

# **The village of farmers**

A novelette by  
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It was almost dark when the two travellers spotted the outline of the village in the distance.

"Finally!" exclaimed Aryanil. "I surely wasn't expecting the Heath to be so desolate. We must not be far from the South Coast now."

Animated by the prospect of a hot dinner and a real bed, they decided to keep walking instead of stopping for the night. A great number of cultivated fields, both small and large, surrounded the village, which was no more than a heap of houses all clustered together. A tall windmill was the only building that stood out in the circle of identical abodes.

As they reached the closest fenced fields, Aryanil found a tight, winding road that seemed to lead into the village. A faded sign by the side of the road read 'Barniville'.

"I see no lights," said Aryanil thoughtfully.

"Neither do I," grunted Delwin, who was struggling to follow the dark path in the starless, cloudy night.

"Don't you find it odd that not a single lantern in the whole village is lit?"

The dwarf grumbled something, squinting. "How far are we?"

"Not far. I can distinguish the houses now. They all seem to have a barn or a stall attached."

As they neared the village, the road widened considerably and became much filthier, until they were forced to walk single file by the edge of the road to avoid the dung of farming animals.

"Why keep the animals inside the village?" snorted Delwin, who was feeling dizzy from the smell.

When they reached the village, they realised the houses were arranged into tight concentric circles. They crossed the outer layer of brick and wood buildings and met nobody on their way. At the third crossing, the road terminated into a small, round clearing.

"This must be the centre of the village," said Aryanil quietly, feeling uncomfortable at the stillness and darkness of the deserted place.

"Smells no better than the road," commented Delwin grumpily. "Do ye see an inn?"

"There's a tavern over there, but... ah, it has a 'closed' sign on the door. Maybe we should camp outside the village tonight and come back tomorrow."

"Bah!" said Delwin. "I'm going no farther, and I won't sleep in this filth like a pig. Come, let's try that house." He clumsily made his way to the nearest house and knocked eagerly on the wooden door.

Before Aryanil had time to join him, the door sprung open by a couple of inches and was firmly blocked by a strong chain. At the same time, the tip of an arrow protruded through the gap, and the figure of an old, scanty man holding a crossbow appeared from inside.

"Who are you?! What do you want in the dead of the night?!" asked a strong, husky voice.

Aryanil immediately went for the hilt of his sword, but Delwin, who could distinguish neither the arrow nor the man in the darkness, replied politely: "How do ye do? We're travellers from the Red Mountains. My name is Delwin, and he is Aryanil. We have just reached yer village and seek lodging for the night but found the tavern to be closed."

A rattling metal sound followed, and the light of a strong oil lantern shone over their faces, while also revealing more of the man's facial features. He looked over forty summers old and had wary, brown eyes and high, protruding cheekbones on his fleshless face. As the light shone on the companions' faces, the man's expression showed surprise, suspicion and then fear before turning back into a hard, hostile mask. "Go away, strangers! You're not welcome here."

The door slammed shut. Aryanil relaxed a little.

"How rude!" thundered Delwin.

"It is late. We probably woke him..."

"Don't be a fool, Aryanil. He answered too quickly to be asleep. Come!" He led the way to another house and knocked again.

The exact same thing happened with the woman in the second house and the couple in the third one.

"Give up, Delwin, before you wake the whole village." Aryanil led the puffing dwarf to an empty field at the edge of the village, where the smell of dung was less intense, and sat down on the hard, dry ground. "Let's spend the night here. Tomorrow we'll try again. We can at least ask for directions to a larger town."

"Bah! Ye think too well of these humans," said Delwin irritably. "Ye should see the hospitality of dwarves. We would never refuse a guest! We would make a feast for them no matter the time of the night!"

"Yeah, if the guest is another dwarf. What if he's a man, or an elf?" said Aryanil with a sad smile.

Delwin stumbled on his thoughts. He sat down in front of the half-elf and said: "I'll tell ye. When I return the medallion to Sohogar, I will explain to them how ye helped to retrieve it. I'm sure they'll welcome ye as one of their own once they know the facts."

Aryanil laughed drily. "I'm not so sure. Not when the elves won't even accept somebody with half their blood." He didn't add that he would rather spend the rest of his life in Barniville's dirty streets than underground in the dwarves' caves.

They tried to make themselves comfortable on the pebbled ground and slowly fell asleep.

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The sound of a hundred bells ringing madly woke them both with a start.

"What is it!" cried Delwin, reaching for his battle-axe. Aryanil grabbed his father's sword and stood up, looking in the direction of the village. It was still the dead of night, but the houses were now all lit up.

"I see people on the roofs! They are shooting arrows. Come!" He strung his bow quickly, picked up his quiver and ran towards the commotion. Delwin followed.

It looked like the whole village had woken up all of a sudden, yet nobody was in the streets. The dark shapes of men could be seen on the roofs, shouting to each other and shooting arrows at the same target.

The two travellers followed the direction of the darts and reached a large house in the outer layer of the village, where a group of ten or fifteen goblins had broken into the stall and driven out a number of cows. Now,

they were struggling to control the frightened animals while shielding themselves from the incoming arrows.

Aryanil and Delwin rushed towards the enemies but were forced to stop by the stream of arrows coming from the houses.

"Geh away, you fools!" cried a deep voice from the roofs.

Delwin pulled Aryanil by the sleeve and dragged him away to avoid friendly fire. In the meantime, the goblins had quickly rallied the stolen cattle and were slowly dragging them out of the village.

"You can't stop them like that!" shouted the half-elf at the men on the roofs. "They're getting away!"

The men ignored him and kept on firing arrows, almost none of which were meeting their target.

Aryanil pulled an arrow from his quiver and aimed it at one of the goblins. He waited for the enemy to move his shield away from his neck and fired at that very instant. The dart penetrated deeply into the goblin's throat. He cried in pain and collapsed. The other goblins yelled in fear and doubled their efforts to lead the cattle away from the village as fast as possible. Two of them let go of their cows and broke into a run.

Aryanil fitted another arrow, but before he could shoot it, a loud, grave horn resounded in the night, covering the racket of the bells. Five ogres appeared in the fields. One of them held a long, twisted horn, and two of them were as big as *gurshals*. They were all heavily armed, and most of them wore some type of armour.

On their arrival, several things happened at once. The goblins dragging the cows redoubled their efforts while those who had run away spun around and rushed to help the others. All the bells in the village stopped ringing,

and the stream of arrows ceased instantly. At the same time, all the men disappeared into their houses, and all the lanterns went off.

"What's going on!" said Delwin confusedly.

The five ogres roared and met the goblins with shouts and kicks. Within seconds, half of the goblins were storming back into the village, while the rest rallied the stolen cows.

Aryanil and Delwin unsheathed their weapons and ran towards the enemies, responding to the ogres' shouts with a battle cry. The goblins divided and burst into the houses, so that Aryanil and Delwin could only engage two each. The enemies looked surprised at the counterattack, but they held their ground nonetheless.

Aryanil feinted at one of them and lunged at the other, forcing them back at every blow. Delwin was struggling to see now that all the lanterns were off, so he grabbed the medallion he was hiding in his pocket and let its power guide him in the fight. His sense of sight, hearing and smell tripled in an instant, and he was immediately at an advantage over the two goblins in front of him. His axe swung as fast as a whip and as strong as a mace, cutting the defence of his opponent and forcing the others out of his way.

They were both partly aware of the ogres approaching and the shouts from the men in the houses.

"How dare you!" A large ogre ran into Aryanil, swinging his longsword. "How dare you oppose us!" He kicked one of the goblins out of his way and crashed into the half-elf's shoulder, pushing him backwards and causing him to fall.

Aryanil got up quickly and looked around: none of the villagers were on the street. "Hey!" he shouted. "Men! Come and help us!" He had barely time

to defend himself from a second, heavy blow. In the meantime, Delwin was standing his own against two ogres, one of whom was a gurshal.

The goblins had scuttled away from the fight and were ransacking the houses, killing the fowls and driving the cattle out.

"Come out and fight, ye cowards!" cried Delwin to the men.

Three of the ogres had now surrounded the dwarf and were lunging mercilessly with their long swords, yet keeping out of range of his double-axe. The medallion gave him the speed to defend from every single attack, but the toll for extended usage was weighing on his chest, where the gem burned his skin.

He felt a sudden jolt of fear and turned around. Aryanil was cornered against the fence of the road, his sword nowhere to be seen.

"Hey, catch!" cried Delwin, but an ogre planted himself between them before he could pass the medallion. He cursed and jumped between his opponent's legs. As he ran towards Aryanil, he saw the half-elf's opponent lift his sword and prepare to finish him.

With a cry of rage, Delwin jumped forward and landed over the ogre's back. The power of the impact sent them both crashing into the fence.

Aryanil slalomed away from the two and retrieved his weapon. The road was now full of animals and goblins carrying stolen pots and vegetables.

The largest ogre, who had not yet engaged in the battle, slowly made his way through the field while rotating a huge flail. The monster was over seven feet tall and as bulky as a bull. He shouted a command in a rough, snappy language at the goblins, and they immediately converged by the stolen goods and slowly led the animals away from the village. The ogres



roared in excitement as their chief joined them, and they all surrounded Aryanil and Delwin.

Aryanil helped the dwarf up and took the medallion from him. "Stop!" he thundered to the ogres, who actually recoiled for a moment. "You will go no further!" He planted his feet wide and raised his sword high, calling on his power to cast a spell.

Some of the ogres laughed, and the chief advanced swinging the flail faster. Aryanil took a deep breath. "Ara...>"

A lasso dropped over him from behind and bound him tightly across his chest, causing him to catch his breath and interrupting his spell. Aryanil and the ogre chief looked at each other in confusion; then, the rope pulled the half-elf backward so quickly that he dropped his sword and barely held onto the medallion. He shouted in shock and fell down to the ground, but the rope kept dragging him. In a matter of seconds, he was pulled into a yard and then inside a house. Before he was swallowed up by the darkness, he saw Delwin being dragged in a similar fashion and most of the ogres laughing, while two of them ran after them. As soon as the two travellers crossed the threshold, the thick door slammed shut.

"Let us go, ye cowards!" cried Delwin, trying to break free and stand up at the same time.

Four or five men pulled them into the farthest corner of the room and bound them even harder with the ropes.

"Be quiet, you fools!" whispered one of the men in a fear-stricken tone.

A mighty bang from outside shook the door. Another one followed, but the door held. The angry voices of the ogres came from outside, but they were

muffled by the thick walls. A third bang tried the resistance of the door; then, all went quiet.

Delwin hissed at the men to release him and tried to break free again, but they tied him even tighter.

With a thunderous crash, the side window exploded, and an ogre climbed into the house, immediately followed by another.

The men cried in shock but didn't engage the enemies. Instead, they dragged Aryanil and Delwin outside through the back-entrance and slammed the door shut. The noise from inside depicted all too well the havoc the ogres were making in the house.

Soon enough, a horn resounded across the village, and the chief re-called the ogres to him.

Unable to move, Aryanil stared at the monsters as they made their way back with the loot they had taken from the houses and set everything else on fire.

A shrill cry came from the pack, and Aryanil saw a little girl, no older than ten, being dragged from her long plait by one of the ogres. A man and a woman cried in despair and attempted to run after her, but four strong men caught them and pushed them back into a house, locking the door shut.

Aryanil and Delwin pushed and pulled to wriggle free, but their captors did their best to keep them still. Aryanil saw tears striking the faces of more than one of them.

"We'll be back in two nights!" thundered the ogre chief. "Prepare two hundred Gold Stallions if you want to see this child alive!" He made a gesture with his hand and led the whole group away into the fields.

Everybody lay still. Everything was silent except for the sobbing of a few women.

When Delwin felt the hands holding him relax a little, he took his chance. He grabbed the medallion from Aryanil's hands, wriggled free of the ropes and started after the far-off party, shouting his battle cry. He had just picked up his double-axe from the dirty road when a well-aimed rock hit him hard on the back of his head and sent him face down to the ground.

Aryanil cried in rage and felt a throbbing pain at the back of his own head. He tried to reach his companion, but half of the men of the village surrounded him and pointed their bows and pitchforks at him. He forced himself to surrender and let them tie him and gag him.

They dragged him and the unconscious dwarf into the main square and bound them both to a wooden pillar that supported the tavern's balcony. Aryanil checked that the dwarf was still breathing and made sure the gash on his head was not bleeding too badly. He then inspected Delwin's hands and found with relief that he was still holding onto the medallion. With a quick movement, he snatched it and hid it behind the column.

Within a minute, the whole village had gathered in the little square. A number of torches were lit, and under their golden light Aryanil watched the desperate faces of the men and the women who had refused them entry into their homes. The villagers whispered to each other and pointed at Aryanil and Delwin.

"Seven ogres..." said a man.

"They took little Bennie," murmured someone else.

As the name of the kidnapped girl spread across the square, the sobs and the cries of her mother intensified. Aryanil glanced at her. She was

surrounded by many other women who were holding her up and murmuring comforting words.

Half of the men gathered on the other side of the square, closer to Aryanil. The half-elf recognised the thin, balding man who had tried to run after the ogre to save the child. He was shaking, tears trickling down his cheeks. A tall man with a long brown beard approached him and grabbed him by the shoulders.

"We'll get her back, Barnim. I swear."

The balding man nodded and tried to compose himself. More whispering broke out between the men.

"Two hundred Gold Stallions... In two days..."

"We'll need to sell the animals."

"They took so many of them already!"

"They never asked for so much. They were enraged! Two of them were wounded!"

"It was them!" cried someone out loud, catching everyone's attention. He was a short, fat man in his forties with hardly any neck. "It was those two strangers. They provoked the ogres!"

Two hundred faces turned towards Aryanil.

"It is true!" shouted a woman. "They brought this calamity upon us!"

Shouts and cries broke out all around and became so menacing that Aryanil grabbed the medallion with his hands tied behind his back and readied to use his magic.

"It's their fault!" said one. "Have them pay the ransom!"

"Look at them, they're beggars!" said another. "Trade them to the ogres for Bennie. It's them they want! We'll tell them they can have their revenge."

The mob walked towards them and some were starting to raise their improvised weapons when a shrill woman's voice broke out: "Stop this madness!"

A girl on the brink of adulthood ran towards them and placed herself between the two companions and the villagers. She was wearing a white nightgown and a bonnet which hid both her face and her hair. "These... men have fought the ogres! They have tried to defend us! They have done what we were too scared to do! How can you blame them?! Let them join us, and let's raise our weapons and drive those monsters away once and for all!"

All throughout her speech, the villagers had stopped their advance and gone quiet. Most of them looked down at the ground now with an uncomfortable expression on their faces. She tried to catch some sympathetic faces, but nobody looked at her way nor said anything.

"Barnim!" She insisted. "Bennie would be here with us now if we had fought by these gentlemen's side!"

The balding man sobbed loudly and turned away, unable to hold back his tears. The young woman tried again and again to call on each individual person, but nobody acknowledged her. They all waited for her wrath to subside, at which point she stormed off. The villagers looked subdued now.

Aryanil relaxed a little and let go of the medallion, which was already burning his hand. The bearded man addressed Barnim again: "We'll pay the ransom, Barnim. We will find the money. It's the only way."

He then walked over to Aryanil and gave him a long, expressionless look. He seemed to be doing his best to conceal his anger and grief. The half-elf stared back at him with mute determination.

"What do we do with them, sir?" asked one of the young men who had tied them to the pillar.

"We'll leave them here for tonight. They must not go after the ogres. Tomorrow, we'll decide what to do with them." He cast a final glance at the half-elf and walked away.

The square slowly emptied, and the villagers made their way to their homes or what was left of them after the raid. Soon, the only people in the square were Aryanil, the unconscious dwarf, and the young man who had promptly agreed to watch over them. He took his place at the centre of the square and stared at them with a scowl, wielding an old, rusty sword. Aryanil sighed and closed his eyes, trying to get some rest.

Every half an hour, he opened an eye to check on Delwin and on their guard. The dwarf looked to be sound asleep, and the young man showed increasing signs of sleepiness; first he sat down on the ground, next he relaxed against the porch of a house, and finally he put his sword aside.

When the sky started changing colour, giving a hint that dawn wasn't far ahead, the dwarf stirred and woke up.

"What... What is going..." he grumbled.

"Be quiet!" hissed Aryanil. Delwin shook his head and tried to get up, but the ropes restrained him.

"What is going on?" he hissed as he noticed Aryanil tied up next to him. The half-elf turned his head and motioned to the side of the square, where their guard had just closed his eyes and was dozing happily.

Delwin squinted. "Why are we bound? And why does my head hurt?!" he whispered.

Aryanil filled him in with all that had happened since he'd passed out.

The dwarf did his best to keep his voice down while he cursed the ancestors of every single person in the village. "How dare they hit and bind us after we risked our lives to save their necks?!"

The guard stirred visibly, and Aryanil elbowed the dwarf in the ribs. The two of them stared at him in silence until they were sure he was still asleep.

A thought crossed Delwin's mind which made him jump. He turned to Aryanil and whispered: "Where is the medallion?! I had it on me when they knocked me out!"

"I have it."

Delwin breathed out in relief. "Let's get out of here. I've had enough of these men," he whispered.

"But what about the child? It's our fault they kidnapped her; we can't leave her to her fate."

Delwin groaned and was about to retort when a dark figure appeared from a side road and silently walked towards them. Aryanil recognised the lady who had defended them from the villagers just hours ago. She had swapped her nightdress for a pair of loosely fitted trousers and had lost the bonnet, revealing a mane of golden hair combed into two tight plaits.

She ensured that the guard was asleep before stealthily walking over to them. Aryanil studied her face in the moonlight. She looked young, but the

signs of her youth were fading, revealing a lean, pale face, dotted with many little freckles clustered around her nose.

She cast an uneasy glance at the dwarf, then turned to Aryanil and smiled slightly. "I brought you water," she whispered. She removed a waterskin from her belt and bent down to pour its contents into Aryanil's mouth.

The half-elf accepted it gladly. "What's your name?" he asked when she stepped back.

"Ramell," she mumbled. She offered the waterskin to Delwin, but the dwarf shook his head haughtily.

"Thank you for defending us earlier, Ramell," said Aryanil.

The girl blushed slightly; then, she looked straight into Aryanil's eyes.

"Who are you, and why did you come here?"

"My name is Aryanil, and he is Delwin," replied the half-elf with a smile.

"We are from the Red Mountains and came upon your village while travelling to the South Coast."

Her eyes widened at the mention of the Red Mountains. "Why did you attack the ogres? You were greatly outnumbered!"

Delwin snorted. "We're not cowards like yer people."

Aryanil shot him an annoyed glance, but the dwarf didn't notice. "We thought the villagers would join us," explained Aryanil. "We saw what a great resistance they put up against the goblins."

The lady sighed and relaxed a little. "We have been dealing with goblins for decades, since before I was born. They used to come once or twice a month in small groups of two or three and steal what they could: vegetables, eggs, a few chickens. We had no issues driving them away."



Aryanil nodded.

"That time has passed, now. Four years back, the first ogres came. They ordered the goblins around, treating them like scum, and they stole and plundered and... killed."

"Ye should have fought and killed them back," remarked Delwin.

"We did!" snapped Ramell, then put a hand over her mouth, and they all turned towards the guard, but he was still asleep. "We did fight," she whispered angrily at Delwin. "We fought and drove them away, at first. You don't understand ogres. They are merciless, horrible creatures. They came back in larger packs, with hordes of goblins at their heels. There was nothing we could do. They plundered the village, set the houses on fire and... they killed my brother."

Aryanil felt the urge to place a hand on her shoulder, but the tight ropes prevented him from moving anything but his fingers.

She sniffed and continued. "Since then, they've all stopped fighting. They will repel the goblins' incursions, but if a single ogre shows up, they will hide in their houses and wait to be robbed. We are all farmers, and we own little more than what we grow and the few animals we breed. The goblins know it. There's no reason for them to break into our houses when they can find all they're looking for in the barns and the stalls." Ramell went quiet and stared at the wooden boards of the terrace.

"Why have you come here, Ramell?" asked Aryanil softly.

She raised her head and met his eyes. "I've come here to make a deal with you. I will free you and lead you out of the village if you swear to chase those monsters and take Bennie back."

Delwin huffed and shook his head.

"It is dangerous," said Aryanil calmly, "and not just for us. When they see us, they could use Bennie as a hostage."

"It's just as dangerous if we wait. This is the second time they have kidnapped somebody. A few months past, they took a little boy and asked a hundred gold pieces for ransom. We sold everything we could spare to raise the sum, including our most precious belongings, but we were one day late delivering the gold."

She fiddled nervously with her waterskin. "Alyn was given back to us, but they had broken one of his legs and one arm, and he was traumatised beyond measure."

Aryanil clenched his hands into fists and pulled against the ropes, which creaked. Even Delwin went pale.

Ramell sighed and moved closer to Aryanil. "What is your answer? Will you accept my help in exchange for rescuing the child?"

Aryanil looked straight into her resolute, brown eyes. "Yes, we will get her back."

Delwin groaned, and Ramell broke into a broad, sweet smile. "We do not know exactly where the ogres live," she said while removing a knife from her belt and starting to work on the ropes that bound Aryanil's chest. "But the goblins are said to dwell in the Shrub Forest, which is east of Barniville, a day's walk from here."

"They must be walking slowly, given the load and the animals they stole," said Aryanil, turning towards the dwarf. "Also, such a caravan must leave an easy trail to follow."

"Do you have a plan?" asked Ramell excitedly. "How do we free Bennie without fighting all of them?"

"We?" said Aryanil and Delwin at the same time.

"Of course! I am coming with you, that is part of the deal."

Delwin snorted. "That's no place for a young lady. It won't help us having ye around."

"Delwin is right," remarked Aryanil more gently. "It will be dangerous, we can't risk your life as well."

She stopped cutting the rope and stood up in front of them. "If you don't take me with you, there is no deal," she said resolutely.

"Fine," snorted Delwin, shrugging. "We don't need no help anyway."

She shot him an angry stare. "Suit yourself. You can stay here and rot a little longer." She returned her knife to her belt. "I'll be back before dawn. See that you have changed your mind, or stand to whatever the master of the village decides to do with you."

When neither of them tried to stop her, she turned on her heels and walked away into the darkness.

"Feisty girl, that one," commented Aryanil with a smile.

Delwin shook his head. "Let's free ourselves and get out of this accursed village."

Aryanil stretched his fingers until he met the medallion. He touched the stone, let its power engulf him and conjured a spell to cut the ropes that bound his hands. The laces gave in easily, and he quickly tore them off, freeing himself and Delwin.

"We'll need our weapons," the dwarf whispered, squinting at the centre of the square.

"They are next to the sleeping guard. I'll go get them, don't move." Aryanil slunk over to the other side of the square and carefully picked up the weapons. He waved to Delwin, and the two walked into a side road.

There was nobody around, but the faint noises that came from the nearby houses told them that some of the villagers were awake. They reached the edge of the village, retrieved their rucksacks and broke into a fast march.

"I can see the tracks," said Aryanil and took the lead.

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"Ye're convinced, then," said Delwin. "Ye really want to follow the ogres and rescue the child?"

"It's our fault they have kidnapped her, Delw. We enraged the ogres, and they're taking it out on the girl."

"That would never have happened, had those nitwits of villagers not got in the way!"

Aryanil shrugged and stared at the horizon, which was becoming lighter and lighter as dawn drew closer. "I can't honestly walk away from them now," he said after a while.

"Aye. And how do ye plan to rescue her from five ogres and Rhotgar knows how many goblins without getting her killed?"

Aryanil scratched his stubble and snapped: "I don't know... yet. Be useful and think about it while we walk, will you?"

They marched in silence until the sun was up and shining, its golden light bathing the Heath and highlighting the footprints of both the thieves and

the animals. When they met a very small stream of water that crossed their path, they stopped to rest and have some lunch.

"They are going faster than I expected," said Aryanil, gloomily. "These prints are half a day's old."

"They cannot hide in this place," shrugged Delwin. He removed his pipe from his backpack and lit it up.

Aryanil stood up and paced around. He couldn't clear the image from his head of Ramell's smiling face when he had agreed to save the child. Yet, how was he going to rescue the little girl? He needed a way to carry her away from the ogres before they could hurt her or use her as a hostage.

He pulled the medallion out of his shirt and studied the red gem. *If I could conjure up a spell to lift the girl off the ground and transport her away...* His knowledge of the language of Magic was limited to the few words his mother had taught him. When she was young, she had studied to become a cleric; so she had come into contact with a few mages.

He picked up a small, round pebble, placed it on his palm and whispered: "*Leva.*"

The rock trembled for a moment, then levitated a few inches above his palm before falling back down. Aryanil took a deep breath, already feeling dizzy.

Next, he pulled out the medallion, pressed it against his hand and readied to cast the spell again. "*Leva,*" he uttered.

The stone shot right up like a dart and disappeared into the sky before Aryanil, crying in surprise, released the spell. Delwin turned towards him, cast him an inquisitive look and went back to his pipe. Aryanil stared at the sky in excitement.

*I need something bigger and farther away to test it out.* He looked around, but there was nothing on the grassland other than a few, short, dry shrubs. He huffed and fiddled with the medallion. *Maybe my rucksack? Hmm, not quite as heavy...*

A sudden idea formed in his head and made him grin. He took a deep breath, closed his fist around the medallion and extended a hand towards Delwin. After gathering his power, he whispered: "*Leva!*"

Nothing happened. The dwarf breathed happily from the tip of his pipe and exhaled a perfect, purple ring of smoke. Aryanil focused on the stream of energy that was going into the spell and intensified it.

Delwin shivered. He checked the ground under his feet, then scratched his bottom and sat down cross-legged.

The half-elf gritted his teeth and clenched the medallion harder. A sudden jolt of energy made him quiver. Excited, he poured all of it into the spell.

Delwin felt another tingle around his lower legs. "I think I caught flees in that damn, dirty village," he grumbled and checked his leg again. Without warning, the ground disappeared from under his feet, and he shot upwards into the sky like an arrow. He cried in shock, feeling his body being pulled up by some invisible hand closed tightly around his belly button. Five, ten, fifteen feet he flew up from the ground, before Aryanil terminated the spell.

Delwin cried even harder when the force abandoned him, and he crashed face down on the soft, dry grass.

"That was awesome!" cheered the half-elf, putting the medallion back around his neck and rejoining the dwarf.

Delwin groaned in pain and raised his head; his reddened eyes fixed on the half-elf.

Aryanil frowned. "You have some grass stuck in your beard."

With a roar, Delwin pushed himself up and jumped on the half-elf, punching and kicking anything he could reach.

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Despite having spent most of the night awake, they decided against stopping to catch up on sleep, for as Delwin put it: "If they reach the Shrub Forest or wherever their lair is, our chances will get slimmer."

"Don't you worry. I think I can fly her out of their hands, from up to a hundred feet away," said Aryanil cheerfully.

Delwin shot him a withering glance but didn't start the argument again. He was positive the half-elf would grow a black eye by the next day, and the thought was enough to appease his anger.

They realised luck was not on their side in the late afternoon, when they caught sight of a vast, dark-green grove which extended as far as the distant mountains.

"That must be the Shrub Forest," said Aryanil. "And I think the tracks lead straight inside. We are late."

"Do ye know anything else about ogres?" asked Delwin after a while. "How many of them shall we expect?"

"They live in tribes," answered Aryanil, struggling to bring his father's teachings to mind. "A tribe may be several hundred individuals strong."

Delwin stopped and glared at him with his mouth slightly open.

"But it's unlikely for the whole tribe to dwell in the same place," the half-elf added hurriedly. "A tribe has a single chieftain which is usually the strongest of the gursals, for he has to suppress all the insurrections. The tribe is further subdivided into packs. A pack has between three and fifteen ogres, including the pack leader, who has a mark on his chin and reports to the chieftain."

"That doesn't help much," grumbled Delwin.

They reached the Shrub Forest at sunset. The forest presented itself as a thick layer of short and tall shrubs, all clustered together in a dense, uneven lattice. There were spruces, rhubarbs, blackthorns, hollies, junipers, and other shrubs or small trees whose names Aryanil could not recall.

"They could hardly come up with a more fitting name," said Delwin, taking a look at the bleak forest, whose members hardly reached six feet in height.

"Here's the path they followed," said Aryanil. "Come."

The trail was wide and marked by the feet of a large number of both individuals and animals. It had been dug into the thick under-brush and looked like it had been trodden for years. Aryanil and Delwin readied their weapons and proceeded slowly, keeping both eyes and ears out. The forest was very quiet. With the exception of the rhythmic gusts of wind cracking the branches of the shrubs, there was no noise.

"Where are the birds? Where are the animals?" whispered Aryanil, frowning.

As they delved deeper and deeper into the woods, the shrubs left space for some sparse trees to grow. For over an hour they walked in the dimming



light of the setting sun, never encountering anybody, yet flinching at every little sound.

"Look," said Aryanil, raising an arm to stop the dwarf. "There's a mark on that tree, and rubbish over there. We must be close."

They took one more step, and the forest exploded with noise. The shrubs all around them were torn apart by an army of goblins storming into the path from all directions. Aryanil and Delwin yelled in surprise and raised their weapons. Before they could take another step, however, they were forced back to back and surrounded.

The goblins were partly naked, with yellow paint on their skin and dirt on their faces. They all handled one or more weapons, which ranged from well-made lances to rusty pitchforks.

"Stop!" yelled one of them, struggling to overcome the noise made by the others. He was a slightly taller goblin who looked like he had fallen head-first into a large bucket of yellow paint.

Delwin thrust his shield forward to push away the tips of the lances with which the goblins were eagerly prodding them.

"Who are you?!" cried the yellow goblin, trying to make his way through his fellows.

*They must have followed us since we entered the forest,* thought Aryanil. He scanned the area quickly. There were close to thirty goblins around them, and even if they found a way through the circle of enemies, how could they possibly save the child without being spotted?

"Thieves!" cried a goblin in response to the question.

"Murderers. Kill them!"

"Send them to the chief!" cried another.

"Send them to the chief! Send them to the chief!" many cried in chorus.

Before the yellow goblin could say anything more, the little army parted to clear the way, and the goblins from behind marched forward, forcing the two companions to advance or be trampled over. The army of goblins led them quickly up the path, making so much noise that Aryanil wondered how they had managed to ambush them.

"What do we do now?!" hissed Delwin, struggling to keep up.

"I don't know... thinking of a plan."

The path wound both left and right and became steadily wider and dirtier. The signs of a possibly permanent settlement became more evident as they marched along. Small shacks of rough-hewn, wooden boards sprouted between the trees at random intervals and became progressively more frequent. They met a few goblins on the way, both males and females, who stared at them in surprise.

Suddenly, the road turned sharply and ended in a wide, busy clearing. All the goblins stopped in their tracks. Like the square of a town, the clearing was surrounded by many wooden huts, both small and big, clustered all together like mushrooms. Ten pointed tents of sown leather terminating in a yellow spear's head took the centre of the square. The tents were set in a semicircle, and all around them were close to thirty ogres. On the outskirts of the clearing were over a hundred goblins, and they all looked like they were trying to stay as far away from the ogres as they could. Two whole cows were being charred whole in the very middle of the square.

The commotion of the companions' arrival caused many heads to turn and glare at them. Now that they had reached the village, the goblins seemed

reluctant to speak or move forward. Even the one covered in yellow paint was hesitant, but two of his comrades hastily pushed him forward until the eyes of all the ogres fell on him.

"Two trespassers!" he squeaked. "We bring them to the chief to hear his council."

Aryanil's eyes immediately fell on the large, yellow pavilion in the middle, under which a massive, green-skinned ogre was resting on a leather couch. He was drinking from a tankard and playing with a knife.

The chieftain, who had looked annoyed at the irruption, was now watching them with interest. His forehead, like those of all the other ogres in the village, was marked with a yellow symbol. Unlike the other ogres though, his face was also scarred by two dark lines which, starting from his eyes, met down under his chin.

"Look!" whispered Delwin and pointed at the edge of the circle of tents, where a young girl was gagged and tied up to a pole. The girl's face was stricken by tears, but she wasn't weeping now; she was staring at them with big, red eyes.

Aryanil looked at her and nodded curtly, trying to communicate that everything was going to be fine.

"Who are you to dare enter the territories of the Hukarash tribe?!" thundered the ogre chief in a loud, coarse voice.

Delwin and Aryanil turned to face the main pavilion.

The chief put his tankard on the ground. Immediately, one of the goblins standing by the sides of the tent ran forward to pick it up, then scuttled away.

Before either of the two travellers had time to answer, an ogre with a blue stain on his chin stepped forward and addressed the chief. Aryanil recognised him as the leader of the pack that had attacked the village the night before.

"These men come from the village of farmers," he stated aloud. "They tried to oppose us, and they wounded two of my ogres!"

Delwin cursed.

"Great, now they know we're here to save the girl," he hissed to the half-elf. "How do we get out of this one?"

"I've got a plan," Aryanil whispered back.

"Fighters among the farmers," sneered the chieftain. "You are not men though. You smell different. Answer to me: have you brought the ransom for *its* head?!"

He raised his hand and threw his knife. The little dagger flew towards the pole where the girl was tied up and plunged into the wood, a mere inch above her head. Both Aryanil and Delwin cried in shock.

"So you are here for the child!" thundered the chieftain, complacently.

Aryanil stepped forward and cried: "I challenge you to fight for the control of this tribe!"

The entire clearing went quiet, and Delwin groaned loudly. Even the chieftain was taken aback for a moment; then, he smiled deeply and burst out laughing. His coarse, rattling laugh filled the whole clearing, and he was soon joined by the roars of all the other ogres. The goblins didn't laugh but whispered to each other and moved a bit farther from the two travellers.

As soon as it started, the laugh ended. "You dare challenge me?!" the tribe leader yelled.

"I do! And if I win, your tribe shall answer to me. They will no longer attack Barniville or any other village in the Heath. Also, the child will be released, unharmed."

Without warning, the chieftain rose from his couch and strode towards Aryanil. The goblins shrank back, and Delwin gripped harder on the hilt of his shield. Aryanil didn't flinch but looked straight into the huge ogre's eyes as the monster approached him.

The chieftain stopped three feet before him. His face twisted into a deep sneer and he shouted: "If you lose, you will die slowly and painfully. The midget will follow, and then the child and every single person in your village of farmers."

Aryanil opened his mouth to answer, but his tongue was too dry to use. He swallowed and squeaked: "Deal."

The chieftain turned around and roared something at his tribe. The clearing immediately exploded with activity. Most of the ogres arranged themselves in a large semicircle and started clapping their right fist into their left palm, rhythmically. The goblins by the tents hastened to clear the space between the two roasting fires and scuttled into their huts by the edge of the square. Two of the ogres approached Aryanil and extended their hands.

"Weapons," one croaked. "Fight is bare-handed."

Aryanil reluctantly surrendered his bow, his quiver, and his sword. At the same time, the whole army of goblins pointed their blades at Delwin and prodded him to move away from the semicircle. Two ogres took his weapons

and planted themselves on each side to prevent him from intervening. Delwin cast a significant and worried look at the half-elf.

Aryanil took a deep breath and put his hand in the flap of his coat to grab the medallion. It wasn't there.

With a strike of fear, he touched his chest and then fingered his pockets with both hands. The two ogres that had taken his weapons grabbed him by the shoulders and pushed him into the circle.

"Wait!" he cried and looked for Delwin, who pointed to himself to indicate he had the medallion. Aryanil tried to reach the dwarf, but the two ogres blocked him and pushed him back into the middle.

Delwin, who had only now understood the half-elf's plan, groaned and put his face in his hands. He was completely surrounded. Even if he managed to throw the medallion at Aryanil, there was no way the ogres wouldn't notice. Even worse, they might catch it.

Suddenly, the ogres stopped clapping, and they roared at the sky. Aryanil turned around quickly and found the chieftain staring at him with greedy eyes. He had never met such a big gurschal in his whole life. With a towering height of eight feet and his squared muscles, he was a beast. Aryanil started sweating and shaking slightly.

*I have elven reflexes, he told himself, and I have my magic.*

The chieftain smirked and advanced confidently; then, he jumped forward and tried to catch him with his huge open hand. Aryanil jerked backwards to avoid it.

The ogre covered the distance in one step and closed his other hand into a fist. Aryanil jumped backwards again; he had reached the edge of the

circle of ogres. The ogre behind him grabbed him by his shirt and pushed him forward, hard.

The chieftain had expected it, for he lunged forward and tried to grab his shoulders, but Aryanil bent his knees as fast as he could and jumped to the side. He immediately lunged forward and aimed a kick at the ogre's side.

With surprising speed, the chieftain turned around and stopped the kick with his open palm. He almost closed his hand around it, but Aryanil jerked back just in time and moved to the centre of the circle.

Shouts and cackles came from the surrounding ogres, but he was too focused on the fight to understand whether they were laughing at him or inciting their leader.

Aryanil caught his breath, forced the fear out of his mind and ran towards his opponent, shouting his battle cry. The chieftain stopped and opened his arms in an inviting gesture. Aryanil raised his fist to the ogres' face level and ran straight into his arms.

The enemy attempted to grab him, but Aryanil bent down just in time and punched him in the leg. He was aiming for his kneecap but instead he hit the muscle. The blow shook the ogre's leg only slightly but made him roar in anger. He tried to grab Aryanil by the neck but only managed to get some of his long hair.

The half-elf scrambled back up and jumped out of reach. The ogre dropped the lock of hair and ran towards him.

Aryanil dodged the first two kicks and parried the third punch with both his forearms, but the blow was so strong that he fell down on his knee. With a cry of glee, the ogre bent and grabbed him by the neck.

The half-elf tried desperately to wriggle free, but the ogre's large fingers tightened around his throat, and he was soon gasping for air.

Acclaimed by the cries of his tribe, the chieftain single-handedly lifted the half-elf off his feet. Aryanil grabbed the ogre's arm with both hands to support his own weight and kicked wildly.

Nothing worked. The chieftain's arm was long enough to avoid the half-elf's kicks and strong enough to hold him still. Desperate for air, Aryanil extended his palm towards the ogre's face and mouthed: "Aras!"

No sound came from his lips, but a wave of red flames, fuelled by the adrenaline in his body, rushed out of his palm and engulfed the enemy's face. The ogre immediately dropped him and jerked backwards, crying in pain.

Aryanil collapsed to the ground and took a shaky breath, coughing heavily. The clearing went silent for a moment; then, it exploded with shouts and cries of anger.

Delwin watched transfixed as more than a few ogres broke the circle and advanced towards Aryanil with their weapons drawn. The chieftain roared louder than everybody and forced the ogres back to their places. His face was scarred and his eyes wet with tears, but the damage was not deep. Aryanil stumbled back up and tried to pull himself together, still holding his throat.

The ogre chief rubbed his eyes and snarled at him with pure hatred. With a wild cry, he jerked forward and engaged the half-elf with a series of fast blows. Aryanil dodged all of them, skirting to the side whenever he moved too close to the circle of ogres. The blows were driven by anger and



easy to predict, but the spell was taking its toll on him, making him feel sick and dimming his vision.

Taking advantage of the ogre's rage, Aryanil counterattacked at every blind spot and managed to score a few hits, but they did little against the huge opponent, who didn't even notice. Soon enough, the ogre recovered his wits, and when Aryanil punched him on the side of his ribs, he grabbed the half-elf's wrist and pulled him forward.

Aryanil cried in surprise and tried to skirt away, but the chieftain blocked his shoulder and pushed him against the ground. "No more tricks, wizard!" he shouted. He planted one of his mighty feet over Aryanil's shoulder and pulled both his arms backwards.

The half-elf crashed face down into the hard soil. Delwin's curse was lost in the cheering of the crowd. It was clear Aryanil had no chance without the medallion. He thought quickly of the alternatives. *If I intervene, the fight will be forfeited, and they will all attack us. If I throw the medallion, they might do the same or even catch it before Aryanil does.*

The ogre chief hardened his grip around Aryanil's wrists and forced his palms outwards. "Now you will pay for what you dared do to me!"

The chieftain twisted his opponent's arm farther up, and Aryanil cried in pain. He tried to pull away, to kick him or to break free, but it was no use: he was at the ogre's mercy. The words of magic eluded him, and all he could feel was the pain of his joints, which were about to break.

The chieftain sneered in pleasure and pulled his right arm up. With a deafening cry and a loud crack, Aryanil's arm bent into an unnatural angle, and an agonising pain shot from his right shoulder.

The ogre laughed heartily and dropped him. The other ogres roared in approval, and the chieftain turned the half-elf over with his boot. Aryanil stared at the huge monster in shock, holding his right shoulder with his good arm.

The ogre chief sneered and raised his massive boot right above the half-elf's face.

Suddenly, a very different roar filled the clearing, attracting everybody's attention. Aryanil didn't turn to see what it was, for he could now feel what the dwarf was doing in the back of his own mind. He rolled over, ignored a fit of pain in his shoulder and raised his good arm.

The two ogres who were standing on both sides of the dwarf were now on the ground, and Delwin had jumped into the circle of enemies.

"Catch!" he cried. The medallion flew past the chieftain's reach, and Aryanil caught it with his good hand. A wide stream of energy rushed into his body like a river of steam, reinvigorating his muscles and dulling the pain in his shoulder.

The ogre bellowed in confusion and jumped forward, extending his arm to grab Aryanil's neck. With hardly any effort, the half-elf raised his good arm and parried the attack. The two hands clashed with a crunching sound; then, flames erupted from the medallion and enveloped the ogre's arm.

The chieftain yelled and jerked backwards, shaking his hand in an attempt to extinguish the fire. Aryanil closed his fist around the medallion, jumped forward and punched the ogre straight in the face.

With a dull thud, the chieftain's eyes rolled backwards, and he collapsed to the ground. The ogres' screams died all at once.

Aryanil slowly looked up, panting. His hand was still firmly holding the medallion, which had started to burn his palm, but he ignored it. Delwin was now by his side.

"I have won!" bellowed Aryanil to the crowd, surprised by the strength of his own voice. "You will now answer to me!"

So great was the shock of the ogres that for a while they simply stared at him, bewildered. Then, without warning, they raised their heads to sky, roared in rage and charged all together.

Delwin ran towards them, slid between their legs and raced towards the goblins that were holding his weapons. At his sudden approach, the goblins dropped the weapons and ran for their lives.

Aryanil stood still, waiting as the ogres ran towards him. At the last moment, he jumped to the side and shoved his elbow into the skull one of them before the ogre realised what had hit him. At the other end of the clearing, Aryanil could feel that Delwin had retrieved their weapons but was almost surrounded by three of the ogres. The half-elf spun around, kicked the closest ogre out of his way and ran towards the dwarf. Hoping that Delwin could hear his thoughts, he jumped towards one of the enemies, climbed over him and tossed the medallion to his companion.

The gem flew towards the dwarf at the same time as Delwin threw Aryanil's sword towards him. Aryanil caught it with his good hand and plunged it straight into the shoulder of the ogre he was using as a ladder. As he landed on the ground, the price of the medallion's use hit him, and he felt he was about to faint. He swung his sword around wildly, trying to keep the many enemies at bay, while the square and the ogres became blurry.

Delwin felt a pang of fear from Aryanil, and he ran to his side, swinging his axe and crashing his shield into any ogre that tried to stop him. Back to back, the two companions fought what felt like an endless stream of enemies. As they had done once before, they passed the medallion between each other whenever one side was more in need.

"There's too many!" cried Aryanil, who was at his limits, both with and without the medallion.

"Thank yer stupid plan!" shouted Delwin, who was defending his ground from five ogres. No matter how many fell, the monsters kept pushing their way in, climbing over their fallen fellows and closing all ways out.

"How many left?" cried Delwin.

"Half!" yelled Aryanil, who was holding the medallion with his injured hand and spinning his sword with his good one. Whenever the blade hit an enemy, it emitted a gust of fire of its own accord. Despite the power of the medallion, he could do nothing but step backwards at every attack. The prolonged use of the artefact was messing with his sensations, and everything around him looked red.

Suddenly, a large ochre-skinned ogre broke Aryanil's defence with a swing of his mace and kicked him in his chest, sending him to the ground. With a roar of victory, he raced towards the half-elf and raised his mace to finish him off.

Aryanil tried to roll out of the way, but he wasn't fast enough. The weapon fell down and crashed into the ground, next to Aryanil's head.

The ogre growled in pain, massaging the side of his head where a well aimed rock had just hit him. In a matter of seconds, a shower of pebbles flew towards them. Many of the ogres cried in surprise and turned around.

From the outer edges of the clearing, over a hundred goblins were shouting and throwing stones at them. Some with slings, the others with their bare hands. Some of the ogres bellowed and charged at the goblins, but they were taken down or driven back by the goblins' fire before they could reach them.

Delwin raised his shield, ran over to Aryanil and pulled him up. "Let's get out of here!"

But there was no escape. The stream of stones came from all directions, trapping both them and the ogres in the very centre of the square. The two companions ran over to one of the fires and took cover behind the roasting cow.

Chaos was spreading in the clearing. The tents collapsed under the incessant rain of stones. The ogres were at a loss. Many sought to get revenge on the goblins, but those who tried did not make it alive, for none had shields with them.

A few ogres managed to escape the clearing from the same path from where the two companions had arrived. The rest focused on the two of them.

Delwin took the medallion and dealt with them, one after the other, until they were all dead. The dwarf cried in victory for a moment; then, he jumped backwards and raised his shield, for the shower of stones did not stop.

"We need to get out of here!" he cried.

"We can't leave without the kid!" said Aryanil. The child was still bound to the wooden poll, stones flying inches from her face.

"We'll never get over there alive!"

Excited by their apparent victory, the goblins were quickly taking control of their village and picking up their weapons. Delwin's shield resounded more and more often as the fire concentrated on where they stood.

"Give me the medallion!" said Aryanil with a sudden idea. He took it, focused the last bit of his power and conjured a spell. A red spherical shield appeared around them. The stones that reached it were bounced back and caught fire. At the half-elf's command, the shield increased in size until the whole circle where he had fought with the ogre chief was enveloped by the red barrier.

Many of the goblins cried in fear at the advancing magical shield, and the rain of stones stopped immediately.

"Get the child!" hissed Aryanil to the dwarf. With a magically enhanced booming voice, Aryanil addressed the goblins. "The ogres are finished! You are now free! Your village and your lives are yours to command." His vision went dark for a moment, and he had to rely on his sword to hold his weight. Clenching his fist around the medallion, he looked at the startled goblins and added: "If you attack Barniville or any other village again, we'll be back!"

Delwin and the girl joined him at the centre of the clearing. The dwarf had picked up an empty sack on the way. Aryanil forced a smile at her frightened face.

Delwin walked over to the ogre chief, raised his battle-axe and cut his head clean.

"What did you do that for!" cried Aryanil in shock. The dwarf put the head in the sack and walked over to them. "Proof!" he said.

The three marched out of the clearing, struggling to walk steadily. Once the goblins were out of sight, they broke into a run.

Delwin took the lead, glancing uneasily at the other two. The girl was shaking and stumbling, but she seemed determined to get as far away as possible from the goblins' village. Aryanil looked like he was about to collapse. His eyes were bloodshot, and sweat was running down his chin, his temples and his hands. His right arm was limp, and his left was swollen, with all the veins sticking out. A trickle of blood stained his hand, which was still holding the medallion.

"Put the medallion away," Delwin whispered to him. Aryanil shook his head. He felt the medallion was the only reason why he was still alive. If he let go of it, he had no idea how much energy would abandon his body.

They ran in silence until the forest turned into a field of sparse shrubs, through which they could see the Heath in the distance.

"Enough," said Aryanil. "We need to rest." They stopped for a moment to recover their breath.

"There," said Delwin. He led them out of the path and into a small clearing surrounded by thick shrubs.

"Will they find us here?" asked the girl, opening her mouth to speak for the first time.

"No," said Aryanil with a forced smile. "You're safe here." He collapsed to the ground and took a deep breath. He could barely distinguish the figures of the shrubs in the red sea that lay before his eyes. He also couldn't feel his body, except for his left hand, which burned as if it were on fire.

Delwin crouched next to him and examined his right shoulder. "I think the bone is intact," he said, "but it's out of its socket, and the muscle might be torn."

"Can you put it back in place?" asked Aryanil, trying his best to sound casual.

"I'll try. This might hurt." He grabbed the shoulder with his sturdy hands and yanked his arm forward.

Aryanil felt a distinct click and a shot of pain which made him cling even harder onto the medallion. A spring of flames erupted from his hands and set the dry grass on fire.

The girl shrieked in surprise and jerked backwards.

"Shush!" hissed Delwin, stepping over the fire to put it out.

Aryanil smiled drowsily at the girl. "Your name is Bennie, right?"

She nodded.

"I have a very important task for you, Bennie. You need to stay awake and guard our sleep. If anybody comes close, wake us instantly. Deal?"

She nodded more determinedly. Aryanil opened his bloody hand and let Delwin peel the medallion from his skin. A long-lasting stream of energy abandoned his body, and the pain from his dislocated shoulder came back all at once. He tried to say something, to cry for help, to breathe, but it was all too much effort. Everything went dark.

Delwin ensured the half-elf was still breathing before hiding the medallion under his shirt and sitting next to him. Bennie and the dwarf exchanged an uneasy look. She did not seem particularly happy to be in his company, and he felt the same.



"Thank you for saving me," she said awkwardly.

Delwin nodded.

"Where are my mum and my dad? Are they all right?"

"Yes," he said gruffly. "They are waiting for you in the village. Everybody is alive."

She took a breath of relief; then, she looked around warily. "When are we going back? And what was that medallion?"

Delwin shot her an angry look which made her recoil. "Ye heard Aryanil. We'll leave when he's able to walk. Now, listen to me. Ye must never mention the medallion and never ask anybody about it. If ye do, yer family and yer village will be in danger."

She gaped at him in fear, and for a moment he was scared she might flee. He tried to smile at her but wasn't sure whether it helped. "Look at him," he said. "He risked his life to save ye. If ye tell anybody about the medallion, the ogres will come back to look for him. Ye must tell nobody, not even yer parents, do ye understand?"

She nodded quickly. Delwin sighed in relief and rested his back against a sturdy, thick shrub. Then, he pulled a waterskin and some dried meat from his sack and handed them to her. The fatigue from the battle and the energy drained by the medallion were heavy on his eyelids, which despite his efforts, slowly closed and cut the world out.

\* \* \*

Delwin became slowly aware of something tugging on his coat. He turned around, hoping it would go away, but a young voice whispered something in his ear.

"Sir, it's dawning. There are goblins on the path."

His eyes burst open and fixed upon the little girl that was leaning over him. "Have they found us?" he croaked, searching the ground for his battle-axe.

"No sir. Not yet, but they will if they keep searching the forest."

Delwin stood up and looked around. The faint, dawning sunlight was bathing the forest in an eerie, white light. He turned around to check on Aryanil and found him still asleep. He gently shook him to wake him up.

Aryanil woke suddenly and tried to sit upright, but a jolt of pain in his right shoulder made him groan and fall back. His whole body ached more than ever, and he was feeling both very weak and sick.

"We have to go," whispered Delwin. "Can ye stand?"

Aryanil nodded and let the dwarf help him up. "Water," he murmured, and the girl hurriedly handed him the waterskin. After quenching his thirst, Aryanil smiled at her. "You have done well, Bennie."

The three left the clearing straight after but did not rejoin the main path. Instead, they cleared their own trail through the shrubs until they reached the edge of the woods and entered the sun-bathed grasslands. They proceeded faster from then on, and even though they kept looking around to make sure they were not being followed, they felt the worst had passed.

Bennie became all the more cheerful, and she took the lead, telling them she would lead them back to the village, yet asking them how far it was every so often.

Delwin, who was carrying both their sacks and the ogre's head, was the last in the line. He hissed at Aryanil to fall behind and then whispered to him: "The girl has seen the medallion, and so have two hundred goblins and the ogres who have escaped."

"I know," sighed Aryanil. "It couldn't be helped."

"It could if ye'd checked yer pockets before challenging the ogre chief!"

Aryanil shrugged, and the shoulder gave him another fit of pain. "I wouldn't worry much about the goblins. They were so afraid of magic they will think twice before trying to hunt us down. As for the girl, we need to make her promise to not tell anybody."

"I have already," Delwin replied, and Aryanil stared at him in surprise. "She seems smarter than all the villagers put together, so I hope she follows my advice," snorted Delwin. "Yet, talk to her again if ye must."

The rest of the trip was uneventful. They stopped twice to rest and to dine on the little provisions they had left. At sunset, they caught sight of Barniville.

\* \* \*

Bennie cheered and ran ahead, crying the names of her mother and her father. Aryanil and Delwin hastened up the road, and by the time they reached the first few houses, a large crowd was waiting for them.

A woman screamed and rushed forward. She hugged the little girl tightly to her chest and sobbed on her shoulder. More women gathered around her, and the men stared at the two companions, dumbstruck.

A balding man stepped forward and cried: "You saved her! You saved my daughter!"

Delwin shifted uncomfortably and looked away from the man's tear-stricken face. Aryanil recognised the girl's father. He looked much more gaunt and haggard than he had two nights before.

Before he could say anything, a tall, bearded man with the complexion of a woodcutter made his way through the crowd, his eyes fixed on them. Immediately, seven armed men were by his side.

"What have you done?!" the leader of the village hissed.

"We saved her life," answered Aryanil, startled by the accusing tone.

The bearded man stepped forward and pointed at Aryanil's chest, his eyes narrowed by anger and fear. "You took her away from them! You attacked them and insulted them! Now they will seek revenge upon all of us!"

Delwin snorted, and the bearded man turned sharply towards him. "You think this is a joke? They will be back! They will bring the whole tribe with them this time! They will kill us all for your impudence! They will..."

"They won't do none of that!" snapped Delwin, raising his voice. He opened the sack he was carrying and turned it upside down. The severed head of the ogre chief rolled across the dirt road and stopped by the man's feet, leaving a trail of dark blood.

Many of the men jerked back in shock, and one of them yelled. The bearded man stared at the head in astonishment. The dark lines that mark a tribe chief were clearly imprinted on his face.

"The tribe doesn't exist any more," said Delwin loudly. "We took care of them."

The words took a few moments to sink in; then, without warning, the whole village exploded with cheers and laughter. The two travellers were welcomed into the village like heroes: their sacks were carried for them, a bath was prepared for them, and the leader of the village apologised openly to them. The village healer took care of Aryanil's wounds. She was an old crone with a small house – that she used as an infirmary – which opened onto the main square the village. She did not have cleric powers, and her medicine mainly consisted of the application of herb poultices, bandages and whatever she could do with her wrinkly, expert hands. Within minutes, the half-elf's shoulder was put back in its place and bound tightly with linen strips.

"Drink wine for the pain and get plenty of rest," she croaked once she was done. "You'll be as good as new in three weeks."

He did not get time to rest, however, for that night the villagers threw a huge feast in their honour. The town square was cleaned of the animals' excrements and filled with lanterns, tables and chairs. The tavern sprung its doors open and provided barrel after barrel of ale and wine. A large fire was lit in the centre of the square, and much to Delwin's delight, two hogs were roasted whole on spits. The entire village reunited that evening and celebrated until late, alternating toasts to Aryanil and Delwin's courage, Bennie's survival and their newly acquired freedom.

The two companions, together with Bennie and their parents, sat at the largest table, next to the bearded man and the elders of the village. Again and again, they were asked to describe what happened in the Shrub Forest, and they decided to tell the truth, except for mention of the medallion. Bennie was not spared from all the questions, but she was so tired that she fell asleep against her mother's chest straight after dinner.

When they could eat no more – which took Delwin several courses – the leader of the village caught their attention and led them to a table by the edge of the square. After they sat down, he placed a small, heavy-looking, wooden chest on the table and opened it.

Delwin's eyes widened in awe as dozens of Gold Stallions shone in the lanterns' light.

"These are one hundred gold pieces. It's all we managed to gather in the two days since the attack. We had to sell our most precious items and many animals, and yet it's only half of what they ogres asked. I don't know what we would have done if they came to collect the ransom tonight. Thanks to you, this will not happen, and may it never happen again. It might not be enough to repay you for all you have done for us, but this is all we can give you at this time."

"We can't accept it," replied Aryanil immediately. Delwin shot him a long, sour look.

"We appreciate what you have done for us tonight," continued Aryanil. "It is partly our fault that Bennie's life was put at risk, so getting her back was the least we could do. Keep this gold and use it to buy back whatever you can."

At a loss for words, the bearded man stuttered his thanks, but Aryanil didn't pay any attention, as his eyes met with Ramell's, who was sitting by herself at the other end of the square. As soon she noticed his stare, she immediately turned her head and pretended to watch the dances in the centre of the square.

"Excuse me," said Aryanil and walked lightly towards her, leaving the now grumpy dwarf to accept the gratitude of the bearded man.

She was wearing a long, black dress with a wide neckline. Her loose hair formed large full curls on both sides of her face.

"Hello," he said, approaching the small table. "You look very nice tonight."

She shot him a reproving glance, then turned her head back to the centre of the square and took a sip from her goblet. Aryanil smiled and sat down next to her. He filled his goblet from the red wine carafe that was on the table and relaxed against the back of the chair, feeling a tickling pain in his right shoulder. The healer had been right. The strong sweet wine the farmers made did help with the pain, but it also relaxed his mind and hindered his reflexes.

After a minute or so, Ramell turned slightly towards him and asked: "How did you free yourselves from the ropes?"

"You had already done half the job before leaving, and I had a hidden dirk up my sleeve," he lied nonchalantly. "I trust you were not blamed for our escape?"

"Nobody saw me," she replied proudly. "Mormen however – he is the young man appointed to guard you – was deemed responsible and his incompetence

made known to everybody in the village. I imagine he will now be praised for *letting* you escape."

Aryanil looked straight into her eyes and smiled meekly, but didn't say anything. She stared at her empty goblet for a while; then, she added resentfully: "You couldn't take me with you, could you... I care for Bennie's life way more than you do. I've been trying to persuade the villagers to attack the ogres for years. But no! Nobody listened to me, just because I'm a woman, I..."

"More like a girl," interjected Aryanil without thinking. Ramell gave him a spiteful look, stood up and turned around to leave the table.

"Wait!" he said, grabbing her wrist. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend you." She wriggled her arm free of his grip but didn't walk away.

"Trust me if I tell you that after thirty-two years of living with my mother, I cannot help but appreciate the strength of women." He immediately added: "Such as yourself."

She gaped at him, taken aback. "Thirty-two years... It cannot be, you can't be much older than I!"

Aryanil smiled meekly and refilled the lady's goblet, then invited her to sit back down. She took the seat and studied him for a moment; then, she glanced over to Delwin, who had moved to another table and was drinking ale with an old geezer. "It is true then," she whispered. "You are not human."

Aryanil involuntarily adjusted his hair behind his left ear. "I am part-human," he said eventually, trying not to sound affected by her cold reaction.



Ramell grabbed his left shoulder suddenly and drew very close to inspect his ear. The unexpected contact made him shiver, and her earthly scent filled his nostrils. He could feel the heat emanating from her body, and he felt his cheeks burn.

"Your ears are pointed, and your eyes are different. They are... slanted," she said, seriously.

Aryanil glared at her, and she sat back in her chair, blushing. "Yes. My mother is an elf of Light," he said, feeling more keen to talk as he realised she wasn't repulsed by him. "In fact, she is a lovely young woman of ninety-two years." He smiled and took another sip of wine.

"How... Where is she?" Ramell asked, carefully picking up her goblet again.

"She is in the Forest of Light now, with her own family. My father, however, was a man of the Kingdom. He was a ranger in the Cordon."

He found it easy to talk to her. She was a keen listener and was fond of stories. For the first time in his life, Aryanil truly felt that being different was not to be ashamed of. The elves had proven too closed-minded to even let him talk, but maybe the men were not.

When he had finished summarising his life, Aryanil asked Ramell to tell him about herself, and she happily complied.

"I was born in this village eighteen years past. Like most of the others, my parents were farmers. We had a big house in the fields north of the village. From my room, I could see the Heath, which in spring becomes an endless sea of pink heather." She sighed, then continued: "when I was five, my mother died while giving birth to my little brother. At about the same time, my father got an illness which slowly caused him to lose the use of his legs. With only me and my little brother to take care of the farm, my

father decided to give it to my uncle and auntie. We lived altogether in the farm until five years ago, when the ogres came.

"Like all the other farmers, we were forced to move into the village to defend ourselves. It was then... my brother was the first to die at their hands."

Aryanil grabbed her hand and squeezed it. She looked at him, and then stared back at her wine. "Now it's just me and dad. But thanks to you, we are free." She forced a smile.

Aryanil smiled back. "What will you do now? Will you move back to the farm?"

"I don't know. The old house is in shambles, and I have to take care of my father. He... He says I should get married." She pulled her hand from under his and placed it on her lap.

After a minute of awkward silence, she asked: "How did you and the dwar... your companion wipe out the whole tribe of ogres? Bennie spoke of hundreds of them, and even more goblins!"

Aryanil laughed. "Hardly more than a tenth of that. The goblins were many, but they did not intervene. Nay, they helped us once they realised we were winning. We think they were enslaved by the ogres."

"Still, how could the two of you take on so many ogres?" she insisted.

The half-elf smiled evasively.

"You don't trust me, do you?" she said coldly.

"You wouldn't expect me to reveal all my tricks, would you?" he joked.

"Maybe after you prove yourself," he added teasingly.

Her eyes sparkled for a moment. She stood up and looked straight at him.  
"I'll do it now. Follow me."

Both surprised and confused by the turn of events, he grabbed the wine carafe and followed her. He cast one last glance at the people around the square, but nobody was looking at them.

Ramell led him outside the square to a small house at the border of the village, where the noise of the feast was muffled. Like most houses, it had a small barn, which turned out to be where she was heading.

She removed the heavy lock and went in. Aryanil followed. The smell of livestock filled his nostrils, but was not too intense to bear. Ramell lit an oil lamp and set it on the ground. It cast a golden light over the straw littered floor.

"I don't understand," said Aryanil, putting the carafe on a shelf.

Ramell turned around and tossed a wooden stick to him. He caught it just in time and felt a strain of pain through his injured shoulder.

"Defend yourself," she hissed, smiling and picking up another stick. "I'll prove what I'm worth."

\* \* \*

Delwin put down his tankard and belched loudly. The ale was good and surprisingly cool. He looked at the elderly man sitting opposite him and nodded at him. The old man had been drinking just as much as him and still looked sober.

"How do ye keep the ale so cold in the summer?" Delwin asked.

The man smiled proudly and said: "We store it underground. Deep in the earth, under our feet, there's a cold stream of fresh water which we extract to water the crops in the summer. The ale barrels are stored down there. My son brews it with my help."

Delwin nodded again, and the old man gestured to a young lady to bring more ale. "My son said you an' your companion killed the ogres' tribe-chief."

"Aye," said Delwin, feeling pleasantly light-headed. "I brought his head as proof."

The elderly man pierced him with his eyes, then said: "Can I see it?"

Delwin frowned. "As ye wish. It should be in a sack, by my things." He stood up, and the world started spinning.

The old man told him to sit back down and called a boy to fetch the head. Within a minute, the boy came back with the bloody sack and a sickened expression. The man opened the sack and unceremoniously put the head onto the table; it released an acrid smell which made Delwin wince.

The man moved the lantern closer and studied the ogre's ugly face. He ran a finger over the yellow symbol on its forehead and then studied the two lines that from its lifeless eyes connected to its chin. When he was done, he looked up at Delwin with new-found respect.

"This truly is the ogre chief of the Hukarash tribe. These two lines are the mark of the tribe leader."

"What do ye know about them?" asked Delwin, moving closer.

The old man dropped the head back into the sack and took a long sip of ale. "I know they were a young tribe. They came from the Wild Lands five

years back and settled in the Shrub Forest, alongside the goblins. Did you see any females with them?"

Delwin shook his head.

"I thought so. They must have divided from a bigger tribe and escaped to the Heath." He stared down at the smelly sack, then added: "He was known in the South Lands as the Yellow Demon. If I'm not mistaken, there's a bounty on his head of eighty Gold Stallions."

The ale went down the wrong way, and Delwin coughed loudly. "Are ye sure? Where can we claim the bounty?"

The old man scratched his rough chin and nodded. "The nearest place is Oldport. But you must get there while the head is still recognisable."

Delwin grabbed the sack and pulled it close to his side.

\* \* \*

The feast went on for hours into the night, although Delwin lost track of the events after the talk with the old man, of whom he could never recall the name. He was aware that Aryanil had been missing for a while because a number of villagers came to him to enquire about the half-elf. They dropped the subject, however, when the healer suggested he had probably gone to bed to rest after his injuries.

After consuming more food and alcohol than he thought his stomach could hold, Delwin stumbled back to the large bedroom he and Aryanil had been given at the bearded man's house. He first ensured the sack with the head was stored safely; then, he collapsed onto his fresh linen bed and fell fast asleep.

He had the oddest dreams that night. They went from fighting ogres and goblins, to arguing with the bearded man about the little wooden chest with the ransom, to some very unfocused dreams that featured Aryanil talking to a lady with large, blonde curls. The last dream soon became clearer. Aryanil and the lady stopped talking, and he picked her up and lay her flat on a bed of straw.

With growing embarrassment, Delwin realised it wasn't Aryanil holding the lady, but himself. He fought against the blankets to break free from the dream, but his mind refused to wake up from his slumber until much later, when a sudden creaking sound startled him.

"Whoisit?!" he croaked, trying to break free from the tangle of sheets.

"Shush, it's me," came the exasperated voice of Aryanil. "This stupid door makes more noise than an army of goblins."

Delwin scratched his eyes and sat upright, trying to push the still vivid dreams out of his head. A faint light came from the large window, marking the early hours before sunrise.

"Where have ye been?" hissed Delwin.

"I slept somewhere else," answered Aryanil, evasively. "Have I missed much?"

Delwin groaned as he realised his dream was real. "Ye were with that girl, weren't ye? The one with blonde curls."

Aryanil gaped at him in astonishment. "How... How do you know? Did you follow me?!"

"Never mind," croaked Delwin, suddenly wishing he hadn't said anything. He got up and sorted randomly through his things, just to turn his back on

the half-elf. As he shuffled through his possessions, he noticed the sack with the ogre's head and remembered his conversation with the old man. He turned around sharply and told the half-elf about it.

"So, if we reach Oldport quickly enough, we can claim the bounty on the ogre's head!" he concluded, excitedly.

"I see," said Aryanil, pacing the room. "We should probably leave soon. If we go now, we can slip past the villagers without waking them up."

Delwin frowned. "That's so rude. Why would ye not wait to say goodbye, and have breakfast!"

"They might not want us to leave," he replied. "They might ask us to stay here with them, to protect them."

"It's not such a bad place," shrugged Delwin, remembering the feast of the night before.

"Really?" said Aryanil, smirking. "You are going to drop your axe and pick up the hoe? You would make a fine farmer."

Delwin turned as red as a pepper and grunted: "Let's get out of here!"