look up at his new friend, Vigre, and sobbed, "They should have designed a way to work together. Then they could have taken all the power and riches away from those cruel city elders!"

The dragonarmy officer who stood next to me hissed in my ear, "You're a clever one, Kenro, but I'm not deceived. I know what you're up to. End this story now, or I'll end your life, instead."

A storyteller is nothing if his tales don't have the ring of truth. And this story had but one true ending. . . .

"My friends," I said softly, making them all lean forward and strain their ears to hear, "THE THREE ORPHANS ARE HERE IN THIS ROOM."

The officer began to raise his sword.

At the same time, however, the kender began shouting, "Where are they? I don't see them! Are they under the tables?"

"You doorknobs!" roared the dwarves, glaring at the kender in disgust. They knew what I was talking about. As for the gnomes, they became instantly agitated, but they all spoke so fast that no one could understand a single word they were saying.

The officer laughed at all three races. "The fools," he said. Then he prodded me with the tip of his sword. "Out the door, Kenro," he commanded.

I had come from a small woodland village and had never known the intoxicating effect of hearing a crowd chant my name. But Jawbone Jekson had. Now there was a man who could weave a tale. People would walk two days to reach our village in order to hear him. Their return trip, however, always seemed to go faster because their heads were filled with his wondrous tales.

When I was a child, I traipsed after Jawbone wherever he went. I learned his stories, his little vocal tricks, the way he moved his body at the climax of a tale. He took me under his wing and taught me still more. Jawbone was more than a teacher, he was a father to me - a father who told bedtime stories from morning till night. But I was never as good as he was, and no one wanted to listen to me when Jawbone Jekson could be called upon to tell his tales. Despite everything I had learned, I was unneeded, unwanted, useless.

It was clearly time for me to go off on my own, but I was afraid to leave. What if no one listened?

Late one night, Jawbone walked with me along the Patch

River and - what else? - he told me a story. In his little tale I became a hero, a myth, a storyteller whose name lasted through the ages. As I listened, I could see myself standing high on a hill, the sun shining down on me, as hundreds - no, thousands - of people gathered below to hear my words.

Despite my terrible fears, I left my home and sailed into the unknown on a wispy cloud of Jawbone's words. Such was his story telling power.

I traveled across Krynn, telling my own tales in little villages and towns with barely a tear being shed or a laugh being loosed. I thought myself a dismal failure. But then I came to Flotsam. There were no storytellers among the kender, dwarves, and gnomes. When they heard me tell my tales, it was as if the first dragon had taken wing. Their eyes opened wide, and they listened and stared with awestruck fascination.

Once, soon after arriving in Flotsam, I told a story in a tannery to a small group of kender in exchange for a meal. The tanner was crying by the end of my tale. One of his friends took me home to feed me. As I ate, he told me that the tanner's daughter had died during the last new moon. The father did not cry at the funeral, yet he clearly loved his little girl. "Why," he asked me, "could the tanner weep for the people in my story and not for his daughter?"

I wanted to say that I was such a wonderful storyteller that I could make a stone cry. But I didn't. I had no answer - until now. I remember that Jawbone once said that stories are the windows of life. They let everyone peek inside to see that they are not alone in their suffering. It's that knowledge that gives them hope when their world is bleak, makes them laugh when they see their own folly, makes them cry when tears are the only answer. Without that window, he said, the greatest emotions are sometimes never touched, never felt, and never shared.

Oh, how I wished Jawbone could have been there to see the huge crowd in the Paw's Mark Inn chanting my name. He would have been proud of me. I had opened a lot of windows.

I was brought before the Dragon Highlord. She had long, slender legs that were only partially hidden by her armor. And there were tantalizing glimpses of flesh above her breastplate. But it was her face, with blazing green eyes and high cheekbones, that riveted me in place. She was the kind of woman storytellers usually make the love interest of their tales. Perhaps that's the difference between stories and reality.

As I waited on my knees in front of her, the Highlord whispered something to one of her generals. All I heard was the name Tanis and an order to ready the dragons to attack a ship that had just left the harbor. She obviously wasn't planning on spending much time on my case.

"How do you plead?" she demanded, finally turning her attention toward me.

"Plead?" I asked. "How can I plead when I don't know the charge?"

Her full lips opened into a mirthless smile that revealed

sharp, white teeth.

"The charge," she said with surprising gentleness, "is treason." Still smiling, she continued. "We need the kender, dwarves, and gnomes working day and night if we are to conquer Krynn. But now they shirk their jobs to come and hear you prattle on about nonsense. Your silly stories have turned them into hapless dreamers who stare into space and ignore their work."

"Please," I began, answering her smile with one of my own. "You must understand that telling stories is no crime. The imagination is part of the soul. Without it, my audience might as well be animals."

At that, the Highlord laughed. "Animals. Exactly. That's what those races are. And that's what they shall remain. Work animals. Now, how do you plead?"

I didn't know what to say. It is true I hated the tyranny of the dragonarmy, but I had never regarded my story telling as treason. "Not guilty," I said.

"In the interest of justice," announced the Highlord as she rose to a standing position, "I have always given the people of this court a chance to defend themselves." The smile reappeared. "But I am the final judge of truth and falsehood. And you, Spinner Kenro, are guilty as charged."

I began to rise from my knees to protest, but two soldiers clamped their hands on my shoulders and held me down.

"I sentence Spinner Kenro to death by hanging," she proclaimed. "The sentence shall be carried out tomorrow morning at dawn. Be sure that his fate is known throughout the city. Our 'citizens' " - she sneered - "must learn what happens to those who lose themselves in dreams."

While awaiting my execution, I was thrown into a cell with a young half-elf named Davin. He was quiet and didn't speak a word. But I did.

I told him my story.

While I was telling him who I was, what I was, and what was to become of me, something miraculous was happening out beyond the prison walls.

QUINBY CULL, THAT FEARLESS KENDER, BRAVELY
CROSSED OVER INTO THE DWARF SECTION OF THE
CITY AND SOUGHT OUT Vigre Arch.

"Did you hear about Spinner's sentence?" he demanded of the dwarf. Before Vigre could answer, Quinby declared, "We've got to help our friend. If he dies, there will be no more stories."

Vigre Arch dug his boot heel into the hardpacked ground before he finally said, "You know how I feel about humans. They aren't worth the skin they're packed into. You just can't trust them. But," he added, looking Quinby straight in the eye, "Spinner is different. He isn't like the other humans. And he certainly isn't like those dragonarmy soldiers. I like him just as much as you do. Maybe more."

Quinby sniffed. "That's ridiculous," he said. "I like Spinner more than you, and he likes me best of everyone."

"Does not," said the dwarf.

"Does so," countered the kender.

"Does not," said the dwarf.

"Does so," insisted the kender.

This debate might have gone on all night had not Barsh, the gnome, suddenly arrived in a rush.

"Spinner is to be hanged at dawn!" declared the gnome.

Quinby and Vigre stopped their argument and soberly nodded their heads. "We know," said Vigre.

"It's terrible," exclaimed Barsh. "If the Highlord kills him, there will be no more beautiful females who bring the dead back to life with a kiss, no more exciting chases through walls of fire, and no more great heroes who fight and die for freedom. How dull everything will be if he is killed."

Vigre Arch looked at these two creatures, the kender and the gnome, both of whom he and his people had never much liked. But just then he felt a kinship with them that stirred his heart. They had a common bond in their love of Spinner Kenro. And maybe that was enough to help them unite the way those three orphans in Spinner's story should have done. Vigre smiled to himself. It struck him as a funny coincidence that Spinner's story was so similar to their present dilemma. But he shrugged it off. There were more important matters at hand.

"What if we tried to rescue Spinner?" suggested the dwarf.

"What?" asked Barsh, not quite believing his ears.

"He said, 'What if we tried to rescue Spinner?', " repeated the kender helpfully.

"I heard him," said Barsh.

"Then why did you ask, 'What?', " questioned the kender.

Vigre Arch sighed deeply. Sometimes there was just no talking to kender.

"Never mind all that," piped up Barsh. "We've only got until dawn before they hang Spinner. Between now and then we have to find a way to break into the prison, free him, and spirit him to safety before the Dragon Highlord and her soldiers can stop us. Once he's free, we'll protect him and hide him so he can always tell us his stories."

"The Highlord won't like it," said Vigre.

"Since when do you care what the Highlord thinks?" asked Quinby.

The dwarf had to grin. "I never really have."

"Me neither," said Quinby.

"The same goes for me," added Barsh. "The Highlord is no friend of mine. But Spinner is. And I say we save him tonight!"

The three of them agreed that Spinner had to be saved. They shook hands on it and went immediately to work on a plan.

It fell to Barsh and his gnomes to quickly create a device that would help them scale the prison walls and open the gate. It was up to Quinby to rally every kender in the city to storm through the prison gates once they were open, then hold them long enough so that Vigre and his dwarves could race through the prison and return with Spinner Kenro

safely in tow.

Word of the impending attack on the prison swept through the city. Every kender, dwarf, and gnome knew of the plans, and they all readied themselves for the battle to come.

The Highlord and her soldiers thought of these little people as foolish and simple, so they suspected nothing. But facing death was not foolish or simple. And everyone who prepared for the coming battle knew that he might never see the rising sun.

The life of Spinner Kenro, however, was worth the risk. Yet it was more than Spinner's life that they were fighting for. It was the spark of their souls, the light of their minds, the richness of their imaginations that spurred them on that memorable night. Somewhere inside each of them there was an epic tale bursting to be told and they sensed it, knew it, believed it, and were willing to die for it.

As the night wore on, hundreds of gnomes stumbled through the dark, windswept streets of Flotsam carrying heavy joints, long poles, and hundreds of tree branches still sprouting their leaves. These were the basic elements of their wall-scaling device which they carried past dragonarmy patrols who merely shrugged their shoulders at yet another gnome oddity.

Barsh's hastily conceived invention was quickly assembled in a big, empty barn just beyond the rear prison walls. Nearly a thousand gnomes had gathered there to put the finishing touches on the wall-scaling device, and they were anxious to put it to the test.

The invention, a huge, rectangular ladder, was as long as the entire southern wall of the prison. Two hundred fifty gnomes could climb it at one time. The tree branches attached to the top of the ladder were meant to camouflage the ladder as they approached the enemy fortress.

Just before dawn, the kender began arriving at the Paw's Mark Inn. At first they filled the main room. Then their numbers swelled into the garden in the back. Luckily, the garden was surrounded by trees and bushes that kept the small army of kender hidden from the dragonarmy soldiers who watched the streets.

Quinby Cull had given his fellow kender strict instructions to remain perfectly quiet. They knew that to do otherwise might mean death and the failure of their mission. And failure meant the end of Spinner Kenro. Nonetheless, Quinby heard little shouts of surprise, followed by titters and giggles, as his fellow kender constantly poked each other with their hoopaks, swords, and lances, curious to see if the weapons were in good working order.

Not far from the Paw's Mark Inn, in a hidden ravine dug deep into a hillside near the prison, Vigre Arch complained bitterly about the cold wind - and that wasn't all he grumped about. "How come we're out here?" he mumbled angrily. "Barsh and his gnomes are warm inside that barn, and Quinby and his kender are drinking and having a fine old time in the Paw's Mark Inn. It isn't fair! Maybe," he muttered, "we ought to just go home and get some sleep

and forget this nonsense."

But Vigre didn't utter any such orders. He was proud of his people that night. And he was proud of himself. If their plan to free Spinner Kenro failed, Vigre vowed that it wasn't going to be because the dwarves didn't do their part.

It seemed, somehow, that the stars were moving more swiftly across the sky than usual. It was nearly time.

The gnomes were to lead the attack. But because the original idea had been Quinby Cull's, the kender was given the honor of giving the signal to start the battle. . . .

Quinby looked out the window of the Paw's Mark Inn. It had stormed all night, but the sky was beginning to lighten. It was now or never. He looked at his fellow kender and smiled with satisfaction. If he had been a painter he would have drawn the scene inside the inn so that he'd never forget it. Perhaps Spinner, when he was a free man, would tell a story about this glorious adventure. It occurred to Quinby that Spinner might even make him a hero in the tale. Wouldn't that be something? he thought. But then Quinby laughed at himself. How could a kender be a hero? he scoffed, shaking his head. Such things never happened. Yet, in his imagination, stoked by the stories that Spinner had told, Quinby Cull held on to the dream.

With those thoughts circling in his mind, the kender opened the door of the inn. He took a horn made of bone from his waistband and lifted it to his lips.

The shrill, piercing sound of Quinby's horn echoed throughout the silent city. Vigre heard it. Barsh heard it. And so did the dragonarmy guards who stood atop the prison walls.

The Highlord's soldiers rubbed the sleep from their eyes, wondering what that strange sound might mean.

It didn't take them long to find out.

Suddenly, they heard shouts and cries coming out of the darkness. Then, illuminated by the torch light from the parapets, one guard saw the forest moving first one way, then another, and yet in a third direction.

"What magic is this?" cried the guard, staring at the gyrating woods.

Suddenly, a gnome popped his head through the front of the forest and shouted, "It's this way, you idiots!"

"We can't see!" a chorus of voices answered.

An entire squad of gnomes came forward and began chopping the branches off the wall-scaling device in full view of the startled dragonarmy guard. But even then, the Highlord's soldier had no idea what the gnomes were doing. At least not until the shrubbery was fully hacked away and the gnomes charged with their massive ladder.

When they leaned it against the prison wall, though, the top of the ladder soared far beyond the top of the battlements.

"It's the wrong way!" cried Barsh, exasperated. "Turn it down on its side!"

By this time, of course, the dragonarmy guard had yelled for help. As the correct side of the ladder finally

settled down across the battlement, the Highlord's soldiers rushed to the rear of the prison. But the wall-scaling device was so heavy with gnomes climbing upon it that the enemy couldn't push the ladder away from the wall. And soon the gnomes were climbing over the parapets!

The first gnome to stand on the prison wall was Barsh himself. A tall dragonarmy guard swung a heavy broadsword at Barsh's head. The gnome ducked under the blade and dove at the feet of the soldier. As the guard prepared to swing his sword down on Barsh's back, the gnome pulled the soldier's legs together while another gnome whacked the enemy in the belly with a stick. The soldier lost his balance, falling off the battlement and landing with a heavy thud on the prison grounds below.

Barsh couldn't believe that he was still alive.

And not only was Barsh alive, but his fellow gnomes were swarming onto the parapet, overwhelming the small number of dragonarmy soldiers who had been on watch.

"To the gate!" cried Barsh, leading his people along the battlement to the front of the prison.

Even as they worked their way toward the gate, prison guards were racing out of their barracks to fight the intruders. If the gnomes couldn't get the gates opened quickly, they'd be destroyed by the powerful dragonarmy soldiers. It was only with the help of the kender as reinforcements that they had a chance of holding out against the fierce soldiers of the Dragon Highlord.

The kender, with Quinby Cull urging them on, had already begun their charge. The Paw's Mark Inn was just a short distance from the prison, and now the kender were racing like an angry wind toward the gate.

Quinby could see the battle unfolding up on the parapet. The gnomes were fighting furiously to reach the gate's pulley system. Quinby knew that if they failed, he and his kender army would be racing toward death.

He saw gnomes dying. A dragonarmy soldier pierced one of them in the chest with his sword. Another gnome was thrown over the wall. And still another had his head split open with an ax. But the gnomes fought on, gallantly pushing the prison guards away from the gate. Until . . .

"It's opening!" cried Quinby just as he and his army of kender were about to give up hope. Without having to break their stride, they surged under the rising metal gate and plowed right into a phalanx of dragon-army soldiers!

"Are we supposed to fight KENDER?!" demanded one of the enemy with contempt in his voice.

Quinby heard the soldier and, filled with fury, he shouted in return, "On this day you will not only fight kender, you will die at our hands!" The soldier thrust his sword's point toward Quinby's throat. But the kender nimbly parried, then lunged forward and stabbed the enemy clean through the heart.

Scores of kender and gnomes witnessed Quinby's bold declaration and even bolder swordplay. A great cheer went up when the dragonarmy soldier fell. For, in that moment, Quinby Cull had done more than simply kill one enemy. He had shown that the kender were a force to be reckoned

with. He had given dignity back to his race. And he had shown that a kender could be a hero!

On the heels of Quinby's dramatic battle, the kender drove the better-armed and better-trained dragon-army force away from the gate as they fought for control of the prison grounds.

But the Highlord's soldiers quickly formed a new battle line. Their bowman sent one withering volley after another into the kender ranks. In their fearless-ness, the kender didn't let the arrows stop them. Even with bloody shafts sticking in their stomachs, shoulders, and legs - many of them dying on their feet - the kender troops charged headlong into the dragonarmy lines. They swung crude swords and knives at the soldiers until their enemy was finally routed.

It was then that a shockingly small number of dwarves led by Vigre Arch came streaming through the open gate.

"Where are the rest of your people?" demanded Barsh.

"You promised you would have an army of dwarves," echoed Quinby. "There are barely a hundred of you here. What's going on?"

Vigre took a deep breath and told them the bad news.

"Dragonarmy soldiers are coming this way," he reported.

"We saw them from the top of the ravine. There must be at least two thousand of them marching through the city. We'd all be trapped in the prison if they got here before Spinner was freed. So I ordered most of our people to meet the dragonarmy soldiers in the street and fight them there. It was the only way to stall for time."

Barsh and Quinby turned pale. A ragtag group of dwarves didn't have a chance against two thousand crack dragonarmy troops. Vigre's people were going to be slaughtered. They must have known their fate, yet they were willing to sacrifice their lives for stories they would never hear. Truly, thought Quinby, this was the stuff of legend. He put his hand on Vigre's shoulder and said, "If I were a dwarf, I'd be proud on this day. Then again," he added, considering, "I'm not a dwarf."

Vigre looked at the kender trying to decide what Quinby meant.

"No matter what happens," Quinby went on, oblivious to Vigre's questioning stare, "your people belong in Spinner's stories. Not all of his stories," he hastily added. "Just one of them."

Vigre gave up trying to figure out the kender's intentions and simply said, "Spinner could make a fine, though tragic, tale of the battle in the city. So let's make sure that he lives to tell it. I'll take what's left of our force and fight our way through the prison till we find our storyteller."

"But there aren't enough of you," Quinby declared.

"You're going to need help. I'll take some kender and go with you."

"And I'll come, too," volunteered Barsh. "I'll bring a small troop of gnomes along."

Vigre couldn't refuse. He knew they were right. There was no telling how many of the Dragon Highlord's soldiers were waiting for them inside the prison's labyrinth of cells.

"Come on," he said. "Spinner must be wondering what all the noise is about."

I was, indeed, wondering what all the noise was about. The night had nearly passed, and I waited for the dawning, resigned to my fate. My cellmate, Davin, had listened to me throughout the night, offering not a word of his own.

Then I heard shouts and screams filtering down to the depths of the filthy dungeon where I had been left to languish until my death.

"What's going on?" I called out to a dragonarmy guard who raced past the cell.

He ignored me.

"What do you think is happening?" I asked Davin. He shook his head.

The noise grew louder. It sounded like battle. There was the clash of steel on steel. There were howls of pain, boots running on stone, and shouts of ... MY NAME!

"Here!" I cried. "I'm here! This way!"

I couldn't believe my own senses. But yes, it was the voice of Quinby Cull calling out to me! Then I heard Vigre Arch. My mind was reeling when even that clever gnome, Barsh, made his presence known.

"It's impossible!" I exclaimed. And then I turned to Davin. "Do you hear them, or have I gone mad? Are my friends really here to save me?"

My cellmate was about to answer, but then, instead, he shouted, "Look out!"

Too late. A prison guard had suddenly appeared at my cell and grabbed me through the bars. "I'll see you dead before they free you," he vowed. And then he lifted his dagger and plunged it toward my chest.

Davin was faster than I was. He lunged forward and grabbed the guard's wrist just before the knife could strike me. He twisted the man's arm against the iron bars until there was an audible crack. The guard screamed as the knife clattered to the floor. He ran in terror as Quinby, Vigre, and Barsh led a legion of their people toward my cell.

"Keys!" crowed Barsh, dangling them happily in the air.

"We took them from an officer at the landing," explained Vigre. "You're going to be free."

"We're glad to see you," said Quinby, standing back from the door with tears of joy in his eyes.

"YOU'RE glad to see me?" I cried in disbelief. "To be sure, it's the other way around!"

The cell door flew open.

"Come with us," said Quinby. "We came to save you. Now you and your stories can live forever!"

Spinner Kenro ended the long tale about himself with a flourish, his voice rising in a dramatic crescendo. His timing was impeccable. No sooner had he finished than a prison guard unlocked the cell door. "It's dawn," said the Highlord's emissary. Spinner took a deep breath and rose to his feet. "Sometimes," he said softly, "I half believe my own stories. There was a part of me that really thought my friends would come and save me. Do you think I'm foolish,

Davin?"

I couldn't answer. I was crying.

Spinner had not slept. He had sat up against a wall, weaving his final story during the last hours of his life. And I was his only audience.

They hanged Spinner Kenro at daybreak.

Spinner died a great many years ago, but his memory lives on. For that night in the prison he opened the window of my soul. And though his voice was stilled, his gift was somehow passed to me. I've told many stories throughout the years as I've traveled across Krynn. But I never fail to tell this, the one, great, final story exactly as Spinner told it to me that night in the prison.

Oh, I know what really happened. Quinby, Vigre, and Barsh did try to save Spinner. But once they made their plans, Quinby forgot all about them - he was true to his kender soul; out of sight, out of mind. Vigre, ever distrustful of humans, had second thoughts about the entire enterprise. Meanwhile, Barsh and his gnomes did set about creating a huge wall-scaling device. The problem was that it was so big that they couldn't get it out of the building in which they had constructed it. It's still there to this day.

Now, you might say that the truth doesn't make a good tale. But that's not the point. There is a higher truth than the facts. And that truth reveals itself every time I tell Spinner's story. For as the years went by, the kender, dwarves, and gnomes of Flotsam grew to BELIEVE that they had saved Spinner. They have convinced themselves that on one cold, windswept night they joined together to make history, to reach greatness, to become heroes. And if they did it once, might they not do it again?

A Shaggy Dog's Tail

by Danny Peary
poem by Suzanne Rafer

Word spread like wildfire that Tasslehoff Burrfoot was in Spritzbriar. "I'm just passing through," he told the villagers as they rushed home to lock up their valuables. "But if anyone wants to hear some stories, I might just hang around a bit." Of course, everyone knew that as long as anyone would listen to the kender's improbable tales, he wasn't going anywhere. That's what worried the men and women of Spritzbriar. They knew that while they were safeguarding those belongings they feared might wind up in the kender's pouches, their children would slip out doors and wriggle out windows in order to see the illustrious visitor.

As the boys and girls raced across the grassy field toward Prine Lake at the edge of the forest, they looked nervously over their shoulders, hoping their absences wouldn't be discovered until AFTER Tas had spun a few yams. Most had promised their parents to never again listen to his stories after even the bravest had had nightmares in the wake of his last visit. But they'd grown tired of those cheery

tales told by their mothers and grandmothers. Because kender weren't frightened of anything, Tas thought nothing of telling the children about bloody battles in war-torn areas of Krynn, vicious dragons, hobgoblins, or black-robed magic-users. The children found such stories well worth risking a night without supper.

The children who gathered at Prine Lake sat on the ground and formed a tight circle around Tas, with the oldest by his small, wriggling feet. Tas sat proudly under a mammoth vallenwood, propped like a king on a wooden stool so everyone could see him. He stroked his hoopak staff and grinned broadly, delighted his audience was so large. If only Flint could see him now.

While everyone waited impatiently, Tas took a meticulously carved flute from an elegant, woven-rope, yellow pouch that was strapped around his neck. As he brought it toward his lips, a young boy named Jespato intercepted his hand.

"My, that looks like my father's flute!" the boy exclaimed without suspicion.

"Your father's flute?" asked Tas innocently.

"It's been missing since the last time you were in Spritzbriar!"

The kender's childlike face flushed red. He examined the instrument. "Great Uncle Trapspringer! It IS your father's flute! Good eye, boy! Now I remember: I took it for safekeeping. It was sticking out of his pouch, where any thief might have snatched it."

"His pouch disappeared at the same time as the flute," said the boy. "It was YELLOW, just like the one you've got around your neck!"

Tas grinned sheepishly. "Of course, THIS pouch is older and more worn than the one your father carried," he said, failing to remind Jespato that it had been some time since he'd been to Spritzbriar. "But please give MY pouch to him to replace his missing one." Tas pulled the strap over his head and handed the pouch and the flute to the young boy. He forced a big smile.

Jespato looked at Tas with great respect. "My father will surely change his opinion of you when I give him your present. Imagine: he said you're the type who'd snatch candy-bubbles from children!"

The kender's face turned even redder. "I was just borrowing them," he replied with deep embarrassment as he reached into a red pouch and retrieved a dozen multi-colored candy-bubbles. The children around him checked their pockets and were startled to discover they were empty. Tas sadly returned the tasty treats, saying weakly, "I didn't want anyone to have his appetite spoiled."

Tas would have enjoyed playing that nifty flute, but he was cheered by the children's willingness to share their candy-bubbles with him and by the sight of eager faces around him, anticipating his story.

"Are you going to tell another whopper?" asked a young, curly-haired boy who sat to his left.

"I ... I never tell whoppers!" Tas insisted, a bit indignant.

Everyone groaned. They knew better.

A little freckle-faced girl stood up and asked politely, "What will your first story be about, sir?"

There was a definite trace of mischievousness in the kender's big brown eyes. "Revenge!" he barked with such force that the startled little girl plopped over backward. Everyone else slid forward.

"Revenge! I want revenge!" Gorath's threatening words resounded through the little shack, causing all the pots and pans to rattle and the rickety furniture to creak. His angry, blood-shot eyes doubled in size, and the veins on his temple were ready to burst. "Revenge, I want . . ."

This time his words were stifled by a large wooden spoon that was being forced into his gaping mouth. The spoon carried an ugly mound of undercooked slug stew. A stream of steaming, foul-smelling gravy dribbled down his chin and drenched his long black beard. Gorath groaned.

"Oh, so sorry, darling," said Zorna. Using her long, bony fingers, she managed to push most of the gravy back into Gorath's mouth. The huge man nearly gagged. "There, there," said the tiny old woman, her teeth clicking with every word. "You don't want to lose a drop, do you, darling?" Her shrill, scratchy voice was irritating, but there was no mistaking it was full of love. She wiped her shriveled hands on her shabby black robe. "After what you've suffered, darling, a meal is just what you need."

"Stop calling me DARLING, you old hag!" growled Gorath, spitting stew across the room. "You don't even know me!"

"But I do love you!" Zorna protested softly, her feelings hurt. "And I'll cook, and clean, and care for you for the rest of your life." She brushed away a tear, wiped her dripping nose, and smiled lovingly. "We'll have such a happy time together."

This thought horrified Gorath. He tried to rise, but he couldn't budge. All he could move was his head. That's why he could offer no resistance when Zorna again stuffed slug stew into his mouth.

Gorath couldn't believe his terrible luck. He had been the most decorated and feared human officer in the dragonarmy. In the war campaigns against the Que-shu, no one had razed more villages, slaughtered more enemies, or enslaved more women and children than the mighty Gorath! For amusement, he had broken men's backs with his bare hands and held beautiful women prisoner in his tent, forcing them to do his bidding. But now he suddenly found himself paralyzed from the neck down and the prisoner of an old lady who kept him strapped to a chair in her gloomy, windowless shack in the Forest of Wayreth. What an indignity!

He thought back to when his bad fortune began.

Was it yesterday morning or early afternoon when he awoke from a drunken stupor to find that Meadow had fled his tent? He was so stunned by her brazen act that at first all he could do was scream, "Revenge! I want revenge!"

No wonder her escape troubled him so much. With her long, flowing black hair, alluring green eyes, slim figure, and delicate features, Meadow was the loveliest female he had ever abducted during a raid of the Que-shu tribe. Moreover, she had already lived longer than any of the previous women he'd captured, although he had worked her endlessly and beat her mercilessly.

In Gorath's twisted mind, Meadow had actually BETRAYED him by running away and deserved to be punished severely. Gorath never forgave anyone for what he believed was a wrong action against him. In the past, he had sworn revenge on dragonarmy soldiers he suspected of talking mutiny behind his back, friends he suspected of trying to steal his women, and even his brothers, who he suspected of plotting his death so that they could confiscate his goods. Now all those men lay in their graves. At last, Gorath's lone companion had been this woman he held captive. How dare Meadow desert him and leave him completely alone!

Pulling in his huge belly, his head pounding, Gorath knelt to examine the heavy chain that had kept Meadow attached to an iron post even when she slept. It had been severed by a sharp weapon, probably a sword. Meadow had an accomplice, another person who had betrayed him!

Gorath reasoned that the trespasser had been Starglow, the tribesman for whom Meadow had pined during her torturous term of captivity. The barbarian smiled slyly. It would give him great pleasure to kill Starglow while Meadow looked on. He sheathed his sword. "Revenge! I want revenge!" he thundered as he stormed from the tent.

The lovers' trail led north toward Solace. It was easy to follow because they were traveling on foot and were too hurried to attempt deception. Without stopping to rest or water his horse, Gorath rode at full gallop over rocky roads, treacherous mountain paths, and overgrown trails where sharp spines ripped into his steed's flesh. The poor beast finally collapsed under Gorath's great weight, unable to endure the punishing journey or its master's whip any longer. Gorath cursed and reviled the animal, but rather than putting it out of its misery, he left it to die in the wilderness.

He proceeded on foot, feeling meaner with every step. He thought how much he'd enjoy strangling Starglow with his mighty hands or piercing his enemy's heart with his sword while Meadow screamed helplessly. Maybe he would stab her as well, or make her drop to her knees and beg him to allow her to be his slave again. How he would make her suffer! Gorath shouted: "Revenge! I want revenge!"

As the sun sank low in the west, Gorath discovered that Meadow and Starglow had veered east, thereby avoiding Solace and well-traveled roads on their way back to their own village. Gorath followed blindly although he had to travel over unfamiliar terrain. He wasn't one to worry about the possible consequences of acting so impulsively, especially with thoughts of revenge dancing on his dizzy brain.

Soon the mighty warrior stood facing the Forest of Wayreth.

Gorath had heard eerie legends throughout Krynn about Wayreth and how it often played tricks with the minds of those who dared pass through. "They think I'll be too frightened to follow," said Gorath, attempting to laugh. "But Gorath is scared of nothing!" Nevertheless, before taking another step, he peered through the trees on the perimeter of the strange forest. He was relieved that it seemed peaceful inside, even inviting.

Suddenly a dozen dark-colored birds floated down from the nearest tree and circled above him. They taunted him in song:

IS THIS THE MIGHTY GORATH, HOVERING LIKE
A CHILD AT WAYRETH'S EDGE, AFRAID TO
MOVE BELITTLED, BEWITCHED, BEGUILED?

YOU HAVE KILLED WITH BRUTISH STRENGTH
AND NARY
ONCE DID GRIEVE YET
YOUR MIND IS NOT SO
STRONG THUS EASY TO
DECEIVE.

SO, DARE YOU ENTER WAYRETH, KNOWING NOT
WHICH
PATHS TO TREAD
AND SEEK REVENGE YOU THINK IS
SWEET? . . . BETTER TURN AROUND
INSTEAD!

The warrior nervously yanked his sword from his scabbard and thrust it wildly into the air. "Get away, you silly birds!" he demanded, his voice shaky. "Don't you know that Gorath is scared of nothing?"

Gorath thought it very strange that the birds seemed to disappear into thin air. He was tempted to turn around and try to find his way home, but he reminded himself why he had come this far: "Revenge! I want revenge!" Forgetting about the birds, he stomped into the forest, angrily using his sword to hack off branches that blocked his path. He turned and looked behind him. He noticed that while it was bright inside the forest, night had fallen outside. None the wiser, he shrugged and marched forward, content that he could clearly see the trail of Meadow and Starglow.

Deeper in the forest, the trail divided in two. Gorath stopped and studied both paths. When he saw fresh tracks on the one that angled to the left, he rubbed his sweaty palms together and licked his lips. "It won't be long now," he said. He started to follow the path to the left. But suddenly a strong gust of wind knocked him off balance and pushed him toward the other path.

He tightened his fingers around his sword and looked about suspiciously. All seemed calm. Was the forest playing tricks with him?

Looking in all directions, Gorath stealthily moved toward the path to the left. But he never made it. A second,

much stronger gust of wind came howling and twisting toward him. It nearly lifted the big man off the ground. Before Gorath knew what hit him, he was being blown at great speed down the path to the right. Because his legs were thick as tree trunks and rubbed together whenever he moved, it was difficult for him to stay on his feet. But each time he fell, the wind swept him up and forced him to continue.

The wind ceased as quickly as it had begun, leaving Gorath sprawled on the ground with his boots twisted together. The dazed warrior spat dust and struggled to catch his breath. Then he slowly rose and, still quite bleary-eyed, looked around.

He was facing a small, crumbling black shack. It had no windows, just a crooked black door. A walkway of broken stones led from the path to the door. Tall weeds filled a garden to the left, and strange, twisted vegetables grew on the other side. Gorath thought the shack deserted until he noticed that thick black smoke curled upward from a crooked chimney on the dilapidated roof. Suddenly it blew in Gorath's direction, carrying with it a ghastly aroma. Gorath's stomach became queasy. He could have sworn someone was cooking a stew consisting of spoiled meat and rotten vegetables.

Gorath prided himself on his bravery, but his instincts urged him to get away at once. Without understanding why, Gorath walked briskly past the house and farther down the path. But he didn't get very far. An angry gust of wind grabbed him, spun him around, and hurled him through the air toward the house, causing him to crash into the door and bounce off with a loud thud.

Again, the wind quickly subsided. The large man staggered to his feet, rubbing his bull neck and bruised left arm. He was only a few feet from the door. He started to back away, but it was too late. The door creaked open.

An old woman peeked out. Gorath had never seen anyone uglier. She had a hatchet-face, with sharp bones pushing through the skin, a needle-shaped nose, and tiny, pointed ears. Her hair was white and wild, yet her thick eyebrows were black. Her eyes were pale yellow, her thin lips were colorless, and her complexion was as pale as a fish's belly. It would have taken Gorath a lifetime to have counted the deep wrinkles that lined her face.

The tiny woman looked the big man up and down. She wiggled her nose as if she were smelling him. Her scowl gave way to a smile. Her heart, which had so long ago resigned itself to eternal loneliness, began to pound. Her chest began to rise and fall. Her eyes looked at the stranger hungrily. Women had always been repulsed by Gorath's appearance, but he left this one breathless. At last she spoke.

"You're so handsome, I must hold you," she said brazenly. As the stunned Gorath backed up, she moved toward him out of the shadows. That's when Gorath saw how she was garbed.

"Ah, I ... I see you are a black-robed magic-user," he said, somewhat relieved. "Then we are both servants of the

Queen of Darkness."

The old woman stopped in her tracks upon hearing Gorath's remarks. "You are mistaken, my darling," she replied humbly, her teeth chattering annoyingly. "I am just Zorna, a poor and forgotten old woman. This robe was discarded in the forest by a sorceress who was passing through. I took it because I had nothing to wear."

"You don't know how to perform magic?" asked Gorath skeptically.

"I swear I am no sorceress. But I have other talents, darling. I can cook the finest slug stew you've tasted in your life. Won't you be my guest?"

Gorath didn't know what to make of this weird woman. He wanted to laugh at her invitation, run her through with his sword, and ransack her shack for anything of value. But he kept his distance, not fully convinced she wasn't a black-robed magic-user. "I have no time to waste with you," he told her coldly. "Now I must find the woman who betrayed me and slay the scoundrel who stole her from me."

"Forget your woman!" Zorna shrieked. "She doesn't love you. I love you. And I'll cook, and clean, and care for you for the rest of your life . . . IF you will let me ... darling."

"Enough, you batty crone," snapped Gorath, remembering how he had tried without success to force Meadow to say such words to him. "Only one thing matters: Revenge! I want revenge!"

Before Zorna could protest, Gorath wheeled around and walked down the path that brought him into her lonely life. He felt her sad eyes upon him and heard her pitiful, blood-curdling wail of anguish. He laughed.

Gorath returned to where the trail into the forest divided. This time there were no mysterious gusts of wind to prevent him from going in the direction he intended. So he followed the left path, the one Meadow and Starglow had taken.

He walked quickly, anticipating the kill. Soon he came to a large clearing. There he spotted Meadow and Starglow standing by a fallen vallenwood, about twenty feet from a deep ravine. The lovely young woman and handsome tribesman were locked in an embrace.

Drawing his sword, Gorath charged from the bushes toward the lovers. "Gorath!" Meadow screamed in terror. "He's found us!"

Starglow eyed his sword, which was resting on the ground near the far end of the fallen tree. He made a dash for it, but wasn't quick enough. As the fingers of his right hand touched the handle, Gorath's sword slashed his wrist, causing blood to spurt and the young warrior to grimace in pain. Meadow screamed and ran toward her stricken lover. "Meadow!" Starglow shouted. "Stay back!"

Starglow's agony was great, but his desire to protect Meadow was much greater. So he again reached for the sword. Just as he lifted it, Gorath's heavy boot smashed into his hand. The sword flew out of Starglow's weak grip and landed by Meadow's feet. Without hesitating, she picked up the weapon and ran to Starglow's side. Surprised, Gorath backed up a few feet to contemplate the situation. He

certainly hadn't expected Meadow to put up any physical resistance.

Starglow reached for the sword Meadow held. "No!" she said firmly. "You're hurt." When he started to protest, she calmly said: "I am a woman and your lover, Starglow. But don't forget that I am also a warrior like you."

Starglow nodded and smiled slightly. He kissed her trembling lips and placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. Together they bravely waited for Gorath to approach them. They were going to resist to the death even though they had little chance to defeat the mighty Gorath.

"We're ready," said Meadow boldly. As she looked at Gorath, revulsion showed clearly in her beautiful green eyes. She had withstood his drunkenness and savage nature long enough. She preferred to die here with her beloved Starglow by her side rather than return to Gorath's cabin. Never again would she be a slave to him, endure his beatings, or have him clutch her in his filthy arms.

Gorath's eyes were sour and mean. He laughed cruelly. "So you want to die together. How touching! I'll grant your wish as long as you die first, Starglow, so Meadow can watch the blood pour from your body. Revenge! I want revenge!"

Gorath began to drool as he walked toward the lovers, who pulled closer together. He lifted his sword higher and higher. Meadow dug her feet into the soil and held the sword in front of her, gripping it with both hands.

All at once Gorath noticed that an intruder sat between him and his intended victims.

He stopped and tried to figure out where this large, mangy dog had come from. There had been no dog in this clearing just a moment before. And what a strange dog it was. Gorath suspected it was a red-rover, but it was the only red-rover he'd ever seen sporting a shaggy tail with a snow-white tip.

The dog sat perfectly still, its tongue hanging out the right side of its mouth.

"Call off your dog, Starglow," Gorath threatened, "or I'll chop it into a million pieces!"

"But I have no dog," replied Starglow, puzzled.

"Wh . . . what dog?" asked Meadow, also bewildered.

"Very well, you had your chance!" Gorath shouted as he attacked the animal. He swung his sword with all his might at the dog's head, expecting to see it rolling in the sand. But the dog easily dodged the blow. Now Gorath aimed for the shaggy tail with the snow-white tip. Gorath's sword whistled through the air repeatedly. The dog moved from side to side, causing the brute to miss by a hair, a shaggy hair, each time.

Gorath's frustration increased because he could sense that the dog was actually enjoying itself, as if it were unaware its life was in danger. It barked happily and playfully nipped at Gorath's feet. When Gorath raised his sword above his head, the dog jumped up, put its front paws on his chest, and licked his face several times.

Gorath lost all patience. He shoved the dog away and simultaneously swung the sword with all his might. He

missed badly. He also lost his balance. So when the big dog jumped back up on his chest to continue their game, it knocked Gorath back a few steps toward the ravine. Again the dog jumped up. Again Gorath was knocked backward, his curses shattering the quiet of the forest. This happened several more times. Each time, the force of the dog's paws increased, and Gorath was knocked farther back. Then came the mightiest blow of all.

Suddenly, Gorath found himself somersaulting backward through the air, falling helplessly into the deep, deep ravine. Gorath expected to see his life flash before his eyes, but for some reason he had a vision of Zoma's old, ugly face instead. He screamed. Then everything went black.

When Gorath opened his eyes, he was looking directly into Zoma's face. Only this time it was no vision. It really was Zorna. He screamed again.

She attempted to comfort him, wiping the sweat off his feverish brow with her icy hand. "There, there, darling," she whispered into his ear. "I'll make you feel better."

Gorath realized he was strapped to a chair. But where was he? He looked around. He was in Zoma's cold, musty house. It was as inviting as a tomb. It was too dark to see clearly, but he could make out some crooked furniture in the shadows, some heavy pots hanging from cobweb-infested walls, and a large bubbling kettle by the fireplace. There was a horrible stench in the air, and Gorath suspected Zorna was still preparing slug stew. "How did I get here, old woman?" he snapped.

"I brought you from the ravine."

Gorath looked at the frail woman. "How could YOU carry me all the way from the ravine?"

"I love you," she said simply.

"Then untie this strap before I lose my temper!"

"I've strapped you to the chair so you won't fall," she said tenderly. "I'm sorry, my poor darling, but when you landed in the ravine, you struck a boulder and snapped your spine. You're paralyzed from the neck down." A look of shock and anguish came over Gorath, terribly saddening Zoma. "But please don't worry, darling. I'll cook, and clean, and care for you for the rest of your life."

Upon hearing those words, Gorath could think of only one thing: "Revenge! I want revenge!"

That's when Zorna began to feed Gorath slug stew.

By the time Zorna shoved the final spoonful into Gorath's miserable mouth, he had figured out his only chance for exacting the revenge he desperately desired.

He batted his eyes at Zorna and sighed happily. "That was delicious!" he said.

Zorna nearly blushed. "I'm so happy you liked it, darling."

"Could you make it for me again some time, dear?" he asked hopefully.

Zorna nearly cried from happiness. "I make it EVERY day, darling."

Gorath looked around the shack. "You know, dear, you

have a lovely home. I think I'll enjoy spending the rest of my life here with you."

Zorna gushed. "We'll be so happy together!"

Gorath frowned. "But you wouldn't want to take care of ME."

"Oh, darling, it would give me such pleasure!" Zorna objected.

Gorath shook his head. "That's so sweet, dear. But I could never be happy unless I could hold you in my arms . . . and I can't do that because I'm paralyzed." He closed his eyes as if he were trying to hold back a flood of tears.

Zorna was overwhelmed with pity. She kissed Gorath on his fleshy cheek. She felt him tremble. "My darling," she said softly, her voice quivering. "I understand your misery. I have lived alone, always. Eternity passed, and I almost gave up hope of finding a man I could open my heart to. Now that I have found you, it would be torture not to be able to express my love."

Gorath opened one eye. "If only you could help me. . .

."

"Darling, maybe I can."

Gorath opened his other eye, his hopes rising. "Only someone with magic powers could mend my severed spine. But you have said you are not a black-robed sorceress."

"This is true, but many years ago a black-robed sorceress traveled through the Forest of Wayreth and rewarded my hospitality by granting me the power to perform ONE feat of magic, only once."

Gorath immediately became worried. "Just ONE feat? Only ONCE?" he asked nervously. "Have . . . have you performed it . . . y . . . yet?"

"I am a simple woman. I never had reason before."

Relieved, Gorath batted his eyes again. "Will you perform it now . . . dear?" he asked, trying not to sound too anxious.

"First you must promise me something."

"Anything, dear, I promise."

"If I heal you, I want you to promise that you will stay with me forever and that you will forget that other woman and your quest for revenge."

"Of course, dear," Gorath said sincerely. "I long only to hold you in my strong arms."

Zorna nearly swooned. She was so happy. "Very well, darling. I'll do as you ask."

The old woman stood in front of Gorath. He expected her to call on the Queen of Darkness, recite a lengthy chant, and go into contortions. But she merely pointed a lone finger at him and wiggled her sharp nose a couple of times.

Gorath immediately felt a wave of heat deep in his back. He felt bones shift and fuse together. Then his chair started spinning, faster and faster. The strap broke, and Gorath was propelled to his feet. He stretched his arms and legs. He smiled broadly. He was no longer paralyzed.

Zorna moved toward him with arms spread, expecting Gorath to draw her to his powerful chest. Instead Gorath shoved her aside, knocking the feeble woman to the ground.

"Out of my way, foolish woman," he said, taking broad

steps toward the door. "Too bad you wasted your only feat of magic on ME," he said mockingly.

"So you lied to me," said Zoma, showing no emotion.

"You BETRAYED me."

Gorath laughed. "Be thankful that I don't throw you in the kettle with your wretched stew. But I have no time."

"Your sword is next to the door," said Zoma quietly, her eyes closed.

Gorath retrieved his weapon and needlessly kicked open the door on his way out. As he raced into the forest, he shouted: "Revenge! I want revenge!"

It didn't take long for Gorath to find his way back to the large clearing. Once again, he found Meadow and Starglow by the fallen vallenwood, about twenty feet from the deep ravine. Again they were locked in an embrace.

He was surprised that they hadn't traveled further. But then he figured they thought they were out of danger after he'd fallen into the ravine and become paralyzed.

However, he couldn't figure out why Starglow showed no sign of injury. He remembered distinctly striking Starglow's wrist with his sword and seeing blood spurt. What was going on?

Drawing his sword, Gorath charged from the bushes toward the lovers. "Gorath!" Meadow screamed in terror. "He's found us!"

Starglow eyed his sword, which was resting on the ground near the far end of the fallen tree. He made a dash for it but wasn't quick enough. As the fingers of his right hand touched the handle, Gorath's sword slashed his wrist, causing blood to spurt and the young warrior to grimace in pain. Meadow screamed and ran toward her stricken lover. "Meadow!" Starglow shouted. "Stay back!"

Although in obvious agony, Starglow again reached for the sword. Just as he lifted it, Gorath's heavy boot smashed into his hand. The sword flew out of Starglow's weak grip and landed by Meadow's feet. Without hesitating, she picked up the weapon and ran to Starglow's side. Surprised, Gorath backed up a few feet to contemplate the situation.

He was bewildered. Why was this experience so similar to the earlier one, when he first found Meadow and Starglow at this clearing?

Starglow reached for the sword Meadow held, just like before. "No!" she said firmly. "You're hurt." When he started to protest, she calmly said: "I am a woman and your lover. But don't forget that I am also a warrior like you." Just like before.

As before, Starglow nodded and smiled slightly. And again, he kissed her trembling lips and placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. Together they bravely waited for Gorath to approach them. Just like before.

"We're ready," said Meadow boldly. As she looked at Gorath, revulsion showed clearly in her beautiful green eyes.

Just like before.

"Revenge! I want revenge!" Gorath demanded, but he seemed only mildly interested in either Starglow or Meadow. He didn't approach them but instead looked

around the clearing. "I'll deal with you two later," he said at last, searching for the one creature he hated more than Starglow and Meadow, the creature that had been the last to hurt him and had hurt him worst of all. "FIRST, Starglow," he announced, "I must kill your DOG! Revenge! I want revenge!"

"But I have no dog," said Starglow, puzzled.

"Wh . . . what dog?" asked Meadow, also bewildered.

"You know very well what dog!" Gorath bellowed. "The dreadful beast that tried to kill me! The one that caused me to be prisoner of an ugly crone and eat her awful slug stew. The one that pushed me into that ravine. . . ."

Meadow and Starglow seemed to be completely baffled.

"When did you fall into that ravine?" asked Starglow incredulously.

"You know very well it happened when I last confronted you at this clearing."

Meadow and Starglow looked at each other as if they were dealing with a madman.

"But, Gorath," said Meadow slowly, "this is the first time we've seen you since we fled your tent The Forest of Wayreth must be playing tricks with your mind."

Gorath snarled. He didn't know what to think. Was this indeed the first and only time he'd found Meadow and Starglow in this clearing? While standing here facing them, had he blanked out and imagined that horrible red dog? And falling into the deep, deep ravine? And being paralyzed? And returning to Zoma's shack? Had the Forest of Wayreth indeed played tricks with his mind?

Suddenly Gorath heard growling. He turned toward the ravine. The red dog sat by the ledge, wagging its shaggy tail and whipping the snow-white tip into the ground as if it were issuing a challenge. "Ah, ha! There's the DOG!" howled Gorath, thrilled to have proof that his story was true.

Meadow and Starglow looked at each other, then at Gorath. "What dog?" they both wondered aloud.

But Gorath wasn't listening. He was slowly stepping toward the ravine, hoping to exact the most satisfying revenge of his entire life. He did not even notice that Meadow and Starglow had seized the opportunity to escape in the opposite direction. They would not halt their anxious flight until they were out of the Forest of Wayreth and safely back in their Que-shu village.

Hiding his unsheathed sword behind him, Gorath approached the shaggy dog. He attempted a friendly, toothy grin. The shaggy dog responded by growling and baring its teeth. This time it was not in a playful mood.

Gorath stopped smiling. He lifted his sword high in the air. He charged and took a mighty swing at the dog. Amazingly, the dog slipped out of the way. Gorath turned around, the heels of his boots touching the edge of the cliff. "Oh, no!" cried Gorath as the dog jumped at him, striking him a mighty blow in the chest with its entire body.

Again Gorath found himself somersaulting backward through the air and helplessly falling into the ravine. This time it seemed even deeper.

When Gorath regained consciousness, he was not surprised to find himself paralyzed from the neck down and strapped to the chair in Zorna's shack. And there was Zorna, busily preparing slug stew. He yelled: "Revenge! I want revenge!"

Zorna turned toward him, her eyes blazing with anger.

"I've heard enough about YOUR revenge! After you deceived and deserted me, it's ME who wants revenge!"

Gorath's eyes showed fear. "But I ... I ... I love you, dear," he stammered.

Zorna pointed a finger at Gorath and wiggled her nose. Instantly, he lost his ability to talk. "That will teach you never to betray a black-robed sorceress!" she sneered, causing sweat to pour down Gorath's unhappy face. "I hope a few years without speech will help you learn your lesson."

She pointed toward her terrified guest, and his chair slid toward her. She waved her hand slightly, and the chair rose into the air so their noses nearly touched. "I'll never forgive you or let you forget your cruelty toward me!" she shouted. Then, as she looked into his eyes, she calmed down and even smiled slightly. "But I do love you, darling," she said thoughtfully. "And I'll cook, and clean, and care for you for the rest of your life. You'll see. We'll have such a happy time together."

Leaving Gorath in midair, Zorna turned back to the kettle. The black-robed magic-user caused the fire to rise underneath just by raising her finger. She then leaned over the kettle to stir the stew, putting her hand directly into the boiling water without feeling any discomfort. The folds at the back of her black robe separated slightly.

Gorath's frightened eyes bulged from their sockets. Even if he still had the ability to talk, he couldn't have uttered a sound. He stared in disbelief at what was sticking out from Zorna's black robe.

It was a shaggy red tail with a snow-white tip.

Lord Toede's Disastrous Hunt
by Harold Bakst

The Pilgrim's Rest was a pretty old tavern, having been started by the great grandfather of its owner, a gnarly old dwarf by the name of Pug. But the place looked even older than it was because it was built into the hollow of a huge and truly ancient oak tree near the Darken Wood.

Following the shape of the trunk, the room was basically round and soared up into the dark heights of the tree's interior. Up there, unseen, were woodpeckers, bats, a few squirrels, and various other critters. Occasionally one of them would fly or creep down along the wall to steal food from the round, rough-hewn tables, and old Pug was constantly chasing them back up again with a broom. "Don't feed the animals!" he kept telling his patrons. "It only encourages them!"

Business at the Pilgrim's Rest was usually good, thanks to the forest paths that crisscrossed all around it. On any given day, there was likely to be an assortment of many peoples - elves, dwarves, humans, and such - all traveling to and from the four comers of Krynn.

On one particular evening, this crowd was joined by a kender. Old Pug kept an eye on the little, slight-boned fellow, for he knew a kender was likely to slip away without paying his tab. True to form, the kender, dressed in red leggings and tunic, sat at a table near the door.

But this kender, apparently a bit inebriated, was talking loudly, and this reassured Pug, who could at least turn his back and hear him.

"... I tell you," the kender was saying, "Kronin and I DID kill him!"

"You expect us to believe," said a squat, black-bearded dwarf sitting at the kender's table, "that two puny kender killed Toede, a Dragon Highlord?"

"Why, Kronin isn't just ANY kender! He's our leader!"

"Even so," said another patron, a lanky human who was walking over with his beer stein, "kender are no match for a hobgoblin lord."

The kender's pointy ears turned red. "Do you think I'm lying?" he shouted.

"Yes!" came back all the patrons as they gathered around the boaster's table.

"And how did you two kill Toede?" asked a tall, willowy elf, a fair eyebrow arched incredulously. "With that silly what-do-you-call-it you kender carry?"

"The hoopak," said the dwarf, picking up the pronged stick from under the table for everyone to see.

"Leave that alone!" shouted the kender, snatching the weapon back.

"What's this?" said the human. "A kender getting angry? Where's your usual sense of humor?"

"He's had too much ale," suggested the dwarf with a smirk.

"Yes, that explains his ridiculous claims," agreed the elf, waving the story away with his long, slender hand.

"Phooey on you all!" shouted the kender. "Kronin and I are heroes whether you believe it or not!"

"Tell me," called old Pug from behind the counter, "did anyone actually see you do this deed?"

There was a brief silence.

"That's right," said the lanky human, resting his stein on the table. "Can anyone back you on this?"

The kender started to sputter in frustration, when, from across the room, someone shouted:

"I can!"

Everyone turned in surprise to see who had spoken. Sitting at a table near the wooden wall was a hooded figure slouched over a stein. It was unclear what sort of being he was, but his robes were all in tatters. "And who, pray tell, are you that you should know?" asked Pug, his thick eyebrows rising inquisitively.

"I was there," said the hooded stranger. "I saw it all. This kender's name must be Talorin."

The kender beamed, proud that news of his deed had reached another's ears and that this stranger actually knew his name. He crossed his slender arms. "Thank you, sir," he called to the stranger. "Perhaps

you can tell these Doubting Trapspringers what you saw."

Everyone, still gathered around the kender's table, waited for the stranger to speak. But he didn't seem to care to continue, and he sipped from his brew mysteriously.

"Yes, why don't you tell us?" asked the dwarf, taking his stein and waddling over to the stranger's table.

"What difference does it make?" growled the stranger from beneath his cowl. "Toede was a sniveling, cowardly idiot. He had no business being a Dragon Highlord."

At this, Talorin's pointy ears grew red again.

"Maybe so," said the elf, also walking over. "But he caused much harm. If he's dead, then I for one would like to know how it came about."

From deep within his hood, the stranger seemed to be staring at the nearly empty stein sitting before him.

"Perhaps if someone were to buy me another ale - "

"Pug! Bring the gentleman another brew!" called the dwarf, settling himself on a chair at the stranger's table, his broad, leather-clad feet dangling. Soon everyone who had been around Talorin drew closer to the stranger. But the kender, not to be left out, squeezed himself back into their midst. Pug brought the stranger another stein of ale and clunked it before him, the foamy head spilling over and onto the table.

The stranger took a sip and cleared his throat. "I once served that wretch-of-a-hobgoblin," he said. "And, yes, I was there that day. . . ."

And so the stranger told a tale that, since then, has been retold many times throughout Krynn.

For many weeks Toede had been stewing in his somber manor in the decrepit port city of Flotsam, grumbling about how his subjects were not paying him the respect due to a Dragon Highlord. "They don't pay their taxes, they desert my army, they laugh behind my back!" he growled. Then he would just sit slumped on his throne, his two pink eyes squinting out of his flat, fleshy face as if he were hatching some plot that would make everyone realize he was not to be taken so lightly.

But all he did was put himself in a worse and worse mood. If anyone crossed him during those weeks - if an attendant so much as spilled something at the table - Toede fell into a rage. More than one such fellow was tossed off the docks to be eaten by sharks.

Naturally, his attendants were getting increasingly nervous. Finally one of them, Groag - a fat hobgoblin like Toede but who liked to dress in elegant, stylish robes and wear large, bejeweled rings - tried to divert his master from his self-pity. "Perhaps Lord Toede would like to disport himself," he said, standing by the squat, round-backed throne.

Toede glanced up and sideways at the dandified attendant. "Do you have anything in particular in mind?" he snarled. He always felt that Groag, like everyone else, showed him little genuine respect and always sounded

snooty.

"There are many things," said Groag. He counted them off on each bejeweled finger. "You could take your ship out and harpoon dolphins, you could attend a dogfight, you could go hunting - "

"Hunting," snarled Toede, slumping even deeper into his throne. "How can I be expected to catch anything when my forest is full of poachers?" He began to stew again.

"Well," Groag shrugged, "perhaps you can catch a poacher."

At this, Toede's beady eyes lit up, and his broad fleshy mouth actually spread into a twisted smile. "Hmm," he began, drumming his stubby fingers on the throne's broad armrest. "Wouldn't that be fun . . ."

Now, Groag hadn't really been serious about catching a poacher, but the idea did seem to catch his master's imagination. So he said, "Say no more, my lord." Whereupon he hastily arranged a hunting party.

For the hunt, Toede left behind his faithful amphi dragon, Hopsloth, who was much too clumsy on land (pity the terrorized servants who had to comfort the disappointed beast!) and, instead, he rode his fastest, furry-legged pony, Galiot. He also took a large pack of black hunting hounds, each of which was held on a leash by an iron-collared slave who ran along on foot. The hounds were vicious, long-fanged beasts, and sometimes, out of impatience to be let loose, they nipped at the slaves holding them. All the hapless slaves could do to defend themselves was keep the mongrels at bay with sticks found along the way.

Also for the hunt, Toede surrounded himself with half a dozen pony-backed, spear-carrying bodyguards - hobgoblins all - just in case he came upon a particularly nasty poacher. Toede himself wore his armor, which, of late, had become an especially tight fit, causing his flab to squeeze out of the chinks. Only Groag, preferring to remain in his fancy, flowing robes and rings, went unarmored. As he rode beside Toede, however, he did carry his master's bow and arrows.

It was late morning when the hunting party paraded through the crooked, filthy streets of Flotsam. Soon they entered a large, grassy field, at the far end of which was a somber fringe of dark pineforest. Not surprisingly, no poachers were quick to reveal themselves, but Toede did spot a great big stag at the perimeter of the woods. As the party approached, the animal raised its magnificently antlered head and sniffed the air suspiciously.

"Shh," hissed Toede as Groag handed him his bow and an arrow. "No one make a sound."

From atop Galiot, Toede nocked the arrow and pulled back on the bowstring, his red tongue poking out the corner of his mouth as he concentrated on his aim.

But before he could release the arrow, a sudden screaming whine pierced the air, startling the stag. The creature spun around, crashed into the outlying underbrush of the woods, and disappeared. Then ensued a series of muffled, skittering noises that receded into the distance.

"Damn it!" shouted Toede, his pink eyes reddening. He

spun in his saddle toward his bodyguards. "Who did that? Come on! Speak up!"

The hobgoblin guards shrugged and looked at each other stupidly.

"The noise did not come from our party," said Groag, sounding typically haughty.

"Oh? Then who from?" asked Toede.

"A kender," said Groag. "Perhaps more than one. The sound was made by a hoopak, of course."

"Kender!" snapped Toede, his eyes darting about the field and woods. "I should have known! I bet they're the ones who've been poaching in my forest!"

"I wouldn't be surprised," said Groag, though in fact he was indeed surprised to learn that their quest for poachers might have real results.

"All right, then," said Toede, handing the bow and arrow back to the know-it-all attendant, "let's keep our eyes open for damned kender!"

With that, Toede and his hunting party continued on, searching for kender. They saw none. Soon they were skirting the edge of the dark pine forest, whose lower, horizontal branches were dead, gray, and bare.

Of course no kender showed, but Toede did spot a second stag just within the gloomy woods, drinking at the near bank of a purling brook. "Shh," whispered Toede, sticking out his hand for his bow and arrow;

Groag handed them over. Toede acted faster this time, quickly knocking the arrow and pulling back on the bowstring.

But, once again, before he could even take proper aim, another whining scream pierced the air.

"Damn it!" roared Toede as the stag darted off, splashing to the other side of the brook and disappearing deeper into the woods. Toede stood straight up in his saddle and scanned all around him. "Where are they? Where are these blasted kender?"

"They are quite good at hiding," said Groag as if it were too obvious to even mention. "You won't spot them so easily."

"I won't, won't I?" said Toede, straining his eyes even harder. "We'll see about that!" He turned to his bodyguards. "You there," he hissed at one of them, "circle around with some slaves! We'll use them as beaters!"

"Yes, sire!" snapped back the hobgoblin, excited at the idea. He took several slaves and dogs, and off he went, spurring his pony and hoping to encircle the kender, wherever they were.

Toede glared at Groag, who averted his eyes. The rotund Highlord led the hunting party back into the center of the field so that he'd have a wide view of the forest perimeter. Grumbling to himself, he waited atop the impatient Galiot, who kept snorting and pawing at the ground with his small, front hooves.

When at last Toede heard the yelling of the distant beaters deep in the forest, he muttered, "Now, my little kender, the tables are about to be turned. . . ."

The shouts of the beaters and the dogs barking got

louder. In trying to flee these beaters, plenty of other game now burst forth from the forest: rabbit, fox, grouse, even another stag, all hurried past Toede and his hunting party. Toede ignored them all, intent and filled with malicious glee. But two of his hobgoblin bodyguards couldn't resist. They chased and felled the dashing stag with thrusts of their spears.

"Stop that!" shouted Toede, waving them back. "Prepare yourselves for the kender!"

The two hobgoblins looked at each other, then, if a little reluctantly, let the dead deer lay where it fell. They rode obediently back to Toede's side.

Suddenly the dark hounds around Toede began barking furiously and straining at their leashes, testing the strength of the scrawny slaves holding them. Straight ahead, breaking from the forest with the other game, were two small beings running from the beaters and chattering to each other and not at all looking where they were going.

"What have we here?" Toede chuckled smugly, sticking his hand out for his bow and arrow; Groag handed them over. "The dogs shall have some kender meat tonight!" Toede nocked the arrow and drew back the bowstring. He squinted and aimed, sticking his red tongue out the corner of his mouth.

But just when the two kender were within range, Toede relaxed the bow. "No," he said as a contorted smile spread across his face. "No, I have a better idea - a much better idea . . ." He savored the thought a moment and nodded approvingly. He turned to his bodyguards. "Catch them!"

The bodyguards spurred their ponies and galloped off. They were almost on top of the kender before the little people knew what was happening. One of them had stopped to replace a button on his raiment, and the other was offering him a variety of choices from his pouches, so they were surprised by the onslaught.

But it wasn't so easy catching those kender. They were very spry, and one of them kept swinging his hoopak, eliciting that whining scream. This scared the ponies, which, in turn, nearly trampled over the beaters as they themselves came forth from the woods. In the confusion, the kender nearly escaped as they bolted across the field. But they were chased down by two hobgoblins who held an outspread net between their ponies. The two kender were swooped up, the hoopak flying - with a final whine - from the hand of the kender who had held it.

Toede, watching this from a distance, nearly fell out of his saddle from excitement. "Bring them here! Bring them here!" he shouted hoarsely. He settled back on his saddle and began rubbing his pudgy hands expectantly. He leered at Groag, who nodded, if begrudgingly, to acknowledge his master's accomplishment.

The two hobgoblins rode up to Toede, the snared kender dangling between their mounts. The dogs continued barking, straining at their leashes and snapping their jaws only a hand's length from the net.

"Now what have we here?" said Toede, leaning down. Suddenly his beady eyes widened. "What's this? Groag!

Look who we've bagged!"

Groag leaned forward, and even he seemed impressed.

"I do believe - goodness, could it be?"

"It could!" said Toede with great satisfaction. "The kender leader! Oh, won't this impress the other Highlords!"

It was, indeed, Kronin Thistleknot. Except for a certain regal bearing and minnow-silver hair, he looked like an ordinary kender, although slightly taller and sturdier. Also, he had twice as many pouches and ornaments slung around his slender waist. In his company was a more youthful kender with a gap-toothed smile, as thrilled as could be to find himself in the middle of such an unusual experience as being captured by the great Toede.

"Good afternoon," said Kronin casually, swinging in his net-hammock. "Fine day for hunting."

"Fine day, indeed," responded Toede with a sneer.

"Mind you, my dear Kronin, the real hunting hasn't even begun!"

Toede quickly looked about until he spotted the slain stag crumpled on the ground some dozen paces away. His eyes glinted with a notion. "Bring that here!" he ordered.

The two hobgoblins who had killed the animal hurried over to it on their ponies, chasing away some complaining jackals and buzzards that had already gathered there. They grabbed the buck by its antlers and dragged it back before Toede.

"Now," said Toede, gesturing impatiently in the direction of his highly prized prisoners, "release them."

The hobgoblins holding the net tilted it, and out plopped the two small beings. They dusted their similar red leggings and white tunics, and Kronin adjusted his furry vest.

"Now," continued Toede, slowly unfolding his plan, "chain them to the carcass!"

The kender looked at each other in some confusion as two hobgoblins quickly obeyed, chaining a slender wrist from each kender to a separate broad antler. The kender raised their arms questioningly, hefting the head of the dead animal.

Toede slapped his hands together. "Now, then, my pointy eared pests, I will give you a head start."

"A head start?" repeated Kronin.

"That's right," said Toede. "And when I feel you've gone a fair distance, I will release these hounds and hunt you down and kill you. What have you got to say to that?"

Kronin smiled broadly with realization. "Oh, I do love a good game," he said, looking up at the fat hobgoblin who regarded him with such contempt.

"Then you're in luck!" came back Toede, trying to sound as glib as the kender leader. "Now, you'd best be off, my friends. I won't wait TOO long."

"Oh, I'm sure of that," said Kronin. "Until we meet . . ." He bowed deeply. The other kender, who was a bit smaller than Kronin, did likewise. It seemed the polite thing to do.

"Bah!" snapped Toede. "You won't be so smart-alecky when I get through with you!"

But Kronin ignored the Dragon Highlord and turned to his small friend. "Come, Talorin," he said. "We must be

off."

The other kender grinned and jumped up and down in anticipation of the sport to begin. "Yes, sir, my liege!" he said. "Oh, I do love a good game, too!"

The two kender began to shuffle away, dragging the bloody stag carcass - which was bigger than both of them combined - across the field. At the edge of the forest they turned around, waved farewell to Toede, then disappeared through the underbrush, heroically tugging the deer carcass.

Toede drummed his fingers impatiently on his saddle pommel. Galiot snorted and pawed the ground nervously. The dogs yanked at their leashes. The slaves looked imploringly up at Toede, waiting for the command to release the beasts.

"Um, we shouldn't wait too much longer," said Groag, looking a bit concerned. "Kender are awfully tricky - "

"I know how long to wait!" snapped back Toede. And he waited still longer to prove it.

But finally he, too, got nervous, and so he shouted:

"Release the hounds!"

The hounds bolted ahead, and the hobgoblins galloped behind them while the panting slaves, watched over by two rearguards, were forced to try to keep up on foot.

At the edge of the forest, the hounds slowed and began sniffing for the scent of the deer carcass, their dark muzzles sweeping feverishly across the ground, snorting now and then to clear dirt from their wet nostrils. After a few moments of this, one of them suddenly plunged into the woods, pulling the others after it, all of them yapping away. The hunting party followed, the riders forced to duck beneath the low, dead limbs of the pine tree.

"Whew!" said Talorin, pulling his chain with both hands, barely keeping up his share of the burden. "I think I'm actually beginning to sweat!"

The two kender were slowly making their way among the towering trees of the gloomy and silent inner forest where only flecks of sunlight broke through the branches above, dappling the forest floor.

"Good for you!" said Kronin as he also tugged away, taking care to show less strain, because, after all, he was the leader. "You don't get enough exercise."

"Oops!" said Talorin, turning his head. "I think I hear the dogs!" He paused to listen. "Yes, yes, that's them all right. You know, my liege, I think we ought to be making better time."

Kronin also stopped, and as he did the deer's head slumped to the soft bed of brown pine needles. "Well," he said, trying to catch his own breath, "these low branches should slow the riders down a bit." He pointed to the crisscrossing limbs, most of which were over the heads of the two kender. "But you're right, my friend - " he casually rested an elbow on one of the dead animal's upright antlers " - although I feel certain if we had enough time, we could pick these two locks." He looked thoughtful.

"Doubtless!" said Talorin, rattling his chain. "Only" He hesitated to break into Kronin's meditation. "Only, the

dogs are coming closer as we speak. . . ."

"No kender should be hobbled this way," continued Kronin philosophically, shaking his head. "It's so embarrassing. And then, of course, as far as the game goes, it doesn't seem altogether fair."

"True enough. Those dogs are getting rather loud, aren't they?"

"Perhaps," Kronin mused, "we ought to do something about those dogs. . . ."

"Yes, yes! Capital idea!" Talorin brightened. "And I even have an idea how to do it! We need only - oh. Dam. We'd need the hoopak for that." He furrowed his brow to think. "Of course!" said Talorin again, snapping his fingers. "We could take - ahhh - no, that wouldn't work, either. We'd need four more kender. . . ."

Kronin rolled his eyes upward.

"Hey! We could try to - darn it! That's no good! There are too many trees in here! Well, I suppose we could always - drat! I doubt even hobgoblins are that stupid." Talorin rubbed his slender face. "Say, how about - ?"

"Um, don't trouble yourself, my friend," interrupted Kronin finally. He spat into his hands, rubbed them, and took up the chain again. "I do believe I already have an idea. . . ."

Toede and his hunting party had now been riding through those gloomy woods a long while - so long, in fact, that they eventually came to a groaning halt. The slaves collapsed to catch their breath. Toede scratched his broad, squat face. "It seems," he said, only slowly perceiving the truth, "that we've been returning to the same spot over and over."

"Yes, it does seem that way," said Groag, somewhat fatigued by the long search. "The kender apparently dragged the carcass in a circle."

Toede's pink eyes reddened. "So! Kronin thinks he's put one over on me, does he? We'll see about that! Leash the dogs!"

The slaves, who had only just gotten comfortable lying on the bed of pine needles, forced themselves to their feet with a moan. When the dogs were leashed, the hunting party, at Toede's orders, proceeded more slowly and methodically along the scent trail. Toede kept some dogs on the outside of the circle the kender had made, hoping to catch the spot where Kronin and Talorin had veered off. Sure enough, the dogs ranging the perimeter soon grew wild and loud, snorting at the ground and tugging on their leashes.

"Do you see?" shouted Toede gloatingly. "They've only managed to postpone their end - and, may I add, not for very long!" He turned to the slaves. "Release them!"

The slaves were only too happy to obey. The dogs, once free, bolted deeper into the forest in the direction of the fresh scent, scaring up several grouse and other birds along the way.

"Oh, I've never felt such a thrill!" declared Toede gleefully as he galloped after his dogs, the needles on the

ground kicking up under the hooves of Galiot. "We ought to hunt kender more often!"

"Yes, sire," responded Groag without much conviction, his robes fluttering. He was more concerned with trying to stay in the saddle.

"Oops! I hear them again!" said Talorin as he and Kronin sat on rocks by the purling stream that meandered among the trees.

Kronin was fumbling with a pin at the lock around his skinny wrist. His pointy ears perked. "You're right," he said, distracted. "I think they've caught on to our ruse."

Talorin rested his slender face in an open hand and sighed. "Boy, I really do hate being chained. I really do."

"It's no picnic for me, either," said Kronin, now standing, his attention focused on the barking. "My, they do make a racket, don't they? I'm glad we don't do this every day."

"They seem a little too . . . how would you put it?"

"Enthusiastic?"

"Yes, that's it: enthusiastic! Bad for us, huh?"

"Could be. Perhaps we ought to run in circles again."

"Frankly, I'm a bit bored with that."

"Well! Aren't we being finicky!" said Kronin. "Very well, I'll just have to think of another idea." So, with the distant barking getting ever louder, Kronin took a moment to reflect. He furrowed his brow and scratched his chin. He looked around. He thought harder.

"Um, my liege, could you think a bit faster?"

"Got it!" blurted Kronin, his eyes lighting. He sat down and began to untie the leather thongs of his shoes. "Come on," he pressed.

Talorin looked at him in confusion. "What on Krynn - ?"

"And you'll want to roll up your leggings, too," said Kronin, rolling up his own.

Talorin, with a heavy sigh and clank of his chain, slowly pulled one foot onto his bony knee and began removing a shoe. "Well," he said wistfully, "at least the hounds seem to be having a good time. . . ."

The hounds snorted excitedly at the spot where the two kender had been sitting, but they grew frustrated because, once more, they had lost the scent of the kender. They searched frantically around the fern-covered bank, scaring the daylights out of a small green frog who jumped into the water.

"Apparently, my lord, the kender waded into the stream," said Groag, squirming uncomfortably in his saddle and wishing desperately to return to the manor. "There's no telling which way they went."

"No telling?" came back Toede. "You think Kronin has won this little sport?"

"I'm only being practical," said Groag, massaging his rear. "You should have killed them when you had them in hand."

"Bah!" came back Toede. "You give up too easily!" He

turned to the rest of his hunting party. "All right, comb the banks!"

The hunting party split up and covered both sides of the stream in each direction. Toede, more impatient than ever now, waited with Groag and drummed his fingers on his saddle pommel while Galiot took the opportunity to drink some of the cool, crystalline water. "We'll see," muttered Toede. "We'll just see . . ."

Before too long, the dogs upstream on the opposite side began barking furiously. A hobgoblin there blew his horn.

"Ha! Now what do you say, Groag?" called Toede as he splashed across the stream on Galiot. He hunched over to avoid some low branches. "Kronin is not as clever as he - or you - believes!"

An exhausted Groag, falling to the rear of the pursuing hobgoblins, didn't answer. A dead branch had torn the sleeve of his fancy robe.

"Uh oh, do you hear what I hear?" asked Talorin as he and Kronin dragged the dripping wet, impossibly cumbersome deer carcass through the woods. They stopped to listen. Talorin leaned against a large, rough-barked tree and slid to the ground to rest. "Goodness, they are persistent," remarked Kronin. "My poor wrist is starting to chafe," complained Talorin, "and I'm tired and hungry -"

"My, my, such a grumpy boy," said Kronin. "How do you think I feel? Is there a worse curse than for two kender to be chained together?"

But then Talorin, only half listening to the older kender, snapped his fingers. "Say, I have an idea!"

Kronin looked at him skeptically.

"No, really, I do! It's a good one!"

"Are we going to need anything special for this one?"

"No, no, just some muscle grease!" Talorin jumped to his feet. His face shone with eagerness.

"Well, that's too much. Mine requires only - ahh. Hmmm. No. We'd need lard for that -"

"You see? Our situation is dire. Please let me tell you my idea! Please, please, please -"

"All right, all right!" said Kronin, half covering his pointy ears. "Just keep your voice down. They're getting close."

Talorin beamed and rubbed his hands. He leaned toward Kronin and whispered, "That hobgoblin dunderhead will never figure this one out!"

"At last!" said Groag, wiping his forehead with a silk handkerchief and looking up into the high branches of an especially large pine. "We've treed them!"

"It would seem so," said Toede, peering up and rubbing his weak chin. He frowned grotesquely. "Although for the life of me, I don't see anyone up there."

All the guards looked up stupidly and scratched their heads. The dogs, which had led the party to the tree, continued jumping up onto its trunk and sliding back down again - though one of them had actually managed to jump onto a particularly low limb and now stood upon it on

jittery hind legs, barking furiously.

"You're right," said Groag over the din. "I don't see them either. Can kender fly?"

But even as Groag suggested this, a smile spread slowly across his master's face. "Sire?" Groag prodded dimly.

"Fly, Groag?" blurted Toede. "Ha! Fly, you say? Is that your theory?"

"Well, no. I was only wondering - "

"Don't you see what they did?"

"Um, let me see - "

"And you think you're so smart!" Toede pointed with a stubby finger at the various heavy limbs jutting from the tree. "It's obvious! They climbed along one of those upper branches, crossed to another tree, down they came, and - " Toede turned to the rest of his party. "Everyone! Spread out!"

The hunting party radiated from the tree. Toede, more confident than ever, waited with Groag. Every so often he smirked at his uppity attendant. Sure enough, one of the dogs started yapping at the base of a neighboring pine.

"Oh, I do love it!" shouted Toede as he galloped off behind his noisy black dogs. "We'll show Kronin yet!"

"I'm sure we will, my lord," sighed Groag, mostly to himself as another limb tore at his robe.

"Darn! I almost had it!" said Kronin, hunkered down before a large cave at the base of a rocky hillside. His own reddened wrist was at last free of the chain, and he was now working on Talorin's. From the rim of the cave, the two kender had a good view across a clearing of the surrounding forest.

"Will you please hurry, sir?" asked Talorin, sitting on the glassy eyed deer carcass. "Those dogs are getting awfully close."

Kronin rose to his feet. "You're right." He looked pensive for a moment. "Say! Why don't we split up? That would confuse them!"

"What? Me lug this deer all alone?"

Kronin's face showed that he did not think it was such a terrible idea. "You could always hide in this cave - "

"Sire!"

"Hmm. I suppose not." But he looked unconvinced.

"Sir, perhaps it would help you to think if you pretended you were still chained."

"You may be right," said Kronin. "Let. me pretend I'm still chained. Hmmm . . ." And while Kronin pondered, the dogs' barking got steadily louder.

Talorin cleared his throat and held out his wrist, rattling his chain. "Um, in all due respect, sir, maybe you should continue picking the lock." Of course, Talorin could pick the occasional lock, but Kronin was better at it, and besides, he was the leader.

"Maybe," said Kronin vaguely, taking Talorin's shackled wrist. "But I can't pick locks and think at the same time."

"That's all right, my liege. I'll think for us. In fact, I've already got an idea. Why don't we - rats! We already tried that. Or, maybe . . ."

The barking got louder; in addition, the pounding of the ponies' hooves could be heard along with Toede's own hoarse shouting as he frantically barked orders at his hunting party.

"This is going to be just a bit too close for comfort," said Kronin, fumbling at the lock.

Talorin, still sitting on the carcass, squinted in deep thought. Every so often he brightened, but then quickly shook his head and fell back to his cogitating. "Well, that does it!" he finally announced, slapping his thigh with his free hand. "I'm fresh out of ideas!"

Suddenly Kronin stopped picking the lock. His ears twitched. "Say, did you hear something?"

"Hear something?" repeated Talorin, who was busy scooping up pebbles and inspecting them to see if any might, accidentally, be jewels. "Yes, but I thought it was you tugging at the lock - "

"No, no - " said Kronin. His ears twitched again. He turned to face the cave behind them. "I think it came from in there."

Talorin directed his attention to the cave as well. He leaned toward it to listen better, dropping his pebbles. "You're right! Hmm! Someone's an awfully loud snorer!"

The two kender stared at each other a moment. Their eyes lit up with recognition. Kronin resumed picking the lock more feverishly than ever. Talorin was almost giddy with excitement. "Hold still, will you!" said Kronin.

"Oh, this will be a good one!"

The dogs soon came to the cave and barked furiously at its dark entrance, refusing, however, to go in.

"At last!" shouted Toede, pulling up on the reins of Galiot and stopping behind his dogs. He slid off. "They're trapped!"

"I hope so, sire - " groaned Groag.

"Oh, they're in there, all right," said Toede. He stuck out his hand for his bow and arrow.

"Yes, but every time - "

"Come, come! Be quick about it!" shouted Toede, snapping his fingers impatiently.

Groag handed the weapons over. "They've been very sneaky so far - "

"That's right! Very sneaky, indeed!" said Toede, nocking his arrow. "And look where it's gotten them! They're doomed!"

"All the same, my lord, I would proceed carefully - "

"Bah! You just don't like seeing me outwit a kender," came back Toede, turning his back on Groag and peering eagerly into the darkness of the cave.

"You're wrong, my lord," said Groag, sliding his bulk clumsily off his pony. "Nothing would please me more. But - "

"Never mind 'but', " said Toede, turning back. "Just follow your orders. Stay by the trees and watch the mounts and dogs. I'll leave you the slaves and the two rearguards. If Kronin and that other pointy eared pipsqueak should sneak by us, kill them at once! Understand?"

"Yes, sire," said Groag, grateful at least for the respite.

"The rest of you follow me!"

While four of the hobgoblins eagerly dismounted, Groag retreated back across the clearing to the trees with the slaves, dogs, ponies, and the two rearguards. Toede peered once more into the cave, but this time more tentatively. His faithful attendant had given him second thoughts. "Damn that Groag," he muttered. "Always ruining my fun! Well, not this time!" Bow and arrow nocked at the ready, Toede padded stealthily into the cave, followed closely by his guards. Soon they disappeared in the blackness.

There was a moment or so when nothing much happened, except that the dogs kept barking and yanking at their leashes, pulling some of the exhausted slaves from the trees into the clearing. Groag himself settled against a tree and sat down on a bed of pine needles. He gently fingered the tatters of his robe and sighed.

Suddenly, several prolonged hobgoblin screeches echoed from the cave. They were followed almost immediately by none other than Toede himself and his four guards, all squealing like pigs at the top of their lungs and bolting out of the cave as fast as their fat, armor-clad bodies would carry them.

"My lord, what happened?" called Groag, jumping to his feet.

The answer came quickly enough. Out of the cave emerged a huge, very angry, reptilian head. Right between its flaring nostrils was stuck Toede's puny arrow. The emerging head was quickly shown to be attached to a long, thick serpentine neck that slid out and out until the entirety of an enormous green dragon stood before the cave.

"Attack! Attaaaack!" screamed Toede, his hands flailing the air as he retreated across the open ground, his bodyguards clanking after him. Meanwhile, the dogs had reversed themselves and were now lunging in the opposite direction, yelping and dragging some of the slaves with them back into the forest.

The dragon sat back on its haunches before its cave, its head soaring above the surrounding pine trees, its leathern wings opening like two green sails of a great ship. Around the dragon's thick rear ankle, looking like nothing more than a bracelet and charm, were attached the chain and deer carcass.

"Attaaaack!" screamed Toede, continuing his dash toward the forest.

The two hobgoblins who had remained with Groag stepped forward uneasily, their little pig eyes widening, their spears trembling. "Kill it! Kill it!" Groag squealed. "Protect your master!"

The two seemed inclined to head for the rear, but they were pressed forward by Toede. Planted behind them, he was grabbing at the arms of the other fleeing hobgoblin guards, trying to spin them around. "Where are you going, you cowards? Stop! Stop!"

By now most of the guards, dogs, and slaves - with Galiot leading the way - had scattered into the woods.

The dragon kept its glare fixed on the fat hobgoblin

Highlord who stood at the edge of the forest, jumping up and down, waving his fists, and barking orders at the two quivering guards he had pushed into the clearing. Groag was frozen to his spot.

"Get him! You idiots! What are you waiting for?" Toede shrieked.

At last the angry dragon, tired of the squealing, opened its great maw, rolled its pink tongue out of the way, and released a great, thunderous discharge of flame that caught Toede right in the middle of one of his jumps. The flames passed right over the heads of the two hobgoblins edging their way backward. Tossing their spears in the air, they fled in opposite directions.

The dragon's flames were so loud that they drowned out Toede's squeals.

Groag, standing several paces away from Toede, could only watch in horror, his torn robes slowly being singed. And when at long last the flames stopped, all he could see remaining of his master was his red-hot, glowing armor, partly melted, lying on the ground.

The dragon roared victoriously, causing pine needles to rain from the trees. Then, using a front claw, the dragon swatted the irritating arrow from between its nostrils and slowly crawled back into its cave, the deer-carcass bracelet disappearing with it, followed by the dragon's own tapering, spiked tail.

In the ensuing silence, Groag, pine needles covering his head and shoulders, stood alone, gawking at where Toede had been ranting only moments before. After a moment more, he was finally able to move his legs a bit. About to slink back into the forest, he heard an odd sound - a sort of high-pitched, squeaky laugh ter. He stopped and looked to see where it was coming from.

His eyes fell upon two small beings perched on the rocky hill, just over the entrance to the cave. So hard were they laughing that they had fallen right over onto their backs and were holding their aching stomachs. . . .

And that, more or less, was the tale that was told in the tavern and came to be retold over and over throughout Krynn.

When the hooded stranger had finished speaking, the other patrons looked first at him, then at Talorin, who was smiling proudly from pointy ear to pointy ear. "Kender can sneak up on any sleeping dragon," he added unnecessarily.

Old Pug scratched his curly hair. "Well, I'll be," he said. "So it's true about Kronin."

Another patron, the lanky human, patted the proud kender on the back.

"And now, kind stranger," continued Talorin expansively, "perhaps you would like to offer thanks for your liberation. I would be most happy to relay your gratitude to the great Kronin himself."

"Gratitude?" grumbled the hooded stranger. "Gratitude? For my LIBERATION?"

"Why, of course. Everyone knows Toede was a horrible tyrant, and ever since that day - "

"Ever since that day," broke in the stranger, "I have sure enough been free - but free to what? To wander aimlessly? To go hungry? To find no shelter? Gratitude, you say? Look! Look upon my gratitude!" And, with that, the stranger tossed back his hood. The once elegant and haughty, once well-fed minion of the Highlord was now gaunt-faced and clothed in rags.

"Groag!" yelled the kender, sitting up straight.

And before anyone knew it, the crazed hobgoblin brought forth from under the table a rusty double-edged battle-axe, which he immediately swung overhead. Down he came with it, just as the inebriated kender jumped away, his abandoned chair cracking in two. Everyone else around the table jumped back, knocking over their chairs.

"Stand still!" cried the enraged hobgoblin, jumping to his feet and hefting the heavy axe once more. "I want to show you how damned grateful I am!"

"Some other time, perhaps!" called back Talorin, springing lightly back toward the door.

Groag rushed him and swung the axe, smashing a row of clay steins on the counter.

"Oops!" cried Talorin. "I think maybe it's time I take my leave!" And, with that, he hopped out a round window.

"Farewell!" he called, his voice already distant in the woods. "I'll give Kronin your best!"

"Come back!" raged Groag, holding the axe aloft and dashing out the tavern door. "Come back and let me thank you and all your meddling race!"

The remaining patrons pressed back to the circular tree-trunk wall for safety and looked at each other in disbelief. Then the elf, a twinkle coming to his eye, began to chuckle. His cheeks reddened merrily. The others slowly joined him, and soon everyone was laughing.

"Well, how do you like that?" said the elf, wiping a cheerful tear from a pale blue eye as he returned to pick up his chair. "Some people just don't know how to say thank you."

Everyone was now roaring heartily and shaking their heads in amusement as they resettled themselves into their chairs to resume their drinking.

All, that is, except old Pug. He only sighed deeply as he returned to his counter to sweep away the shards of his broken clay steins. Once again, as he knew would happen, a kender had left without paying his tab.

Definitions of Honor Richard A. Knaak

They called the village Dragon's Point. It was a grand name for a tiny human settlement located at the tip of a peninsula northeast of Kornen. Fishtown might have been more appropriate. All who lived in Dragon's Point played some part in the fishing trade. Young and old, men and women.

Visitors were rare in this part of the world: a few traders,

a wandering soul, even a minor cleric now and then. A Knight of Solamnia, then, should have been a sight rare enough to make every villager cease his work and stare in astonishment. At least that was what Torbin had believed. Yet, they did little more than eye him suspiciously and then disappear into their respective homes. They seemed more frightened than surprised.

Those standing nearest to him - those that did not run or sneak away - watched him with narrowed, covetous eyes. His personal wealth amounted to little, but it must have seemed a king's treasure to these folk. His hand strayed to his sword just long enough to warn potential bravados. The message shot home with the swiftness of an arrow. Torbin soon found himself alone in the midst of the very village he had come to protect.

A young knight, he had a tremendous desire to prove himself to the world. He wanted to make a name for himself, something that would gain him the respect of the elders of his order, something that would make the common folk gaze at him in wide-eyed admiration. In short - though he would not have admitted it to himself, much less to anyone else - Torbin wanted to be a hero.

Most of his fellows had chosen to go south toward the more populous regions. They would fight a few bandits, stare down a few peasants, and come back boasting of their great struggles. Torbin wanted much more than that. He wanted a real struggle, a worthy adversary. That was why he had chosen to head toward Kornen and then up the peninsula. The minotaurs lived near here. Savage man-beasts with their own code of honor.

A commoner, making his ways to the more hospitable lands to the southwest, had spoken of the village held in a grip of terror by a great band of minotaurs. The man-beasts prowled the woods and marched along the shore. Any day now they would surely overrun the helpless settlement.

Torbin suspected the commoner of being a great embellisher, and further questioning proved him correct in that assumption. The great band was reduced to one lone minotaur and a few whispered but unaccountable incidents. The situation seemed ideal.

Two weeks later, Dragon's Point's new savior had reached his destination.

It stank heavily of fish.

Three slightly better-dressed men met him at the village center. By their continual bickering over which of them was to speak - none of the three seemed to want the actual honor - he assumed them to be members of the local governing power. As a matter of fact, they turned out to be the mayor, the chief fisherman, and the tax collector. Torbin took the choice out of their hands by steering his horse toward the mayor. The man looked ready to faint, but managed to sputter out a greeting. The knight removed his helmet and returned the greeting.

The three elders seemed a bit disappointed in his youthful appearance. Torbin was clean-shaven and rather handsome, though his nose hooked slightly. His eyes were a bright blue, which seemed to accentuate his lack of

experience. His brown hair contrasted greatly with the blond locks that dominated in this village. The tax collector, a weed of a man who stared down his prominent nose at everyone, sniffed at the newcomer with open disdain. The others shushed him.

"My name is Torbin. I am merely seeking a place to stay for a night before I continue my journey." He had decided to play it dumb for the time being, the better to check the accuracy of his own information.

The mayor, a plump, bald man with the unlikely name of Hallard Boarbreaker, looked even more distressed. "Then you have not come to save us from the minotaurs?"

The knight stiffened. "Minotaurs? I vaguely remember hearing that the islands of the great man-beasts were said to be somewhere near here, out beyond the Blood Sea of Istar, correct?" He waited for them to nod. "I know nothing about your plight. How many? How near?"

Between the three of them, he eventually discovered that there was indeed only one such creature, though it had originally arrived in a boat with others. The rest had immediately turned around and headed for home, to plan more war strategy, no doubt. The remaining minotaur had situated itself somewhere on the shore, though from their inconsistent accounts, the exact location could be anywhere within an hour's to a day's ride. The one thing all three agreed on was that this minotaur must be an advance scout for an invading army. Those brave enough to spy on the creature had reported that it sat in the same spot every day, cutting sharp sticks from wood it gathered and staring out at the sea in expectation.

A grand image was swiftly forming in the young knight's mind. He pictured himself standing over the gutted body of the horrific minotaur, his sword bearing the severed head of the beast on its point. A better trophy he could not have asked for. It did not occur to him that such a scene could easily be reversed. He was, after all, a Knight of Solamnia.

Looking as stern as possible, he nodded. "Very well. Come the dawn, I will ride out to deal with the minotaur. Before the sun sets, I will be back with its head. You have my word on it."

They looked rather dubious at this last statement, but thanked him nonetheless. If he succeeded, they would be all too happy to honor him with a feast. If he failed, they would be no worse off than if he had never come.

At Torbin's request, they found him a place to stay for the night. He was also served one of the finest meals the inn's cook had ever made, though the knight himself had never really been that fond of fish and thus did not realize the trouble the woman had gone through. As it was, he was barely able to down the foul dish. Torbin was also ignorant of the fact that she had outdone herself for the sole reason that she believed this young man was going out to die and deserved one last fine meal.

Torbin made no attempt to converse with those who drifted in and out of this poor attempt at a public inn. The few who stayed for very long only glanced his direction, that same hungry look in their eyes. The knight found

himself anxiously awaiting the morrow.

He bedded down for the night - it could only loosely be called a bed, being more of a bug-ridden mattress on a piece of wood - and eventually drifted off into sleep despite his numerous tiny companions. In his dreams he finally found pleasure, skewering his hapless foe a thousand different ways, each one more daring and skillful than the one preceding it.

He rode quietly, hoping not to alert the minotaur. The tracks he had come across were fresh and spoke of a large beast. Torbin's pulse quickened. Legends said the minotaurs were crafty fighters, as skilled in their own way as the Knights of Solamnia. They also had their own code of honor of which some of the older knights had spoken with great respect.

For a short time, he was forced to ride around trees on a path that could be described as maddening at best. It twisted this way and that, and the knight even found himself momentarily facing the direction he had just come from. Abruptly, it turned toward the coastline and led him to a gritty, open area.

Off to the north, his left, he saw the lean-to; nearby sat the feared minotaur, his great horned head bent over some unknown task.

Using the natural curve of the land to hide him, Torbin readied his sword and shield and backed the horse up in order to give it more time to build up speed before he clashed with the minotaur. A smile flickered on his face. He took a deep breath, quickly searched his mind for any options he might have missed, and then spurred the horse on.

The warhorse's great speed quickly ate away at the distance between Torbin and the minotaur. The knight saw his adversary stand at first notice of the noise and turn quickly toward him. The minotaur was unarmed, but there were a large number of long wooden shafts beside it. The man-beast could easily reach one of them long before Torbin came close enough to strike.

Nevertheless, the minotaur made no move toward its weapons. Torbin's grim determination gave way to puzzled indignation. He had never struck down an unarmed foe. It went against everything he considered honorable, even when fighting a creature such as the minotaur.

They would close soon. The minotaur had still not reached for a weapon and, in fact, looked ready to die. With a sudden curse, the young knight pulled sharply on the reins of his horse, trying desperately to go around the creature rather than run into it. He did not think even a minotaur could survive the blows of a trained warhorse if the victim had no intention of defending itself.

The horse finally allowed itself to be turned. For several seconds, man and steed whirled wildly around as the horse fought to rebalance itself. Torbin lost his sword in an attempt to keep the reins from slipping from his hands. The horse snorted loudly and then slowed. The knight was able to regain his own balance and pull the horse to a halt. It was

then that he first noticed the loss of his weapon.

He twisted around and locked gazes with the minotaur. The massive creature calmly walked over to the sword and picked it up. Turning it so that the hilt pointed toward Torbin, the minotaur returned it to him. The knight blinked, then accepted the blade. The minotaur returned to its carving, staring once more out at the Blood Sea while it worked.

Torbin led his horse so that the minotaur's view would be blocked. The creature looked up at him. Torbin pointed the sword at the minotaur.

"Will you stand and fight? I've always been told that minotaurs were courageous, fierce warriors, not cowards!"

The man-beast's nostrils flared, but it made no attempt to attack. Instead, it put down one stick and began work on another. Torbin grew angrier. How was he to prove himself if his adversary refused to fight? His sense of honor prevented him from striking an opponent who refused battle.

The minotaur chose that moment to talk. Its voice was deep and tended to rumble like thunder. "I would rather talk than fight, Knight of Solamnina, who is too far from home. Please, join me."

It took several seconds for the words to sink in. Torbin stared at the minotaur. With those first words the minotaur became a person, not an "it" like so many people, including Torbin, considered the individual members of the minotaur race to be. Torbin accepted the invitation without thinking. It did not occur to him until he had dismounted and sheathed his blade that the minotaur could have easily skewered him several times.

"Sit here." His unusual host indicated a spot next to his own. Torbin followed his lead.

"Who are you? Why do you disturb me? I have done nothing save sharpen a few sticks." The minotaur was genuinely annoyed, as if this were his personal beach and no one else's. He paused in his labors to inspect the latest stick. Grunting, he threw it away.

Torbin, who had not expected to play question games with a full-grown minotaur, took some time in answering. He was still not sure that he was not sitting in some sort of elaborate trap. Minotaurs were highly intelligent creatures who enjoyed proving their superiority over other races.

The minotaur repeated his questions. Torbin saw no reason not to relate the truth. The creature nodded as he listened to him go over the story of his arrival in Dragon's Point, the fears of the people there, and what the town elders had asked of him.

The creature shook his head. "Humans! So ready to fall prey to the shadows of fear. Your race has a mind; it should learn to use it."

Torbin did not disagree, but felt the case was rather overstated. Men, he told the minotaur, were not all the same. Some were brave, some were fools, some had honor, some were thieves.

"Let us talk of honor." The minotaur's gaze was oddly intent. He had completely abandoned his woodwork.

Having never studied the minotaurs or their way of life, Torbin allowed the man-beast to go first. The creature turned his eyes once more to the sea. Torbin looked, but could see nothing but the eternal motion of waves rolling toward the shore.

"Minotaurs, like some men, believe that honor is first and foremost."

The knight nodded. "Without honor, a man's life is worthless. He is damned. The tale of Lord Soth is legend among the Knights of Solamnia."

"I have heard the tale. The knight who abandoned his mate for an elf woman, condemned now to haunt the halls of his castle, reliving his crimes to his family and friends."

"That is essentially correct."

The man-beast seemed to consider something. "Was he an honorable man before this great transgression?"

"To my knowledge. As I understand it, he was highly thought of by all among the orders. That is what makes his crime that much more terrible. To abandon honor so abruptly. It is unthinkable."

"Apparently not. Soth did so. I wonder what he felt?"

Torbin shrugged. Only Soth knew, and no one was going to take the risk to ask him.

The minotaur blinked. "On the islands, honor is everything. It sets us above the lesser races. The elves claim they are honorable, but they are perhaps the greatest tricksters other than kender. Worse yet, they will not fight. They run and hide, shouting all the while that it's none of their concern, they had nothing to do with it, it wasn't their fault. In the end, they are an old, cowardly people."

Torbin, who had never met an elf face-to-face and had heard a number of stories concerning them, could not judge how much truth the minotaur's statements contained. He did know, however, of the rather egotistical attitude of the minotaurs in general.

"One day, the minotaurs will swarm from the islands and conquer all of Krynn. Our leader claims that. His predecessor claimed that we are the supreme race."

Fearing the conversation was steering toward the blind rhetoric of superiority the minotaurs were famous for, Torbin dared to interrupt. "You were speaking of honor?"

The minotaur nodded. "On Mithas and Kothas, we fight for our place in society. In the name of honor, we slay one another. A minotaur who does not fight has no honor. He is a coward, a non-being."

"A cruel society. The Knights of Solamnia would never permit such useless bloodshed."

The minotaur gave a fierce snort. Torbin froze, sure that the man-beast was preparing to jump him. As the snorting continued, the young knight realized the minotaur was laughing. There was no humor in his laughter, though.

"I have heard many tales of the Knights of Solamnia. You are well respected by my people. There are stories of bands of knights who have fought on, refusing to yield their position, until all are dead. Forget that in many circumstances they could have retreated to better ground, to fight another day. I have heard of knights who have taken

their own lives because they have shamed themselves before their fellows."

Torbin's hand went to the hilt of his sword. "What you say is true; there are such tales. Yet, you twist them so that they sound like acts of - "

"Blind pride and stupidity. Are honor and pride really so important to you, young knight? If a friend died because you were lax, would you leave the Knighthood?"

"A knight who fails in his duty is not worthy of his title." The quote by one of his instructors came to Torbin with little difficulty.

"Could you not make up for your mistake?"

"The friend would still be dead. It would still be my responsibility."

The minotaur sighed, a sound much like a roaring wind. "How long would you go on paying for that mistake? Ten years? Twenty? If you should save a dozen lives, would you still punish yourself for that one?"

"Your question is beyond the point of ridiculousness."

"Is it?" The man-beast studied his own hands. "Would you run a man through from the back? A man who did not even know there was a hint of danger?"

Torbin gasped. "A minotaur might slay a man in such a way, but a Knight of Solamnia would never do such a foul deed! I would challenge him!"

"Indeed? What if you knew this man could easily outfight you? What if you knew that, if he survived, he would cause the deaths of many?" The minotaur's eyes now bore deep into the young knight's. "I ask again, are honor and pride such good things? Must we always do 'the right thing'? "

Torbin did not answer. He was confused. The minotaur's words made some sense, yet, they could not.

The man-beast turned away from him, an almost sad look in his eyes. Torbin waited, but the minotaur would not speak. Instead, he commenced once more with his carving. The knight sat and watched him for a few minutes more, and then he stood up. The minotaur paid him no mind and went on carving another shaft. Torbin returned to his horse and mounted up.

He rode away without looking or speaking to the minotaur again.

The mayor, the chief fisherman, and the tax collector were all waiting for him. As he rode up to them, he noticed how their eyes kept returning to the sword in his sheath. He remembered his earlier promise and gritted his teeth. The mayor stepped forward.

"Is the beast dead, then? Would that I had been there! We feared for you - such a silly thing! Did you sever his head from his body? Campos!" The chief fisherman trundled forward, picking his yellowed teeth as he walked. "Have some of your boys drag the carcass back here! We'll put it where all can see it!"

"The minotaur is not dead."

Torbin might well have demanded the mayor's firstborn child by the look on the man's pudgy face. The chief

fisherman looked grim and spat. The tax collector smiled knowingly.

"Not dead?! Wounded? Run off, has he?"

This part was even more difficult for Torbin to get out.

"I did not fight him. We talked."

"TALKED?!?" all three shouted in one voice. A number of villagers popped their heads out of windows and doorways to see what the noise was all about. A few began muttering and pointing in Torbin's direction. Someone laughed harshly.

"I do not think he will harm you."

"Coward!" The mayor raised his fist, though his distance to the knight did not shrink by even the minutest amount.

"I should have you run out of Dragon's Point!"

Torbin was turning red with anger. On top of everything else, he did not need idiotic backwoods fishermen calling him a coward for no reason at all. He pulled out his sword with one swift motion and tucked the point neatly under the plump man's chin. The mayor let out a gurgle and froze. Villagers began pouring out of their homes, though none moved close enough to lend the stout, blustery man a hand.

"I did not come here to be insulted. You know very little about the situation as it really is. If it will satisfy you, I'll keep an eye on the minotaur. Should he attempt to cause any harm, I'll deal with him. Will that suit you?" In truth, he could not have cared less if it did or did not. This village, this whole region could be damned for all he cared. It stank. The people stank even more.

The chief fisherman whispered something into the mayor's ear. The mayor nodded as best he could, considering the circumstances. The tax collector joined in. Breathing a little slower now, Torbin removed the point from the mayor's throat. After several seconds of swallowing, the man was able to speak.

"It - it has b-been decided that your suggestion is quite reasonable - " He paused as Torbin's grip grew tight around the hilt of the sword. " - I mean REALLY reasonable. Therefore, we will let you deal with the situation as it stands. Provided - " The mayor hesitated again until he felt it safe " - provided that you give us your oath that you will kill the creature at the first sign of hos-hostility."

Torbin sheathed his sword and eyed the three in disgust.

"Agreed."

The meal he received that evening was far inferior to the one the night before, though Torbin was unaware of it. He had a great desire to leave this village. He was sick of fish already and sick of these people. The minotaur was better company than these thieving worm-diggers, despite his maddening questions. Were it not for his pride, the young knight might have ridden out of the village there and then. As it was, he merely retired early, relieved to be away from the inhabitants of this godforsaken village and anxious to see what the next day would bring.

Sunrise saw him far from the village, nearing the shore where the minotaur made his home. The man-beast was there; in fact, he looked as if he had not budged from the

spot since yesterday. As usual, he was carving. Torbin wondered why the ground was not littered with short spears from his previous efforts. Perhaps the minotaur used them for hunting at night, the knight reasoned.

He steered the horse toward the minotaur. The animal snorted its displeasure at being forced to go peaceably toward what it considered a major threat. Training won out, though. Torbin was master and must be obeyed. The minotaur continued to gaze out at the sea so intently that the young knight was unsure whether the creature knew of his presence.

As if on cue, the minotaur spoke. His gaze remained fixed on the Blood Sea. "Welcome back, Knight of Solamnia. You're early."

Torbin had not been aware that he had had an appointment, but he chose to say nothing. Today, he wanted to talk to the minotaur, find out more about the man-beast's homeland. By his manner, the minotaur was unlike many of his race. The tales of bloodthirsty, arrogant monsters was too consistent to be entirely false.

Buried in his subconscious, hidden by a number of excuses, lay the true reason for his visit; Torbin's mind was now riddled with doubts about himself and that which he had believed in until now.

"I have come to a decision today."

The knight blinked. "A decision?"

The minotaur spoke as if Torbin's words had gone unheard. "I have come to a decision today. Honor and pride are nothing without reason. It is not an abrupt decision; in fact, it is the same decision I made long ago. There is a time to fight, a time to give up one's life for another, and a time to run. Tomorrow, the run will be over."

"Run?" Torbin climbed off his horse very quietly lest he destroy the minotaur's chain of thought. The man-beast ignored him. He seemed to be watching every wave, marking every turn of the breeze.

"Minotaurs must fight for their place in society. A minotaur who does not fight does not exist. He shames his family. They call him 'kenderwhelp' or 'elf-bastard.' Even 'manling.' He is shunned by those who know him and cursed by those who do not. Might makes right; honor is all."

The minotaur abruptly turned to Torbin, who had forgotten to sit, so intent was he on following the other's words. "Tomorrow, honor will be returned. No longer will they hold their heads in shame." The final word sounded almost like a curse. The minotaur threw his latest effort far into the sea. He watched it hit with an unruly splash and then vanish from sight.

Torbin found himself oddly concerned. "What happens tomorrow?"

"Is it pride or love? Is it honor or fear?" The man-beast stood. For the first time, Torbin noticed the small, neat stack of short spears. Each point had been finely honed. The best of the minotaur's work. "Forgive me if I leave you so soon. I have preparations to make which must be made in private. I ask you not to follow me. I will harm no one."

Torbin protested, but the minotaur held up one massive, clawed paw. "I know what the village thinks. They are humans, after all, with human idiocies. Let them believe what they wish to believe. Come the morrow, they will know the truth of things."

The minotaur chose two of the sharpened sticks and hefted them, his skill and knowledge evident as he dropped one in favor of another. Eventually satisfied with two, he trudged off toward the woods, his huge feet leaving deep holes in the soft ground. Torbin estimated him to be well over seven feet when standing upright, seven feet of fighting minotaur, undoubtedly a champion among his race if he so chose.

Yet, he had not. Torbin could only guess at the twisted turn the other's life must have taken.

He returned to the village shortly thereafter, refusing to acknowledge the mocking stares of the inhabitants. Most of the day was spent checking and rechecking his equipment, running through his exercises, caring for his horses. It was all done halfheartedly, like some sort of stalling maneuver. Torbin could not find it in himself to push on, but at the same time could not stand the thought of staying any longer. He could feel the eyes at his back, hear the whispers and curses.

He stayed the night at the inn again, this time completely avoiding any meal even remotely smelling of fish. He had long ago learned to live off the land. He did not even consider eating something else; food prepared in the village left a bitter taste in his mouth.

He woke at first light, the decision to leave this place firmly planted in his mind. Despite such grand determination, however, he still found himself packing as the sun neared midday. That was when the decision was taken away from him. 'The minotaur had entered the village.

The people were in a panic. Women were pulling children off the streets. Men rushed to the town elders, demanding that something be done. The town elders, once again led by the less-than-eager mayor, in turn rushed to Torbin, demanding that he do as he promised or suffer the consequences. Torbin idly wondered what sort of consequences the mayor could have in mind if he really thought the minotaur was there to destroy the village. Did he expect the minotaur to wait his turn?

The man-beast did not slink into the village. Despite being realistically outnumbered should the villagers discover their backbones, he walked straight and tall. Even the tallest man in the village came no higher than his shoulder. There was disdain in the minotaur's eyes; Dragon's Point was no argument for the strengths of man. It smelled. The people were dirty, cowardly. Among all of them, only the Knight of Solamnia, an outsider, deserved respect. The others deserved nothing - not even notice.

Minotaur and knight met just before the center of the village. Torbin forewent meeting the other on horseback, which would have given the knight a psychological edge.

The minotaur had given no indication that he had come to fight. Torbin could do no less.

Revealing empty hands, the man-beast acknowledged the knight. Torbin returned the greeting. The villagers had mostly vanished by this time; a few hardy souls dared to stand in the shadows and watch. The mayor and his allies, more out of fear for their positions than their lives, actually remained out in the street, only a few yards from the encounter itself. The minotaur did not even glance in their direction.

"I have come to you because you are the only one worthy of notice amongst this rabble." The minotaur's breathing was ragged, as if the man-beast had been running or was anxious about something. Torbin studied the other's form. With the exception of a loincloth, the minotaur was bare of any sort of clothing. Though the fur-covered skin glistened slightly, it was not the sweat of heavy movement. The knight's curiosity deepened.

"What is it you wish of me?" Torbin did not bother to whisper. No one was close enough to hear him.

The words were difficult for the man-beast to get out. "I ask that you follow me back to the shore. Today things will come to a proper conclusion. The village will have no need to fear me anymore."

The knight wanted to know more, but his trained eye could see that the minotaur was under heavy strain and wanted to be away from those he still considered his lessers, despite his rather peaceful ways. "I'll need to get my horse."

"One hour. No later." As an afterthought - "Please hurry. Time is short."

The minotaur turned to leave and again noticed how the villagers scurried out of sight whenever he turned toward them. He turned back to Torbin and glared, not at him, but at the village and what it represented. "They live in constant fear here, yet they will not leave. A stupid lot. One more thing you can tell them: should they even come near the shore this day, they will bring the wrath of the supreme race down upon them. There will be nothing but ashes to mark where this village once stood. Understand that I do not threaten; what I say is merely fact."

Torbin stood there and absorbed the full impact of the minotaur's words as he watched him stalk off, purposefully noticing every human on his way out. The knight doubted any warning was necessary. It was more stubbornness than bravado that kept the villagers at the tip of the peninsula. What their ancestors had been like Torbin could only guess. The present inhabitants of Dragon's Point, however, were not the adventurous type.

He relayed the minotaur's message to the mayor and those villagers who had already dared to step foot out of their homes and was more than pleased by their reactions. Torbin had almost as little love for these people as the minotaur had; it was his duty, though, to protect them in spite of themselves. For that reason alone - not his chief reason, assuredly - he would be at the minotaur's dwelling by the time of the deadline.

Returning to his restless steed, he mounted up. Though it would have been to his preference if the horse had charged, he forced himself to keep the animal under control and make it trot slowly through the village street. The mayor, who seemed to have nothing better to do than to stand in the streets, wished him the best of luck in what the people of Dragon's Point had now assumed was at long last the great battle. Torbin focused his eyes straight ahead and remained silent. He would explain the truth when it was all over.

The minotaur was at the shore when Torbin arrived. The huge man-beast was startingly swift. He was sweating and breathing heavily, but he was far from exhausted. He greeted the knight with a slight nod of his massive, horned head. Torbin dismounted and sat down beside him. The minotaur waited until his breath returned to him before speaking.

"The village is in no danger from my people. It probably never will be. Dragon's Point is nothing - a foul-smelling pool of your people's dregs. In fact, its presence may very well be important to us. It lets us point at humans and say 'see them - see how weak and pathetic they are.' "

The dark brown eyes shifted to the familiar horizon. Torbin automatically followed suit and thought he saw something in the distance. A speck, little more.

Letting loose an animalistic snort, the minotaur said, "My people. Despite their prowess, their disdain for the 'lesser' races, they are less than gully dwarves in some ways."

The man-beast's words startled Torbin. From what he understood of the race, such words were nearly treason. The minotaur gave his equivalent of a smile, one filled with more mockery than humor.

"We are blind to our faults. The lesser races have no need to fear us. We will continue to kill and maim one another in order to prove our individual superiority and gain ourselves rank. We have done so for as long as memory has existed and will do so until the Final Day. It is our way; it has become . . . habit."

The minotaur's eyes never strayed from the Blood Sea. Now, they widened ever so little. Torbin, trained to notice such minor things, turned his attention back to the sea. The speck was still there, but it was now just close enough to be identified.

It was a boat.

He heard the minotaur groan softly and looked at him. The massive creature stood up and stretched. His animallike features contorted in an attempt to frown. "Thus it begins again. For their sakes."

The words did not seem directed to Torbin. Rather, they were unconscious thoughts accidentally spoken out loud. The minotaur peered intently at the incoming craft, as if assuring himself that it was really there. He then bent over and began selecting the best of his woodwork.

Torbin reacted instantly. If the passengers on the boat meant trouble, he was more than willing to lend his strength to that of the minotaur, whom he had come to think of as a

kindred spirit. To his surprise, however, a hand prevented him from drawing his blade. He turned to find himself staring into the bottomless, dark eyes of the man-beast.

"The feeling is appreciated, human, but I cannot permit you to risk yourself. This is my battle. I ask that you only observe." The minotaur would not remove his hand until the knight had sworn an oath.

With incredible speed, the boat made its way toward the shore. Though he should have expected it, Torbin was still taken aback by the crew's appearances. They were all minotaurs, to his eyes varying only slightly in appearance; they wore some armor and carried swords or tridents. He noted that as a group they stared at the first minotaur whenever ab?e.

As the boat ran aground, four of the creatures jumped out and helped drag it farther to shore. Watching them work, Torbin could not help being awed by the strength in their arms and legs. He tried to imagine a large, coordinated force of minotaurs and shuddered. Better that they should continue to kill one another than turn on the world itself. If not for their brutal ways amongst themselves, they would have swarmed over the eastern part of the continent long ago.

Torbin's friend muttered, "I tried to convince them of the idiocy of fighting one another. Only later did I realize what that would result in. Fortunately, they were too ashamed of me to listen."

There were six all together. None seemed as tall as the original minotaur. They saluted him solemnly. The minotaur saluted them back. The leader of the new band glanced at the knight.

Torbin's companion spoke. "A Knight of Solamnia, here to observe. The rules permit - no, demand - such a witness."

The leader snorted. His voice was even deeper than the first minotaur's. "We greet you, Knight of Solamnia. The honor of your order precedes you." He paused, considering the other minotaur's statement. "I also accept you as witness, though I believe it may very well be the first time that one other than our race has stood for a possible condemned."

Torbin forced himself to utter an empty, formal greeting. Like and unlike fish, it left a bad taste in his mouth.

The leader turned back to the original minotaur. "Have you come to terms?"

"I still remain the same. My thoughts have not changed."

The newcomer seemed almost sad. He tightened his grip on the sword he carried. "Then there is nothing more to say."

"Nothing. We may begin whenever you wish."

Turning to his own companions, the leader said, "Form the circle. Alternate order."

There were three minotaurs armed with tridents. An equal number, including the leader, carried huge broadswords. Each minotaur, barring Torbin's companion, wore a breastplate and arm and ankle guards. The six formed a circle and held their weapons before them in ceremonial style.

The original minotaur, carrying two of his best hand-crafted stakes, stepped into the middle. He saluted the others. They returned the salute. The leader gave a shout in some tongue Torbin could not understand. The si