

The Mines Of Mohrkronin

**Book One of the Saga of
Draupnir Dvalin'son**

by Michael Delving



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In lands ne'er remembered there are stories ne'er told
Of unlived dreams and unthought schemes
And unfound hills of gold.

Those tales are ne'er forgotten or e'er remembered wrong,
For ne'er have they been limned
Nor caught in bonds of mortal song.

Journeys made, when not recorded, remain always to your front,
For having ne'er been traveled
Ne'er become the finished hunt.

Heft not your heavy satchel, friend, gird not your mighty sword.
Trail not my measured tread a'pace
And harken not my word.

The world we will depart to was ne'er really there.
The land we are to walk through
Rises only as a mirror.

Its earth basks not in sunshine, shimmers not in summer rain.
Winds ne'er caress her wondrous fields
Or toss her briny main.

No splendors rare and mighty rise up from distant vales.
No wondrous peoples populate
Her towns, or man her sails.

Good people ne'er celebrate The Rising of the Moons,
Or elevate their throats
In tragic, haunting, distant tunes.

But in those days that ne'er occurred, lived all these gallant foes,
And their flawed, quixotic rivals
Who would conquer if unopposed.

Their days went unrecord, save this pale bard's lament,
The captured hints of glory done,
The blood and sorrow spent.

To trade my realm of faded hope for one ne'er seen the light?
I'd do at once — this instant —
Were I only asked tonight!

So travel not with me, my friend, to lands ne'er touched by man.
But if you tread these heroes' steps
Then sure you're blessed again!

But when your days do ne'er end and home you beg to find,
You'll find that world has left you, friend,
And all is far behind.

Then what you thought was mere mirage you'll find you've always seen.
And what you felt was surely real,
Has ne'er, e'er been...

Michael Delving

All good writers need, more than anything, sufficient inspiration to make their work come alive. Without the help of these people (and others), I would never have been inspired enough to complete this work.

To Harold and Guerrakan, my first compatriots in adventuring, who introduced me to the guided flights of fantasy known in its time as Dungeons and Dragons.

To Brandoch, Ratlavin, Florin and Gwynedde, who helped Draupnir survive early on in his adventuring career, when death was always close and your friends were as important as the sharpness of your sword.

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And lastly, to Suzette, the light in my lantern and the compass for all my travels.

The Mines of Mohrkronin

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An arrow clanged off the side of the bluestone monolith in front of Draupnir as he and his father hunched down back to back, each keeping an eye on an opposite slope of the boulder-strewn hilltop. He instinctively gripped his crossbow tighter, one of the few items he was able to rescue before the...

Before the...the retreat...

He raised up, aimed quickly and shot a metal-tipped bolt down the hill. He dropped back to the protection of the standing stones as a scream and two more arrows flew back in reply. He was sad and he was angry, the two emotions warring inside him just as he and his father fought against the goblins surrounding them. His clan, the Iron House, had never known defeat before, and now they scattered and ran before the overwhelming goblin army. The Mines, his home since birth, seat of all dwarven smithying knowledge and sight of some of the most valuable mineral deposits in The Land, lay in the hands of the foul goblins. And his family, his four brothers and two of his uncles, and his father's venerable wife, had all died here beside him.

Draupnir squinted his eyes and gazed out at the ridge leading down from the great hills to the Setting sun side. With the setting sun behind the mountain line, he could just pick out the last golden glints from the twin peaks near the summit of the mountain. Just between those great spires rose an ominous dark cloud, a curving snake of smoke with here and there an occasional spark or wisp of flame.

Draupnir's narrow eyes squinted a bit tighter, perhaps against the wind or maybe from the dust. He stepped on the stirrup at the front of the crossbow and recocked the weapon, then pulled a quarrel from his belt pouch and laid it on the crossbow rail. His eyes were still too blurry to aim, so he looked back out to Setting Sunward, his gaze scanning the hills that so recently were his home.

His eyes followed a waving, darting line down the mountainside, as the softly shadowed twilight picked out a trail through the grey debris. Every so often a shining object flashed brighter, likely an upraised sword or some other looted metal catching the last rays of the setting sun. He swore he could see some pattern in the bobbing line, but his inner voice told him only Chaos sent messages through that image. A low river of noise floated up to his ears, most of it indistinguishable as separate sounds, save for an occasional roar of harsh laughter or scream of bloodlust. Up here on top of the low hill, all was deathly quiet.

The echo of his father's battle-chants still rang in his ears, though the chants themselves had ceased suns ago. The chants had begun when his father's wife of over one hundred Great Moons had died at the hands of a goblin warrior. The ancient dwarven chants had grown louder and fiercer as his father watched his sons and clansmen cut down one after another. Their bodies lay in a small mound in the middle of the stone circle, and now with only Draupnir his eldest still alive, it seemed there were not enough dwarves left to hear his battle cries.

There had been a moment when Draupnir had tried to speak to his father during the suns of combat, but early on the relentless attacks and din of battle made it impossible to communicate. They had shared a silent moment during one of the few lulls in the battle, when they had gathered up Dvalin's late wife and as many of their kinsmen and family as they could, separating their torn, mangled bodies from the goblins who fell in their efforts to take them. They had solemnly placed them side by side near the middle of the great circle of stones, and had held each others eyes for a brief moment before the goblins began another counterattack. Now with only the two of them left, he found he could not fashion into words the thoughts he wanted to say.

He watched through a crack between the roughly hewn uprights as a group of goblins raced across the rocky slopes, angling to get at the unwatched sides of their small fortress. *Why won't they leave us alone*, he wondered to himself. *Surely they know now we have no valuables, and that there are so few of us left that we pose no threat to their overwhelming numbers. Maybe*, he thought, *they have as deep a hatred of dwarves as we have of them.*

He spied one goblin heading around to the far left, as two more began making their way, step by step, to the right. "One goin' round t' the left, father," he said in a low, grim tone as he brought the crossbow to his shoulder. He carefully concentrated and deliberately squeezed the trigger on the device. The recoil barely moved his heavy frame, and somewhere down the hillside an anguished cry rose up from the fallen attacker. "One comin' round t' the right."

His father, Dvalin Kilgaarn, grunted in reply, though Draupnir could not tell if it was in acceptance that yet another attack was coming or in appreciation of one less goblin to deal with. He realized that there wouldn't be many more chances to talk to his father, so he swallowed the dryness in his throat and half-turned towards the old dwarf at his back.

"Father," he began, then just as quickly halted. How could he describe the conflicting feelings he contained? The awe he had for this mighty warrior, and the love for his venerated father? He thought, *No, they aren't conflicting, merely complementary parts of the same emotion.* He pulled himself back to his task as he noticed his father's head was tilted to the side ever so slightly. "Father," he began again, "you've been...I've always felt...what I mean to say—"

"For someone who's always the first to charge into battle," his father muttered, cutting him off, "you sure are slow t' come t' the point. Seems I've raised me a slow-talkin' one," he said drily, "although you be a damn fine dwarf."

Draupnir noticed his father was looking right at him now. The dying sun outlined the smile Dvalin flashed at his son, formed of equal parts pride and respect. The old dwarf, his arms and hands caked in dried blood and dirt, his long gray beard clipped in places and ratted in others, never seemed to have said an approving word before now. Draupnir ran through the long Great Moons of his life up to this point, searching for a time when the elder had granted an inch of leniency, a moment of kindness. As if reading his mind, Dvalin lowered his glistening blade until it was almost touching the matched sword at his son's feet, and continued.

"I know there have been times when it seems I was harder on you than on the rest. Had t' be. No other way t' do it. Yer the strongest, bravest dwarf I've ever fought beside, Draupnir Dvalin'son. If I'd've allowed you t' keep a single weakness, you would not have become the warrior you are now."

Draupnir was stung by the amazing words, words he would have given anything to hear before these last desperate suns.

Dvalin leaned in close and said in low whispers, as if hiding the comments from the slowly approaching goblins, "Had me a vision yestersun. Saw it plain as the blade in me hand. Great Haela Brightblade came down and saved us—" He stopped, then continued in a grimmer fashion, "Saved you, my son. Helped you defeat them foul vermin what's layin' in wait for us t' croak. She told me as I lay—" Here he paused again, then continued after smearing the dirt under his left

eye, "She told me that you were destined for greatness, Draupnir. Glory and victory in battle, honor to you and your family's name. And son," here his eyes glittered in the low light, "she said that one sun you'd re—"

But Draupnir never heard the last of the sentence. Their short conversation had given the overlooked goblins enough time to approach the edge of the standing stones. Behind his father's shoulder he spotted a lone green-skinned arm raising an axe in the crevice between the monoliths at his father's back. Screaming in furious rage, he heaved the crossbow with one hand at the descending axe, instinctively protecting his father the quickest way he knew how.

The inlaid crossbow, a gift from a respected dwarven elder centuries ago to the clanmaster of those suns, cartwheeled slowly towards the goblin foe. Just as the axe blade was about to come crashing down on the battered helm of the old dwarf, the two weapons met in mid-air. The sharp edge of the hand axe sliced through the bowstring and cleaved the stock partly in two. The halves of the crossbow, fired in tournaments and battles for centuries, displayed in a special niche of honor in the Hall of Arms, flew in opposite directions away from the combat, to fall amid the discarded weapons and scattered body parts that lay around the hilltop.

But its sacrificial separation was in vain. The axe blade was deflected only partially from its intended strike, landing instead between the metal shoulder guards on Dvalin's broad back. The axe blade bit deep, and a pained grunt surged from his lips as his body tossed forward.

The half-buried hand axe ripped from the attacker's hand, and as the green arm began to withdraw, Draupnir's blade shot through the crevice and pierced the unfortunate goblin through a chink his chest armor. The blade drove straight through, and the goblin died before Draupnir could pull his blade back again. Another goblin shape reared next to him and Draupnir kicked out with his heavy boot, taking the surprised foe in his midsection and sending him tumbling back down the slope. Draupnir turned and raced back to the crumpled form on the ground, the hand axe sticking out of the armor, dwarven blood spilled down his back to mix with that already pooled in the bowl's depression.

He pulled the axe gently from the wound and turned his father's body face up, noticing the grim smile had not faded from his lips. Those lips were now trying to form words, and as they parted and closed, small flecks of blood spattered from some unseen wound deep in the old one's chest. Incoherent at first, he sounded as if he were moaning for help, but the defiant expression seemed out of place with any request for mercy.

The sound of a pebble clattering down behind him snapped Draupnir's attention back to the battle at hand. Without standing, he whipped his sword around in a great arc behind him and felt the blade connect with soft matter. He turned and saw a stunned goblin, who had been expecting a free strike, begin to topple to the ground, with three more climbing past the boulders behind him.

As Draupnir pushed himself to his feet, he felt a cool object under his left hand. He quickly grabbed up what he immediately knew was his father's blade and, screaming in dwarven defiance every oath he knew that might terrorize an opponent, leaped with both blades to the attack.

The first goblin ran in swinging, hoping to clear enough room for his two followers to stand beside him. Draupnir met his attack with one blade, catching it in mid-air on his sword's crosshilt, then swung his second sword forward to strike at his opponent's exposed side. The goblin was slow in responding to this double attack, and the black blade caught him just above the hip, opening a big gash that dropped him screaming to the ground, as the other two goblins leaped in to join him.

The one on the right was huge, Draupnir noted, the biggest goblin he had ever seen, and wielded a large two-handed battle axe. It would be tough to parry such a weapon with one hand, although he could deflect it a little. One weakness of such a large weapon, Draupnir recalled from his training, was the great amount of room required to swing it properly. Although there were only three combatants on their feet, the upright monoliths at the top of the hill and the large number of bodies, mostly goblin, left only a limited area in which to stand. The goblin on the left was equipped as most goblins were, with a hand axe and small wooden shield. Quickly Draupnir formed his plan.

He stepped to the shield side of the smaller goblin, diving past the larger axe's sweeping attack and turning the hand axe with one sword. The smaller goblin, not expecting the dwarf to close ground with him, was caught off-guard when the muscular dwarf lowered his shoulder and slammed into his shield arm, knocking him off-balance and sending him flying against the boulder he had just jumped past.

Draupnir was now between the two goblins, and went to work quickly on the bigger one. As the goblin lifted his big axe to come around for another sweep, he quickly cut at the exposed arms, raising three welling gashes on the bigger foe's arms. The goblin, never pausing in his swing, let out a great yelp of pain and hurried to bring the axe across to behead the pesky dwarf.

Fighting between two foes is neither a normal nor a safe mode of combat, Draupnir heard a small voice shout in his head. But Draupnir knew that what was uncommon would also be difficult for the attackers to anticipate. *If only it works*, he thought quickly to himself.

Standing erect in the face of the impending blow, Draupnir sensed the shorter goblin behind him preparing to swing, and in that moment bent over at the waist and drew in both legs, curling himself into as small a target as he could. The closeness of the great stone at his side would prevent the larger goblin from aiming his swing low, and he hoped that in his haste, the great beast would put as much power into his swing as he could to strike at the dwarf.

Whatever the bigger goblin had in mind, he surely never expected the dwarf to duck, or the other goblin who was close behind him to reach up to attack the dwarf's back. The exposed goblin had only enough time to gasp out in surprise before the great axe came swinging across and sliced the top half of his body from the lower half. Stunned in amazement at what he had done, the bigger one could not recover in time to stop the two quick blades that struck him in his lower abdomen, dropping him on top of his recently felled companion.

Lying off to one side, Dvalin was able to follow the action through half-closed eyes. He used the little remaining energy he had to call out a name over and over again. That was what had caused Draupnir to think he was asking for help, for the name Dvalin repeatedly called was "Haela, Haela, Haela..."

Draupnir had no time to notice though, for as soon as he straightened back up, three more goblins leaped up to face him, while another group poked their heads over the rim on the opposite side. He was now being forced back from his rocky shield towards the new group, who planned to catch the dwarf between their threatening weapons. His blades were fast and caught unprotected flesh time and again, but the press of numbers and the fatigue of the week's combat was beginning to take its toll.

He took a glancing blow off his right forearm. Another hand axe bit into the armor above his left leg, releasing drops of hot blood that dribbled down to his boot tops.

Forgotten in the midst of combat, Dvalin reached his shaking hand up to a small shiny object attached to a leather thong around his neck. His fingers curled around the item that resembled a silver sword enveloped in flames, and continued his calling even more fervently. "Haela, Haela, hear me," he croaked, "come to the aid of one who has served you so long. Come to me...as you said you would..."

Two hand axes came down at Draupnir from opposite directions, and he twisted to dodge the one at his back as he parried the other to his front. But the one at his back slipped past the greaves near his shoulder, clipping through the minor protection and slicing a section of skin off his back. His breath caught in his teeth, but rather than pausing, Draupnir whirled and flashed both blades in simultaneous arcs as he spun, catching the goblin behind him in the arm and another to his front in the shoulder, leaving a bloodied weapon and the hand that had recently wielded it laying on the ground. Another stroke came at him from the side; he parried that and prepared to counterswing when he caught sight of another weapon sliding in from the opposite direction. Reacting on instinct, he twisted the parried axe with his blocking blade, snapping it out of the goblin's hand to send it flying at the attacker from the side. The weapon danced off that one's chest, fouling his strike and giving Draupnir time to lean forward against the weaponless goblin and brace for a kick backwards. One goblin tumbled backward, one raced away to pick up another weapon, but four more crowded in to the fray.

Weaker now and softer but with more determination, the old dwarf moaned through clenched teeth, "You promised me, Haela. You promised!" A shudder of pain shook his body, but his hand clung fiercely to the symbol in his grasp. "If not for me, Haela, come for Draupnir. Save him!" His head rolled over onto his shoulder. "He'll serve you well...you'll see...you need him...Haela...Haelaaa..."

The goblin whose axe had been ripped from his hand found another in the dirt and as he grabbed it up, he noticed for the first time the nearly comatose dwarf lying amid the fallen bodies. Smiling at his good fortune, he crept warily towards the figure, expecting another surprise from these tricky opponents. He eyed the old one suspiciously, wondering if the half-lidded eyes and the reclining position were some form of ruse. But when Dvalin's hand closed tighter about his neck ornament the goblin's greed took over. Sensing some jewel or other item of value, he reached for the leather cord and ripped it contemptuously from the dwarf's neck.

Dvalin's eyes shot open and his hand clenched around the cord with the last dregs of his vigor. "No!" he shouted in a surprisingly forceful command. "You cannot have this! Your touch would defile her very name!"

The two began a struggle for control of the ornament, a struggle which the goblin was surprisingly losing. He decided to end this contest quickly, raising the axe in his right hand to sever the old dwarf's wrist just beyond the end of

the cord. He laughed at the ease in fighting these dwarves, not half as tough as he thought they'd be.

The axe flew down unopposed then came to a sudden jarring halt, and the goblin stared at his target. There, holding onto the bare blade of his axe was a dwarven hand, normal in all respects as far as he could tell, except for one odd feature: it glowed with an unearthly flame of silver, as if the hand itself was on fire. He gaped at the uncut fingers, his slow mind not able to comprehend the aborted attack, and ran his eyes along the wrist then up the arm of his new foe. All along its length, the skin was wreathed in licking flames of silver fire. The hand, the arm, the naked shoulder were muscled beyond any this goblin had seen, and when his eye beheld the full countenance of his opponent, he was stunned at the sight.

He faced a naked female dwarf, obviously female despite her extraordinary muscles and long, flowing silver beard. She was bending low from her perch on a fallen megalith behind the old dwarf, an immense two-handed sword resting lightly over one shoulder. Her eyes had an incredible sparkle to them, and her bared teeth formed a grin that was simultaneously enchanting and terrifying. She stared straight into his eyes and through him, the goblin felt, and he knew she was no ordinary dwarven fighter. He tried to wrench the axe free of her bare-handed grasp, but it was as if the weapon had been buried haft-deep in some immense tree. It would not move, and though he tugged and pulled, the female's arm swayed not the slightest amount. His pulling only caused the silver tongues of flame to grow brighter and leap more wildly around her body. The goblin became quite terrified now, not knowing what to do other than to try and regain his weapon. He cursed at her through gasping breaths and tried one more heave with both green hands.

At that moment, the naked dwarf flicked her wrist to the side as if she were chasing a gnat, and tossed the goblin thirty feet in the air, over the nearby bluestones and completely clear of the hilltop, sending him tumbling into the dusk off down the hillside. She jumped up and somersaulted forward, landing lightly behind a big goblin who had managed to catch one of Draupnir's blades in the crook of his axe. She drew her two-handed weapon up with one hand and brought the pommel hard down upon the goblin's helm, a stolen helm of obvious dwarven make. A loud clang rang out and he slumped to the earth. As one the combatants stopped, motionless in the presence of this awe-inspiring figure. For an instant the only sounds were the eerie crackling of the flames about her body, together with the gasping of the mortals around her. Then Draupnir grew a wide mirthless smile, quickly regained his wits and struck back at one of the opponents to his front. That snapped a few of the goblins, now numbering more than a dozen, back to reality as they crowded closer to Draupnir, almost as if their closeness to him would protect them from whatever terrifying spirit now faced them.

Draupnir fought with a fury and purpose that was amazing. His many wounds were completely forgotten. Wherever he swung the black swords, the blades found their mark, striking weapons out of hands or forcing goblins back with the power of his blows. Again and again his twin swords cut through armor and bit deep, causing howls of anguish from the goblins around him. In a powerful voice, audible over the noise of the battle, he shouted at the goblins in the Common tongue he knew they would understand, "You've *lost*, you dogs! Don't you know who that is? That's Haela Brightblade, *Haela the Hard*," he yelled as he punctuated his words with swift hard strokes through a goblin shield. "She's never been defeated, and only appears to help dwarves defeat their enemies!"

As he fought wildly and forcefully a stray thought challenged his concentration. The only other reason Haela appeared, according to the tales the Elders spoke, was to take a worthy warrior to join her band of Guardians, the ever-fighting souls of slain dwarven fighters. *Am I about to die?* a distant part of his mind wondered. But the attack of the goblins, now truly scared and fighting for their lives, forced all further thoughts from his mind.

He parried one battle axe, took that goblin in the shoulder, struck another with the return swing, forced that one back with two more quick strikes, dodged one thrust at his back, dropped another goblin with a low chop at his legs. His weapons flew like beating wings, everywhere at once, impossible for the goblins to resist or outfight. Suddenly they realized this lone dwarf had forced them on the defensive, as the six nearest him began to back away from the onslaught.

Two of the largest goblins had turned to face Haela, swinging with all their might at the unarmored female. Haela leaped and jumped about with ease, turning a strike here, parrying an attack there, and the goblins, with four others now lending their support, were frustrated at every turn. She did not cause damage or open wounds as she fought, but neither could they harm her. Their strikes continued to rain down all around her, always just missing or being turned away by the incredibly quick two-handed great sword she wielded with such unnatural grace.

With one hand palm up on the bloody soil and the other still clutching the sword-amulet that was Haela's symbol, Dvalin lay entranced at the sight of her magical combat. No blade could harm her, no attack could touch her. She was strong and beautiful as she fought next to Draupnir, who with each swing felled another goblin, and in that moment he saw what he knew was the most beautiful image he had ever beheld in his two-hundred-plus Great Moons. The goddess

and his son fighting a horde of goblins, unbeatable together. His smile sank down deep into his cheeks, his chest swelled with pride, his arms stretched out to them both, and then he slumped back finally at peace against the ancient rocks.

At that moment, Haela's aura flamed powerfully, like a furnace stoked for the final melting, and she twirled in a furious attack that forced her opponents away from her. She used the opportunity to spring across the clearing to land next to the old one's lifeless body, and slipping an unadorned arm around his back, lifted him easily up to stand next to her. She faced the old one towards his son, still locked in combat with the goblins around him. She paused there long enough for Draupnir to see the two of them, the lifeless body couched in her arm, then she flashed a strange, warming smile at Draupnir as she leaped into the darkening sky in a blinding flash of silvery light.

Draupnir sensed at once the true reason for Haela's appearance, as she streaked up into the night like a meteor climbing away from the land. She had taken his father Dvalin to join her ethereal bodyguard. He was dead, truly gone from his life now, and the anguish burst from him in terrible anger at the goblins who had taken his father's life. His screams of fury and rage rang off the sides of the tall monoliths around him.

The remaining goblins were barely holding their own against the empowered dwarf until this last assault, but they could finally take no more. The ripping blades and powerful strokes had dropped too many of their brethren, and even though the dwarven goddess had departed, she had left behind an even more frightening figure in the shape of the grief-stricken warrior. In twos and threes they tried backing away from his furious attacks, and when they realized he showed no signs of tiring or slowing, they turned and flew en masse from the bloody hilltop.

Throwing away their weapons, tossing aside their shields to run even faster, dropping the plunder they had recently fought to gain, a dozen or more goblins raced down the slopes of the solitary hill, some of them stumbling to the earth as the flashing blades caught them from behind. And when no enemy remained close enough for his swords to reach, Draupnir picked up discarded hand axes and heaved them back at their former owners.

Fewer than a half-dozen goblins wound up escaping from the carnage that would forever after be known in their lore as the Mad Dwarf's Revenge. And as the Great Moons crawled by and the retelling of the tale reached more goblin ears, the legend of the dwarves who fight harder once they've been killed grew until it became common practice among them to attribute dwarven victories to the aid of their magically restored slain comrades.

None of this was of any help to Draupnir, on his knees half way down the slope. The killing frenzy had departed, leaving him drained and empty. His family was gone, his home occupied. His father would not even receive a traditional dwarven funeral. Yet, as he lifted his head to gaze at the now-foreign mountain range where Mohrkronin stood, he thanked Haela for retrieving his father, and was inwardly grateful for the assistance she had given him in the fight. Surely he would have perished had Haela not appeared. But what had his father been saying just before that last battle erupted? That Haela would...something about his future, he felt. But the effects of the long combat and the grief of the past suns bore heavily on him. He could only think of the immediate future: food and water, survival, and to get away from this horrible place.

Struggling to make his beaten body respond, he staggered exhausted back to the top of the hill. There, he gathered what little gear he could salvage. He placed his father's sword in his own sheath and stood his own blade up against one of the bluestones. He tossed outside the ring of standing stones all the remains of the goblins, then neatly piled the bodies of his foster-mother, his brothers and kinsmen together in the center of the now-empty clearing. Collecting the few flasks of oil the group had carried, he sprinkled their bodies with the liquid as he fought back tears. No rock pillar for these brave ones, no carved stone vault, not even a quiet corner in some subterranean cavern, the least a dwarf could hope for at the end of his or her long existence. He could not take the time to build a proper cairn of boulders over their bodies, knowing full well the numbers of fell creatures that roamed this area now that the goblins had broken through the mountains. He knew he had only a few moments to spare as he laid the last empty flask down, pulled out flint and tinder and looked about for a strip of cloth.

He found a section of a cloak a few feet away that would serve his purpose, and as he bent over to retrieve it, he noticed, lying half buried in the mire, the small silver sword wreathed in flames that was his father's amulet. Bending his head for a moment in prayer, he placed the amulet and its snapped cord into a pouch on his belt and grabbed up the piece of cloth. He saw then the strip he was using had come from Dvalin's cloak, deep royal purple with a border trimmed in spun gold. Gritting his teeth, he struck the flint and set the strip aflame, then tossed the flaming cloth onto the bodies, transforming the stone-capped hilltop into a blazing pyre.

Walking quickly down the Rising Moon side of the hill, his father's sword in his left hand, his own sword now in his right, he watched as his shadowy form trailed ahead of him down the dark slope to the base of the hill. There he turned

and looked back, the encircling monoliths hiding only a part of the inferno as the burning flames tossed sparks and smokey trails into the heavens. A powerful energy overtook him and he raised the two swords high into the night as he yelled out these words:

“By my father’s blood and the power of Haela’s will, I will return to Mohrkronin when the sun is warmer, and claim for you all a proper resting place.”

o o o

The light of the great golden-green bonfire flickered around the edges of Draupnir’s eyes. The reflection contained mirror images of the dwarf’s great gnarled fists, wrapped around a thick carved bow, almost as thick around as his wrist. Nearer the edges of his iris wavered a circle of thin figures, most dressed in greens and browns, others arrayed in tans and golds. They gathered around a solitary figure, dressed in deep green trimmed in maroon, who spoke in low hushed tones.

“Most wondrous of all is the tale of the dwarf known as Bruonar Warhammer, the new king in the retaken Shining Mountain. It is a wondrous place,” and here the speaker glanced to his left to fix his gaze on Draupnir, “if you enjoy living under the earth, that is, out of sight of the great Light and the feel of the warm breath of—”

“The story, Klishnauran? I’d love to hear more of the story,” spoke a tall thin lady, one of the watchers. She was dressed in close-fitting light gray garments, matching the gray of her eyes and her short, close-trimmed hair. She too held a bow, though this one was more like the Elvish bows the rest of the listeners carried.

The speaker named Klishnauran turned to the elder’s comment, bowed his head respectfully and replied, “As you wish, my Lady. The dwarf Bruonar retook the fabled Shining Mountain with the aid of his accompanying warriors. Some dwarven—” Here he shot a wary glance back at Draupnir. “And some not so. Human barbarians from the Winter Realms were said to accompany him, as well as a halfling. And,” he said, raising his head to look up at the full river of stars that swam overhead, “there is another that served with him. Served faithfully, it is said. That one was a great warrior, fabled as a swordsman of unsurpassed skill. His name is Dralts D’Ordun, one of Bruonar’s closest friends,” here he paused for effect, “And a *dorow*.”

The crowd of elves took a step back as a group, all except for Draupnir, who stood immobile, lost in thought. The *dorow* were the hated and feared distant cousins of the elves, but a twisted evil race that lived below ground as the dwarves did. Their fondness for surface-raiding and their proficiency with evil magic left all those who came in contact with the dark-skinned, white-haired *dorow* with a powerful feeling of revulsion. Klishnauran continued his story confidently now, with the audience hanging on his words more intently than before.

“This *dorow*, this Dralts D’Ordun, did indeed help Bruonar take back the Shining Mountain. In faith, I wonder, as do others I have met, what goal he ultimately serves. Is he truly helping the dwarves for noble purposes, or is he still in league with the foul creatures that are his kin?”

Many of the elves in the crowd nodded their heads and whispered comments to themselves. The elder who had made the first comment to Klishnauran now stood and walked forward into the circle cast by the magic bonfire. She was tall and held herself straight, using the ancient unstrung bow in her hands like a wizard used his staff, partly leaning on it, partly wielding it for the respect it granted.

“Klishnauran does us honor,” she began, bowing to the elf on her left, “by sharing this news of the Outside with us. In truth, his tales would be difficult to believe were it not for the first-hand knowledge we ourselves have of the cooperation possible between the races.” Her eyes looked over to Draupnir, and a few other eyes looked over as well. “Yet there is a tale that I would share with our guest.” She looked straight at Klishnauran and held his gaze with her gray unblinking eyes. “This *dorow* you speak of. Have you ever met him?”

Klishnauran bent his head for a moment before replying. “No, Great One, I have never seen him in person.” He looked around at the crowd. “But I’ve spoken with those who have seen him, and they tell me—”

“Many interesting things, I’m sure. Would you like to hear another story concerning Dralts D’Ordun, one you could add to your collection?”

“Why, certainly, Great One, any tale you have to impart would be welcome.”

The elder elf pulled both hands to the tip of her bow, held in front of her with determination and pride. “Great Moons ago, a young elf was hunting for her family in a woods Sunward of here. She was surprised by a pack of gnolls,

eight or ten of them, who attacked without warning." The elder let her gaze touch a few eyes in the group, and then continued. "The elf fought with courage and skill, yet she knew the numbers would eventually overwhelm her. Suddenly, one of the gnolls burst into a flame which glowed purple all about him, causing the group to stop their attack. The affected gnoll held his flame-outlined hands in front of his eyes, and cried out in disbelief to his comrades.

"From a nearby shadow emerged a warrior, two scimitars in his hands, striding confidently to the gnoll who was limbed in the fairy fire. The warrior held both scimitars up to the gnoll and said something in a dark tongue, which the gnolls understood but did not seem to enjoy. The battle resumed, and this fighter dispatched seven of the gnolls with little difficulty before the rest hastily withdrew." The elder closed her eyes and spoke from deep within her chest. "That warrior was Drafts D'Ordun, and the elf he saved," as she paused one last time, "was me."

The elder continued her comments, which were followed closely by all of the elves. "We must guard against fearing those different from us, my friends. Was it that long ago when one came into our midst, and showed us the rightness of trust, the power of faith, the rewards of friendship?" With these words, the elder looked upon the form of Draupnir, standing in the glow of the greenish-gold magic flames. But Draupnir's eyes were focused on some image far away, not within sight of any present.

"Blastfires and furnaces!" Draupnir muttered under his breath, turning away from the speaker in front of him. He politely made his way through the crowd of tall, thin elves gathered to hear the visitor. He made his way past many thick trees to an open clearing, down a short slope, to an adjoining hill on a parallel ridge. The night air was cooler here, and the stars once again twinkled in the cloudless sky. The green-yellow light from the magic bonfire barely touched his back here, but the cool evening air did little to quench the inner fire that the visitor's words had kindled.

Draupnir wrapped his rough dwarven hands around the width of his greatbow, leaning his thick body against the heavy, carved frame as he stared off into the night. Peering through the wall of trees to the Setting side, he imagined he could see the spires of the Anvilspine Mountains, his ancestral homeland and birthplace, rising up against the distant stars. But the night cloaked them in darkness, hiding them from even his sharp eyes. Absently, he ran his tough, gnarled fingers up and down the sides of the bow where the carved dwarvish runes caught his fingers. The runes, seemingly out of place on such a finely-wrought Elvish bow, were dusted with a light coating of silver that did not rub off with Draupnir's strong handling.

The last hand's worth of time spent listening to Klishnauran's stories from abroad had left him in a foul mood. The fact that a visiting elf had appeared at the settlement of Lindenrest was not that unusual. This particular elven enclave was well known to the wanderers of the Land as a safe haven, and would provide rest and welcome to all creatures in need who came in peace. Draupnir himself had stumbled upon the vale some decades prior, after harrowing goblins had forced his family out of their clan's stronghold in the great halls of Mohrkronin.

The story he had heard served only to restoke the flames that had been burning low in his heart for the past few decades. Ever since the lost war with the goblins, his own home of Mohrkronin had been but a memory, and never had the surviving dwarves made an effort to retake the great halls from their enemies.

Draupnir squinted harder into the dark Settingward skies. *Ah, Mohrkronin*, he sighed, *how I wish I could see you tonight as you once were, glittering and bright in the torches of your drinking halls, reflected in the deep Pools of Memory where the Old Ones gathered to retell the stories of their youth. To see the flash and feel the heat of your forges, to hear the ringing weapons of dwarven warriors practicing their art in the training halls, to taste the dusty air as it rises from the bountiful mines. To share in the wine and song when a new vein is discovered, to bow in prayer each summer at the Festival of the Golden Shaft.*

How I miss you, Mohrkronin, Draupnir said to himself. *How I long to return!*

Draupnir walked to edge of the cliff in front of him, close enough now to catch the rippling sounds of water cascading through the rocky stream unseen below. He mulled over the stories Klishnauran had brought back with him from his Sunward travels. Bruonar, old salty Bruonar, had retaken the Shining Mountain, almost as great a warren as Mohrkronin. *Well, at least one clan has their home back*, he thought to himself.

He kicked a small stone into the night, hearing it clatter down the hillside and drop with a splash into the stream. Draupnir had felt a strange emotion come over him with the news that a dorrow had helped Bruonar. The eyes of the other elves had burned into him, showing their fear and distrust, even after the many Great Moons of close contact they had shared. Did they equate the dorrow with the dwarves? He was amazed that such a comparison could be made. The dorrow, for the most part, were despicable creatures, killing and enslaving without regard to their victims. The dwarves only fought when pressed, though lately

many more homeless kinsmen had hired on with adventuring parties, and had forgotten the old ways. Still, Draupnir, had never harmed one weaker than himself, and had only aided these elves, fought beside them, hunted with them.

Their eyes had burned him inside. To know that those he had helped still harbored suspicions tore him up inside. But the voice inside him spoke, *Maybe their fear is understandable. Maybe it should be expected.*

While the elves in Lindenrest always granted help and respite to passers-by and those in need, rarely did they suffer non-elves to stay more than a fortnight. The elves appreciated the solitude their secluded settlement afforded them, and were loath to share it with outsiders for any extended period of time. And their friendship was rarely offered to non-elves, especially to underground-dwelling races like the dwarves.

But Draupnir was an exception. Since arriving at Lindenrest some two decades ago, he had been a welcome comrade, adapting the elven way as his own and sharing what wisdom was his to give. He traded much of his lore of minerals and smithying, along with his ability to manufacture nearly any kind of iron weapon or tool, for their knowledge of the woods and an understanding of many new types of creatures and plants. Under their guidance, he developed an exceptional talent for bowmaking, to the point of specializing in heavy-pull composite bows of a totally unique design. Incorporating the best yew staves, backed with sinews from rare creatures and bone from the giant mastodons traded from the Winter Realms (in addition to his own use of dwarven runes of power carved along the sides), these strange weapons could only be strung and pulled by the strongest of archers. Draupnir had no difficulty himself with his own personal bow, but found that only two others in the settlement had the requisite brawn to use his creations: a pair of young half-elf siblings, S'Reen and his sister Fetla, who with their powerful weapons, became great hunters of the most dangerous monsters that ventured too close to their elven settlement. The increased respect and honor they gained from their exploits made them grateful followers of Draupnir, and the pair usually accompanied him like puppies throughout the nearby locale.

And whenever a warring party asked for volunteers to recapture prisoners or to stop some harassing orcs or ogres, Draupnir was always the first to volunteer, and the last to return to camp. His fighting skills were unmatched even by the most skilled of the elves. With his dwarven-enchanted bow, he was able to hit targets with such force that a single arrow was often more than enough to stop an entire raiding party in its tracks, especially when that arrow drove completely through their leader without slowing. And when close combat came, he used a devastating style of fighting with his matched heirloom blades. With both blades swinging and no apparent attempt at defense, his attacks would carry him into the midst of wavering opponents, sowing confusion and panic. S'Reen and Fetla took to calling him "Arrowblade," since his swords seemed to fly almost as fast as the elves' own arrows. The nickname stuck, although Draupnir himself never used it, preferring to refer to himself always as Draupnir Dvalin'son, from the Iron House of the Mines of Mohrkronin.

After spending many Great Moons among them, a powerful wanderlust and unshakable desire to find others of his kind enticed Draupnir to leave the settlement, taking him to a number of the larger cities of The Land and granting him exploits of many kinds. He gained power and prestige throughout the surrounding area, especially from other wandering dwarves who likewise had no permanent home and spent their lives in eager pursuit of gold and glory.

He was looking for something that was undefineable, at least to himself, and after a season or two in which he traveled with one adventuring band after another, he would inevitably wind up pointing his iron-shod boots to the forests Shadoward of the Grey City, returning to the elves that were his only existent family. His coming and going continued for the better part of the following twenty Great Moons, yet he was always welcomed back with joyous hearts and much celebration whenever he returned.

But Klishnauran's timely arrival and the suspicions his tales had unearthed served to remind him of the difference between himself and his hosts. The village and the surrounding hills were theirs, built up and expanded over hundreds of generations, defended from all manner of incursions, continually occupied through blizzard-filled winters and drought-stricken summers. He had helped defend the area in recent seasons, and had even added some stonework to the wondrous wooden structures they had built and had been instrumental in putting meat on the tables of more than a few families. But when it came right down to it, he would always be a visitor. No amount of traded knowledge or shoulder-to-shoulder struggles would ever erase from his mind the fact that his 'home' was thirty leagues to the Setting side in the occupied mountains of his birth.

As Draupnir gazed across the woods to the darkened Settingward skies, two elves silently approached the glade in which he stood and quietly settled down under the low branches. They placed their sturdy weapons on the soft leaves at their sides, crossed their legs, and respectfully turned their bodies to face away from the dwarf, lost in contemplation.

The way in which Draupnir arrived at Lindenrest was one of the reasons why the elves were always willing to

open their homes to him. When he was still an adolescent of sixty, the goblin wars had succeeded in driving out the last of the dwarves from great Mohrkronin. Not content to merely occupy and defile the once-glorious halls, the goblins continued to press them as they retreated further down the hills into the lowlands. For the only time in their many ages of warfare with goblins and orcs, the few remaining dwarves actually broke and scattered in flight from the relentless goblin pressure.

Draupnir's family—his ancient father, his foster-mother and two brothers, along with a handful of other clansmen—held out some leagues away from the Rising Sun entrance to Mohrkronin on a small hilltop crowned with megaliths, as goblin raiding parties attempted for suns to overwhelm their small group. There was no escape down from their perch, with dozens of warg-riding goblins roaming the countryside by sun, and worse horrors loose at night. Slowly, painfully, he watched as goblin darts and axes took the lives of the ones who mattered most to him. His foster-mother was killed on a wind-swept night as the attackers overwhelmed one edge of their encampment. His two brothers died the following sun, wracked in grief and cursing like madmen at their attackers. The rest of the clansmen died over the following suns, until only he and his father remained.

And when his father had died at the hands of the hated goblins, an unbelievable event occurred: the image of a living dwarven goddess had appeared, helping Draupnir fight off the remaining goblins and taking his father's lifeless body to the heavens with her. At times, Draupnir wondered if he had been delirious from the lack of food and the exhaustion of a full week of continuous fighting, if he had merely hallucinated the image of Haela Brightblade. But whenever he doubted himself, he ran his stubby fingers about the pendant that hung from a leather thong around his neck, the ornament his father Dvalin had carried for two hundred Great Moons: the flaming sword emblem that was Haela's symbol, the one his father dropped as he rose into that empty night sky.

He looked across the dark night now, wondering if from this distance he could make out the low foothills where that last desperate battle had taken place. He knew that even with the light of morning, the intervening hills and forests would block the hilltop.

But the terrain could not hide the memory of that sun, or the dramatic events that occurred in the following weeks.

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Some seven suns after the battle on the Hill of Standing Stones, having avoided the pursuing bands of goblins by traveling mostly in the twilight of early dawn and late afternoon, Draupnir arrived at a small stream, rock-strewn with the debris from the valley it had carved. Here he paused for a sun to rest, knowing he had put enough distance between himself and his pursuers. During the early morning he had had some luck in catching small game, but had yet to see any sign of trailing goblins. Clearly they had been in no hurry to hunt down this last dwarf, after the damage he had caused at the hilltop. Draupnir had aimed for the direction of the rising sun and a little to the right, following the gradual descent of the Anvilspine Mountains as they sank into the nearest reaches of the Dale Lands.

He ate some cooked rabbit and drank from the refreshing stream, and as he looked at the forested ridges ahead, pondered his next decision. He knew there were inhabited lands in this direction, but what exactly lay in front of him he did not know. A large city called Grey City was somewhere Sunward of Mohrkronin, but he had never ventured far beyond the dwarven hills in his sixty-odd Great Moons of life. There were also great forests further to the Rising side, he had heard, some inhabited by the not-unfriendly elves, others home to darker denizens. But since the battle his heart had grown strangely hard, uncaring of his fate. He recalled the oath that had escaped his lips on the foot of the slope, and he wondered what forced that sentence out of him. Surely there was no chance now of retaking the halls, what with his kinsmen slain or scattered across a hundred miles. Better to die on his feet with a weapon in hand, than to struggle along sun after sun with no home or hearth to call his own.

There had always been visits by wandering dwarves who passed through Mohrkronin, regaling their hosts with tales of far-away lands and great treasures awaiting the valiant explorer. But none of them were ever so complacent or wealthy that a pair of bonded dwarves, a male and female with the hint of affection retiring for the night, couldn't bring some sign of envy or sadness to their eyes. And never did the best-equipped, gold-laden traveller ever look so longingly as when he spied one of the small, comfortable quarters the dwarves had carved out for themselves in the deep of their favorite mountain.

Sighing heavily, he finished the rest of the meat, spilled water over the embers of his campfire and began to pack up for his next leg of travel. As the hissing of the cooled embers began to die down, his ears picked up the sound

of heavy footfalls, coming from deep in the woods. Leaving his gear, he picked up his two swords and began to lope off in the direction of the noise. The weights in his hands gave him a comfortable confident feeling, which was all but lost as he focused on the noises that crashed and fell somewhere among the trees.

His experience at wandering the mountaintops and the low hills and valleys that surrounded Mohrkronin had taught Draupnir to survive on his own in the outer world. Hunting small game and finding water were no problem. But even his dwarven battle training left him unprepared for his first foray into heavy woods. The trees reared above him, tall as the arches of the greatest halls, thicker than even the biggest supports in the lowest levels of the caverns. Everywhere growing plants, ferns and low bushes choked the ground from sight. Piles of leaves and moldering logs sent up a musty, clinging aroma that was wholly alien though but not entirely unpleasant.

The trees were nothing like he expected. After moving past the first outer stands, the forest grew to contain giant hardwoods of immense size and surprising beauty. His concentration on following the suspicious noises wavered as he stared at the golden skin of these living artifacts.

Reaching up with one sword hand, he ran his fingertips lightly across the rough exterior of the nearest tree. Instead of the dry surface he expected to find, the bark was surprisingly smooth and pliable. It seemed as if the gods had fashioned thick sheets of goldleaf around the circumference and left it there to hang loose in the wind. Draupnir craned his head back and stared straight up at the towering height of the tree, losing the pinnacle in the gathering closeness of yellow-gold leaves that blocked out all sunlight and sky. The light wind tossed the golden leaves and they responded by clapping against each other like an appreciative audience. The beautiful sound was like music, rapturous and entrancing, and Draupnir merely stood there hypnotized by the scents and sounds of the forest.

Just then the bump of a large body hitting an immovable object, together with a snarling curse that carried easily to his ears, brought him out of his reverie. He tapped the side of the great tree with his fingertips in parting, then headed off at a run toward the nearby sounds.

As he rounded a gentle slope and entered a small glade, he noticed in the distance a pair of huge ogres running in circles around a group of green-leafed trees. Their olive-skinned hands were reaching up into the branches as if they were collecting apples or nuts. And sure enough, a few pieces of some kind of fruit came down at them, sometimes catching them in the face. One ogre, with what looked like half a beard and armed with a warhammer that hung from a strap at his wrist, caught a small melon right in one eye, temporarily blinding him. He continued his running while trying to clear his vision and ran straight into the trunk of one of the wider trees. Curses flew in the air, as leaves and a few twigs dropped from the lower branches.

Draupnir lowered his weapons and chuckled to himself. Ogres were known to all as being fearsome, dangerous fighters, but were equally well known for their incredible stupidity. Many old-timers had stories of how they had outfoxed an ogre with fool's gold, or survived a close battle by tricking the slower-witted ones into believing reinforcements were on their way. These two must have gotten hold of some bad brew, he thought, and were now chasing imaginary foes all across the empty woods.

But the crashing blow that the last ogre had thrown into the tree had dislodged something other than twigs. Visible in one of the lower clumps of foliage was a thin green leg, dancing in the air as its owner tried to regain his perch on the branch. The other ogre also caught sight of this appendage and jumped as best he could to grab it. He came up short, but the bulk of his frame when it returned to the ground caused a powerful shudder to run through the surrounding woods, and now a second leg, the match to the first, appeared out of the clump. The second ogre was joined by the first, both of them flailing their arms at the limit of their reach, trying to grab at their partially-seen prey.

The legs were thin and coloured a pale green hue and were wrapped in deerskin boots to the calf. The ogres were unable to grab either leg before they disappeared back into the leaves that hid the rest of the body of the owner. One ogre screamed some foul epithet up at the branches, and caught a large walnut in the forehead for his trouble. Shaking with rage and screaming at the air around him, he went over to a large dirty sack laying in a clump of leaves. Reaching in, he pulled out what looked like a small tree, but was really a club scaled to his size. He looked back up at the hidden adversary and smiled an evil, gap-toothed grin as he wound some old rags around the end of his club.

The first ogre continued jumping up and grabbing for the now-hidden leg, sending tremors through the forest floor with each attempt. Draupnir had almost decided to let the two ogres tire themselves out before he closed to investigate, when the second returned with his cloth-covered club. He had it lit and was preparing to stick it up into the branches.

Draupnir realized that the single opponent, whoever he was, was no match for a burning tree. Unsure if it was

a good idea to approach these two behemoths by himself but with no other option, Draupnir strode into the clearing with his weapons held low in front of him, the tips just scraping the dry eaves as he closed the distance between them.

The two ogres elbowed each other, openly enjoying their opponent's predicament. The one with the torch held it up to the underside of the nearest clump of green leaves, scorching the lowest branches which quickly burst into flame. He cackled a deep, booming laugh and pointed up at the tree. "Oi, come on dawn an' play wit' us, ya scrawny bastard. We hates ta pull burnt clothin' off'n our dinnah!" The two roared guffaws at their humor, not noticing the dwarf silently approaching behind them. The torch wielder jabbed at the branches in earnest, catching a large section of the tree alight. The one in the tree now became visible for a moment, as a shape ran across the branch to the trunk, disappearing behind it.

The ogres turned to follow, but by now Draupnir stood so close to them that as they turned to pursue, the torchless one banged into him. Tall by dwarven standards, Draupnir was still much shorter than the ogres. Concentrating on the running figure, the one ogre never saw the dwarf he stumbled over, catching his thigh on Draupnir's shoulder and doing a head-first dive into an opportunely-placed thicket of thorns and brambles. The other guffawed at his partner's clumsiness, but halted in mid-laugh as he noticed the dwarf, two weapons extended and ready to fight.

"Pardon me," Draupnir said slowly and deeply, his voice dripping with unappreciated sarcasm.

The standing ogre, the one with half a beard and the torch still burning in his upraised hand, studied the burly fighter for a moment. "Ere, you lost or sumpin,' pal?" he said, waving the brand for emphasis. "Dis 'ere's none o' yer bid'nness." He stepped forward and raised his great bulk up as menacingly as he could. "Away wit' ya, 'afore I squashes ya like a brownbug."

Raising one huge booted foot, the ogre brought his weight down in a crashing thump, smashing a medium-sized bush into flat limbs and scattered leaves. Seeing his chance, Draupnir tossed the weapon in his right hand up in a short arc, caught the hilt overhanded and drove it down in a quick, hard jab, catching the ogre's boot halfway in from the toes. The sword cleaved straight through the unarmored foot as the ogre bellowed a howl of outrage. Flinging the forgotten torch aside and grabbing for his wounded foot, he bent over with his free left hand to pull the weapon out of his bleeding limb. Draupnir took this moment to drop one hand to the bracken-strewn ground, swinging his right leg at the back of the ogre's other leg. The sudden low attack surprised the off-balance ogre, and the force of Draupnir's kick combined with the weight of the heavy beast crumpled the ogre's one good leg, toppling him backward. He took a long time falling, being so high up in the first place, and when he finally hit the ground with a tremendous crash he wound up landing on the previously discarded torch.

Sparks and flame-edged leaves flew out from the impact in all directions. Draupnir shielded his face to the side, where his eyes came level with a great head peeking out of the bushes. The ogre that had tripped over him was watching his comrade's unsuccessful attack, and a few seconds elapsed before he realized his turn was next. He was so close to the dwarf, standing there smiling back at him, that he merely snarled and reached out his two huge arms to grab him up and squeeze the life out of him. "C'mere, youse," he growled at the dwarf.

But if the ogre was close, so was Draupnir. Leaning back for a moment, he pulled his head down low, thrust forward and punched the top of his heavy helmet forward. The blow connected with the ogre's nose, crunching the now useless feature onto his face and sending him sprawling back into the thicket with screams of outrage.

Up in the tree, a thin green face with pointed ears peeked around the side of the tree at the three combatants. His almond-shaped eyes gazed curiously at the short armored warrior with the long beard. The dwarf stood defiantly between the two fallen ogres, one clutching his bleeding foot, the other with gangly hands wrapped around his bleeding face. Draupnir leaned down to pick up his bloodied sword, wiped it on the ground and boomed out a challenge in stentorian tones. "Now be gone you two, before I do more permanent damage to you."

The two moaning ogres slowly got to their feet, one hopping, the other blindly feeling in front of him for some guidance. He poked his hand into the other's face, and the ogre roughly threw down the hand clawing at his eyes. "Gerrouit of it!" he bellowed at his companion, then glared down at the warrior in front of him. "Wot makes youse tink ya kin stop da both of us, runt?" he said, hands as big as tree limbs on his hips, bending down to glower at the intruder.

"Well, actually, I may only have to take care of *one* of you," Draupnir replied, calmly wiping the rest of the ogre blood from his blade with a handful of leaves.

"One of us?" the ogre said, uncomprehendingly.

"Certainly. Your friend with the broken nose, as a matter of fact. You, I won't even have to bother with," he said, looking up at the towering figure.

"An' why won't youse even be bodderin' wit' me?" the ogre bellowed in mounting fury.

"Because," Draupnir stated as if he were explaining a simple tool to an apprentice, "the fire will take care of you for me."

The ogre raised his big head up to the top of his bulk and looked left, then right. "Wot fire? I don't see no fire," he said, sniffing the air with his big nose.

The other ogre, with one hand to his face and the other out in front of him still, had wandered around to the back of his comrade when he noticed what Draupnir was referring to. "Hey Barsht," he called out through his plugged face, "Youse is on fire, youse is."

The other ogre muttered something unintelligible and bent his huge body about to look at his back. The tattered garments he wore were indeed alight from his fall on the torch, and if there was one thing ogres hated more than a fair fight, it was being burned.

"Argghh, you idgit! Put me out! Put me out!" Screaming, he raced around and around, trying to outrace the flames on his back. His gyrations only made the flames stronger, and his nearly blind buddy was no help.

"Stan' still, will youse?" he yelled, but the first ogre was too crazed to pay him any mind. Suddenly remembering that they had crossed a large stream earlier in the sun, he took off at a dead run into the thicker woods, trailing shreds of smoldering cloth.

The dwarf returned his two swords with audible clacks into their sheaths. Arms crossed defiantly, Draupnir looked up at the lone remaining ogre, who peered down at him through the long fingers wrapped around his face. With a single toss of his head towards the departing one, the dwarf dismissed him without a word. The ogre backed away a few steps, still trying to understand how the small fighter had so easily turned the tables on his buddy and himself. But without his bigger companion, he suddenly felt vulnerable, and when a low growl welled up from the dwarf, he headed off through the trees wailing for his friend. "Wait for me, Barsht!" he cried, pushing over small saplings and banging off of bigger trees that couldn't get out of his way.

From up in the tree behind him, Draupnir heard a low sound that soon grew in volume to a discernable giggle. The voice then burst out laughing altogether, and finally Draupnir got a good look at the person whose life he just saved.

Thinner than a dwarven boy-child but taller than most elders, the one in the tree grasped a small limb with a long fingered hand as he slapped his thin leg with the other. His clothing was close-wrapped shades of brown and green, which explained why he was so hard to discern behind the wall of leaves. The green that at first appeared to be leggings or shirt lengths was actually exposed skin, almost matching the green of the leaves he stood next to. His long boots were supple brown leather, and a matching wristguard covered his right arm from elbow to thumb. A circlet of pale gold enclosed his yellow locks, allowing two pointed ears to peak out from beneath. Oddly shaped eyes, wide apart and large, pointed at each end unlike any eyes Draupnir had seen, alternately opened wide and squeezed shut, rolling tears of laughter down pale green cheeks. Across one shoulder hung a wide strap attached to a leather quiver stuffed with green-tufted shafts. Across the other shoulder hung a strung bow, made of a single curved piece and almost as thick as the man's arms.

At his waist was a brown belt enclosed by a pale gold buckle, with what looked like a small sheathed dagger on one hip. On the other hip was a belt pouch with a shock of black hair sticking out of it.

The high rolling laughter of this man grew in volume until it echoed off the nearby hillsides. Draupnir, arms still crossed on his chest, waited until the mirth had for the most part left him before addressing the man.

"Seems you've a bit more to be happy about now than a few moments ago," he said matter-of-factly. "May I have the honor of knowing whom I just saved?"

Coughing back further peals of amusement, the man looked fully at Draupnir for the first time. Releasing the tree limb, he bowed in an exaggerated manner with one hand up in the air and the other bent at his waist, in a motion that Draupnir feared would send him head over heels off the branch he perched on. Instead, the thin man bounced back up to a straight position and happily addressed the dwarf.

"Well met, friend rock-eater. My name is S'Reen Maethla, of the elves of Lindenrest." The voice, speaking the Common tongue with an arresting accent, had a soft yet forceful colour to it, and Draupnir found himself touched by the elegance of the simple words they spoke. "My heartiest thanks to you and your noble actions."

"The dwarves once of Mohrkronin called me Draupnir, son of Dvalin, of the Iron House." His eyes began to well up as he realized for the first time he had uttered his lineage in the past tense.

S'Reen cocked his smiling head to one side and asked, "What exactly do you mean 'once of Mohrkronin?' I have

heard of nothing—” Just then, the elf turned quickly silent and strangely serious. He bent into a low crouch, then ran the length of the tree limb that stretched over Draupnir’s head.

Draupnir hesitated, amazed that the elf was preparing to attack his recent rescuer. He moved his hands down to hover over the grips of his swords, despairing of having to fight his new-found ally but ready to defend himself if need be. But then S’Reen, nearing the limit of the limb, jumped clear of the branch and landed nimbly on the ground behind Draupnir, running in the direction of the ogre’s retreat.

Draupnir wheeled around, unsure of just what was happening. Soon the running elf reached a patch of clumped leaves and began to stomp as heavily as his light feet would allow. It was only then that the dwarf noticed the thin streams of smoke that drifted up from other clumps bordering the ogre’s trail, and watched the sparks fly out from under the elf’s pumping legs. Draupnir, sure now that the elf’s intentions were non-hostile, walked over to an adjacent smoldering pile and stomped along with S’Reen, unsure of the reason for their actions.

“Friend,” he said over his shoulder, his attention on stamping out the smoking leaves but an eye focused on the elf, “why are we doing this? Surely no harm can come to us from such small fires as these.”

The elf actually stopped for a moment, looking over at the dwarf in full disbelief. The stunned expression left his face moments later, as he realized the leaves continued to burn beneath his leather-clad feet. He returned to his stomping, carefully viewing the odd creature who assisted him without an awareness of why.

“The reason, Sir Dwarf,” he finally replied, after measuring his words carefully, “is to prevent these small fires from coming together and forming one big conflagration. That would endanger all the trees, and that,” he said, looking knowingly at Draupnir, “would be unbearable.”

The image of the giant golden trees was still strong enough in his mind’s eye that his reply was slow and uneven, as he said, “But they are, after all, only trees.”

This time the elf came to a complete stop and stared right at him, unsure of whether the dwarf was being honest or just toying with the elf. His cessation of action caused the dwarf to also stop and turn to face the elf.

“Have I offended thee in some fashion?” Draupnir asked sincerely.

“No, truly I should not expect one who lives from birth to the infirmness of old age under the dirt and stone of mountains, bereft of the beauty of the great forests, to understand the feelings we of the woods hold for these trees, and truly for all living things,” S’Reen answered. “Their lives are ours, and ours theirs. As you would fight in your way to save a companion in combat, so we would sacrifice ourselves to protect the forest and all the life it shelters.”

“But you take the fallen trees for firewood, do you not? And the branches and trunks supply you with material to build homes and great halls, don’t they?” Draupnir asked. His manner was straightforward, neither sarcastic nor insulting. Looking around at the small clearing, he said, “I have noticed few large trunks decaying in this wood. Are they perhaps holding up a roof in an elven village nearby, or protecting some family from the harsh winter winds?”

The elf turned once again to his fire prevention work, still pondering the dwarf’s naive but honest questions. He considered how to approach the subject in a fashion that the dwarf would understand. “Do dwarves not feel the same way about the mines you work, the veins you follow in the caves?”

Draupnir realized the direction S’Reen was going with his reasoning. “It is true that dwarves respect, even venerate the mines we work. Prayers are offered for the use of the ore within.” He looked over as S’Reen began to put out another of the smoldering piles. His understanding of elves was thin, but he felt a level of comprehension was within reach that would be essential if he was to ever consider them true friends or allies. “But a dwarf would find it offensive to see a mountain destroyed in the pursuit of metal or stones. It is said that the powerful dwarf Hrumghar, a lord of some standing, once fell into disrepute for completely cleaning out a rich vein of mithril. He worked hard to reestablish the field and his good name.” As Draupnir finished the pile he was on, he noticed S’Reen looking across the glade with a measured smile, knowing that he had touched an inner respect that the elf agreed with.

The elf wandered over to the base of the tree he had retreated to. He located a pack that had lain by the trunk and hoisted it onto his back. “You made reference to the mines of Mohrkronin, Draupnir. You call that your home, do you?”

Draupnir’s head dropped to his chin, and he was a long time in replying. “My home,” he started, then paused, and finally began again. “My home does not exist, in the sense that the word normally is used. It is seven suns and more since my family and clan brothers were forced out from the great Mines by hordes of foul goblin-kind.” He looked up at the sun as it forced its way through the green boughs. “I do not expect to see the Mines again in my lifetime, except perhaps in my nightmares.”

"Then no one awaits your return this sun?" S'Reen asked, and as soon as he did, the reaction that Draupnir gave him showed him the error of asking that question. Draupnir's eyes glazed over, his voice caught in his throat, and he gestured with one hand to the Setting side, indicating some vague location with an unutterable description.

"I see. Well then, good dwarf, you must come and share the hostfires of our settlement. 'Tis the least we can do to repay you for your bravery."

"I would truly be honored," Draupnir replied, bowing low to the green-clad elf. "Sure and I could use a full tankard and a long rest, Haela knows."

S'Reen's eyes opened up quickly as he looked down the trail where the ogres had retreated. "I believe we may have to postpone the celebration for a time, my friend." He pointed with one hand behind Draupnir as he removed his bow from off his shoulder with the other. "It appears we have some unwelcome guests to deal with first."

The ground was beginning to shake as the pounding of many heavy feet came closer, and now Draupnir could make out the noise that a large group of running ogres made as they clomped and stumbled through the underbrush. Soon three and four heads began to poke out of the bracken down the trail, and in a short while the two companions could both clearly see the extent of their foe.

The two ogres must have had friends nearby, for now fully eight of the large angry beasts were tromping this way, pushing over saplings and smashing patches of flowers and low bushes in their anger. One of their number seemed to be leading them, a big ugly brute with a thick rusty sword in one hand and a large full sack clutched in the other.

Draupnir calmly checked his gear with his hands, never taking his eyes off the approaching ogres, making sure his two swords were loose in their scabbards and his armor was all in place. He had never fought this many ogres before—actually, he had never fought *any* ogres before a hand's time ago—but the Old Ones in his clan had many stories about the power and doltishness of these great brutes. His mind began to run through a battle plan, testing options and thinking up counters to them, when the elf next to him yelled "Hold!" in a terribly fierce voice, much more commanding than Draupnir had thought the elf capable of.

Surprisingly, the ogres slowed to a halt. They snarled there in a pack, eight huge monsters all over seven feet tall, thick and burly, dressed in hides and patched-together rags from unlucky adventurers they'd met, some carrying battered weapons and others holding improvised clubs. Opposite them, at the other end of the small clearing stood Draupnir and S'Reen, a single dwarf with two blades and a thin elf with a bow. The ensuing battle looked like it would be a quick, brutal slaughter.

The leader of the ogres looked around at his band, gathered his anger and courage and howled across at the two, "Dey calls me Gorshton, dey does. Which a' youse done dis to me brudder?" He pointed the curved blade at the ogre called Barsht who had attacked S'Reen earlier. This one had part of a beard missing from his chin, where now only a thin reddish scar remained. He also wore britches and a short vest both singed with the black smoldering edges of a recent fire.

"Oh, he must belong to this, then," S'Reen said lightly, pulling the black tuft that Draupnir had noticed earlier from the bag at his waist. He twirled a scraggly section of beard around his finger, a shelf of skin still attached at one end. "T'was doing him little good at the time, hiding that handsome visage of his. T'would be easier to just snip away the other half and even it out."

Barsht the Half-Bearded snarled evilly then and began to move to the attack, but Gorshton held him back with the sword in his hand. "Youse speaks tough, little one. 'Specially fer one what's goin' ta die soon." He leaned back and looked up at the tree tops. "Mebbe we's should cut down a tree er two, raise a big bonfire and roast yer hide afore we kills ya."

The rest of his band roared in laughter at their chieftain's mockery and threw taunts across the clearing at the elf, but S'Reen did not waver. "After this sun," he said slowly and forcefully, "neither you nor any of your smelly, hairy friends will do any more tree-felling in this forest. I give you my word."

The taunting, rowdy bunch quieted somewhat at S'Reen's comments. The chieftain, realizing that he needed to keep the morale of his band high, strode forward. "Big talk from such a skinny stick. And who is that one? Are the tree-climbers taking in rock-crunchers now to help fight their battles?" The big ogre eyed Draupnir suspiciously. Though even shorter than S'Reen, he was more than twice as wide, and ogres had a healthy respect for all dwarves, no matter how few their numbers.

Draupnir glanced over at S'Reen, then responded, "I'm merely here as an observer." At this, S'Reen shot him a curious look. Draupnir smiled back and then shouted, "I'm hoping to observe how quickly the two of us can make you *ghortaag* scum turn tail and run!"

S'Reen knocked an arrow with a little laugh, and waited for the taunt to have its effect on the impatient enemy. Indeed it worked extraordinarily well, for the gang of ogres charged as one right for the two companions, screaming and spitting in rage.

S'Reen pulled the arrow to his ear and held it there with little effort. Waiting for his targets to close he whispered to Draupnir, "What did you call them?"

Draupnir drew both long blades and spoke calmly, "*Ghortaag* has a certain reference to their kin, something like 'spawn of barrowgar-droppings.' The barrowgar are the lowest form of dwarf. It's an oath ogres don't care for."

S'Reen remained stock-still as he replied, "I gathered as much."

The eight ogres were charging at full speed now when Draupnir said, "You're good with that thing I trust?"

"Tell me what you want me to hit. Only, tell me soon."

Draupnir studied the raging horde for a moment then said, "Can you hit the leader?"

Instantly the arrow flew through the air on its way. "Certainly," S'Reen replied, already knocking another arrow before the first found its mark.

The charging mob was packed so close together that when the chieftain caught the arrow in his kneecap and went sprawling to the forest floor, those directly behind him tumbled as well. Two passed around to the sides and came on, while the others tried to sort themselves out. The chieftain bellowed in anger, pain and fury at his comrades who were draped all over him.

Draupnir strode coolly ahead a few paces, ready to meet the two still coming. He began to twirl his two blades in the air before him, catching the ogres' eyes and preventing them from dodging the oncoming arrows. The elf's arrows shot past his ears so closely that he almost felt they had been meant for him. But he saw first one ogre then the other sprout a green-tufted shaft, each in the right shoulder. Draupnir realized the elf had aimed those shots to slow down their attacks, giving Draupnir a better chance to fight them.

By now they had almost joined battle, and their fierce charge gave Draupnir an opportunity. He seemed to pause momentarily. As the two large beasts drew their weapons up, Draupnir dashed forward between the two pairs of massive legs. He put all his weight into one powerful swing at the back of the leg of the one on the left, catching the unfortunate ogre right in the muscle. With a mighty bellow, that one dropped his rusted battleaxe and fell forward, clutching at his leg, no longer able to stand.

But his comrade was fast, quicker than Draupnir had anticipated. He swung his club around and caught the dwarf on the left shoulder with a blow hard enough to kill a normal man. But the resistance of the dwarf's build, together with the fine armor's ability to distribute the shock, kept him alive. He was lifted into the air and shoved a few steps over, but Draupnir merely landed on his feet and turned calmly to face his bigger opponent. "That the best you can do, weakling?" he taunted. "I've known female dwarves that could push me farther than that!"

The ogre snarled and returned to the attack, swinging low and fast. But now that Draupnir was ready for his swings, he used his smaller size and quicker reflexes to dodge and dart between the ogre's attacks and hit home with a few quick attacks. An arrow appeared in the side of the ogre's arm, and as he waved at it distractedly for a moment, Draupnir lunged in with both blades, driving them deep into the ogre's midsection. With a mighty yowl, the great creature toppled over backward, landing in a billowing cloud of dirt and leaves.

The other ogres were still untangling themselves when they saw their friend fall, then watched in horror as the other wounded ogre, trying to smash the dwarf with his meaty fists, was stopped by a quick strike the dwarf launched backwards without looking. He hit the ground heavily, then two arrows quickly appeared in his chest, silencing his moans.

The gang froze in confusion. They were used to taking the attack to their opponents, who always turned to flee at their very approach. On rare occasions they might find a lone human who provided sport as they took him on two on one, and occasionally they got to beat up on a hastily-prepared militia sent out to stop their raiding. But never had any of them gotten so much as a minor injury. And never had one of their brothers been dropped, actually killed right in front of them. And here two of their number had just been dispatched before their eyes, by a lone dwarf and a skinny elf!

Draupnir turned to face the six remaining ogres, some half to their feet, some still on the ground. With a fearsome yell, he ran forward, ran right to them, ran with blades whirling and an arrow or two arcing over his shoulders at the pile of confused ogres.

One of the ogres on his feet began backing away and caught an arrow in the shoulder while two others shifted forward unsteadily. The chieftain Gorshton, last to his feet and still clutching the broken shaft protruding from his kneecap,

bellowed, "Get 'em!" Hesitantly, three of the ogres began to lope off toward the charging dwarf, gaining some speed and a little courage as they went.

Draupnir was running as fast as his stocky, pumping legs could carry him, wondering if his attempt at fury would worry the hesitant ogres as much as he hoped. He wondered what he'd do when he actually had to fight all three or more of them, but then one of the attacking ogres caught an arrow right in the eye. Without a sound he simply fell forward onto his face, landing in a bouncing thud, and moved no more.

From behind him he heard an elven phrase, high and keening in the air, and wondered if the elves ever resorted to taunting an opponent. *Whatever, he thought, I'm glad that one's on my side.*

Now there were only two coming on, with a third actually backing away, holding his bleeding shoulder and Barsht the Half-Bearded standing by his chieftain. Draupnir felt a little better about his chances. He knew he should try something different with these two, since they had witnessed his last attack. As he got closer, he put on a surprising burst of speed and went around to the side of the one on his right. That one got a swing at him but it was weak and missed him completely. The great bulk of the beast kept the other one away from Draupnir, so he could fight almost one-on-one.

The ogre grumbled to a halt and swung again, starting low and finishing high. Draupnir dodged, then countered, stabbing forward at the larger opponent's legs. He struck home once but the second blade stuck in the ogre's thick skin. When the ogre readied his next strike the blade tore from Draupnir's grip and was tossed to the side, almost ten feet away. He was reduced to the single weapon, but the extra length of the haft allowed him to grip the sword with both hands, wielding the blade with more power and better balance. He even seemed faster with just the one weapon.

Part of his mind strayed from the raging battle just then, wondering at how strange fighting with only one sword seemed. It had been barely a week since he had taken up this new style of fighting with his and his father's sword simultaneously. He remembered the warm smile Haela had given him in the middle of that fateful combat, and tried to determine if she had done something to him to make him more skillful with the two weapons. Sure, he had practiced with two-weapon combat in the training halls, but he had usually been more comfortable fighting sword-and-shield style, or more often relying on his great stoutness and using a larger two-handed weapon. For the first time his old 'traditional' style seemed foreign to him, and for the second time in recent memory his instincts took over and suggested an immediate and unorthodox move. He wanted the other sword in his hand. He'd have to defend until he could make his way over to retrieve it.

When he returned to conscious defense he sensed that more than a few swings and counter-strokes had occurred while he had been lost in thought. He was closer to the discarded sword and saw the ogre chieftain pushing the last two in his general direction, screaming encouragement and threats alternately. The other charging ogre had been preoccupied by S'Reen's arrows and looked more like a gully spinehog than a possible threat. He hit the ground soon after, and Draupnir turned his full attention to the big ogre at his front.

Countering one great swing and dodging a huge bare-footed kick, Draupnir sensed that he needed the other weapon in his hand to defeat this one. He timed the ogre's next swing so that the blow would catch him right on the flat of his sword, hopeful for enough weight in the blow to carry him over to where his sword lay in the leaves. The ogre complied perfectly, swinging hard but slow. Draupnir shifted his weight onto his right foot, and took the full force of the mighty blow with his blade and body as one.

The ogre had thought to make quick work of this one, but found the dwarf surprisingly tough to hit. The dwarf had lost one of his stickers but didn't seem at all worried. Hmmph! He'd have to squash this little one, or Barsht and the rest would tease him about it for the rest of the high suntime.

Just then the dwarf made a mistake. He'd been dodging his swings as if he knew just where the big club was going, but then one of the ogre's blows caught the tough little fighter full force, sending him tumbling back into a pile of leaves. Hargh! He strode up with his club held waist high, ready to finish off this bugger in front of Barsht and the Boss, earning him a meatier share of the dinner than usual.

The big club raised up over the dwarven body, and as it came down it was blocked by the dwarf's quick sword. But before the ogre could raise it back up for another strike, the other blade shot out from under the carpet of leaves and sank hilt deep into his abdomen. The hand holding the club faltered, then weakened its grasp and the club slipped, falling to the forest floor. It landed next to the dwarven warrior, who had his black sword stuck deep in the ogre's rib cage. He pulled it out with a flourish, and the ogre slowly sank to join his club in the deep leaves.

The Boss let out a scream of anger and frustration. He kicked Barsht in the backside and threw the other one by the collar forward, then came stamping up with his huge curved steel blade in his hand. He hurled oaths and curses like

they were spears, and bore down on Draupnir with single-minded determination. He didn't slow when a second arrow joined the first in his leg. He didn't flinch when another whizzed past his head. He even picked up speed as he approached the dwarf, and just as they were about to get their first swings in, he lunged madly forward with his whole body.

Draupnir was caught unprepared for the sight of a flying ogre coming toward him. He'd just absorbed one crushing blow from the previous ogre, and wasn't sure if he could take another so soon. His reflexes waited patiently for an order while the great beast approached in slow-motion. He realized that if the chieftain took him flat-footed, he might knock him unconscious with just his body alone. He couldn't withstand that much weight even with his best shield in his hand.

Only one thing to do, his battle senses told him.

He planted both feet and jumped as far as he could to the ogre's open-hand side.

The ogre had hoped he'd catch the dwarf under his body. He could pound him at will, or just squeeze the breath out of him. But quicker than he expected, the dwarf leaped to the side. He grabbed with his big meaty hand and for a moment he thought he'd caught the pesky critter. But it was a flashing sword instead that raked across his palm, leaving a deep gash that quickly bled ogre blood. He roared in pain, his feet flailing for any footing. He fell in a tremendous crash, spraying leaves and dust everywhere.

Draupnir rolled to his feet and went to work quickly on the nearest standing ogre, getting in three fast strikes before the bigger one could even compose himself for a defense. With the two arrows he'd already taken combined with the sight of his comrades either down or dead, he just plain decided that was enough for one sun. He didn't run away; he merely swung once at the pesky fighter to his front, turned around and walked away. He couldn't comprehend what had happened, and completely forgot about the elf standing some distance away with his deadly bow.

Peering from around a nearby tree trunk, S'Reen tracked the big target with an arrow knocked, but decided to let him go. He felt truly that that one, with his numerous wounds and a still-bleeding broken nose, wouldn't come back to these woods any time soon. And besides, there were two more still with fight left in them. He turned his attention to the chieftain and the half-bearded one by Draupnir.

"C'mon, Boss, git up. Git up 'n *crush* 'im," Barsht implored the grounded ogre. Draupnir stood to the side of the ogre on the ground, panting, with blood on both weapons and some of his own leaking through his armor. He needed to catch his breath, and felt that he'd done enough killing already. But he was wary of the ogres. One unexpected swipe could cleave him in two, and he was certainly not prepared to die just yet.

The Boss glanced out from the debris around his face, wondering if the dwarf was close enough for a quick swipe from his sword. He guessed that he was close to his left side, but figured the experienced dwarf would be ready for some trick like that. Instead he rolled his bulk over onto his right side slowly, looking up to see the dwarf was indeed right there, both weapons ready, breathing hard and bleeding far too little.

"Rarrghh. Youse is a pesky little runt, youse is," he said to Draupnir. A look passed between them then, with as much respect as an ogre could ever muster for a dwarf. The Boss slowly clambered to his feet with his curved sword trailing in the leaves behind him.

"It doesn't have to be this way. You don't have to end your suns face-down in the leaves," Draupnir said between breaths. He wanted to give the great hulk quarter and let him depart in one piece. Sometimes a beaten enemy is the best testament to your ability; this one's tales of the woods and their dangerous defenders would help to keep others of his kind far away from the elves and their lands. He judged that there'd always be a risk of the ogres wanting revenge for their fallen friends, but their loyalty ran as shallow as snowfall in summer. "Take them two and go. I won't be a-following you."

The Boss was almost to his feet as he slowly said, "Ya knows I can't do that. I'm the *Boss!*" he yelled, thumping his chest with his free hand. Drops of blood spattered from his chest where he pounded it. "I ain't *nevahr* backed down from a fight! *Nevahr!*" The arrow wounds were taking their effect as he staggered a bit before raising himself up to his full height. "I'm the best dere is, I am! You? Yer nothin' but a halfling in human armor! Ya can't stop me. I'm the *Boss!*"

With his last words he whipped his blade over his head in a great flying blow. It struck the ground where moments before the dwarf had been standing. While the ogre struggled to pull it back up from its earthen sheath, Draupnir hit the arm holding it with two slashing strikes. But then he drew back, hoping the Boss would learn from his error and accept defeat.

The Boss roared gain, kicked out with his left foot and swung the blade around in a wide arc. Draupnir leaped clear and stood his ground, neither backing away nor closing to attack. The ogre stepped forward and swung again, this time clanging his great sword off of one of Draupnir's blades. Draupnir turned it skillfully and took one more step back,

equalling the distance between them. Attack and block, swing and parry, their ringing fight continued.

Unobserved, Barsht was now almost behind Draupnir. He had been totally forgotten by the two combatants in their deadly duel. He spied a big boulder down to his right, and slowly bent over to pick it up. It must have weighed as much as a small horse, but the ogre lifted it with ease. Barsht hefted it to his shoulder, then raised it over his head. He gauged that in another step or two, the dwarf would have his back completely to him and then—

“Unh unh uunnh,” he heard a thin reedy voice say behind him. He turned his upper body slowly around and saw the elf, standing beside a tree with an arrow knocked and pointed right at his eyes. Barsht glanced back at the Boss, then swallowed his plan and dropped the rock. It landed with a heavy thud, unfortunately right on his foot. He grimaced in pain and stifled a scream.

Draupnir and the ogre continued to circle, with an occasional lunge by the Boss and a deft sidestep by the dwarf. Draupnir’s breathing was almost normal now, but the Boss’s exertions were beginning to tire him. He hadn’t gone this long in a fight in...well, in as long as he could remember. He had lost his powerful band, most of them dead in this very spot. He had no spoils from this fight, in fact, had lost face in letting this dwarf hold him off for so long. He had little left but to defeat this one, even if..

Draupnir knew the look in the eyes in front of him. He’d seen it many times before during training, when his fellow dwarfs lost their composure as they sparred with him. They threw away any advantage to get in a strike, though Draupnir’s stronger muscles and quicker reflexes would usually keep their strikes from landing. They would become desperate, willing to try anything. ‘One hit or die trying,’ that’d be their motto, not accepting defeat until he beat them into exhaustion. But this one was just too big to tire out. They could be here all night doing this.

Finally, Draupnir called out, “Take yer opportunity and go, Big One. Ya cannot win the fight this sun.”

The Boss grunted a reply. “I’ll beat ya ‘er die tryin’!”

Quickly Draupnir raised his weapons. “Are ya sure that’s the way you’d want it?” he said with squinting eyes.

“Aye, that be’s the only way I kin end it.”

“Very well.” The dwarf stood as straight as he could despite the beating he’d taken, crossed both blades in front of his chest and closed his eyes. In a quiet, solemn voice he said, “One swing.” He stood rock-still.

The ogre halted in his blind rage. One swing? Was that a challenge or an invite? Maybe one of the blows had connected with the rockeater’s skull, sent him looney. One desperate voice rang in his head to clear out now while the dwarf wasn’t looking, but the rest of him gathered his remaining energy for one last try. He quietly raised his sword—no threat, no scream—and rushed forward, the wind whistling through his open teeth.

Watching from beside the tree with an eye on the half-beard, S’Reen thought he’d heard the dwarf challenge the ogre to try one swing. Or so, that’s what it sounded like. Sure enough, the dwarf held his swords up in some kind of ceremonial defense and just waited. S’Reen wanted to call out a warning to him when the ogre charged, but the attack came so quick he couldn’t get the words out.

Draupnir was aware of the impending strike. With lightning speed he pulled his left blade up and out, catching the ogre’s great sword and deftly turning it aside. His other blade came from right to left, soaring over the ogre’s left hand and curving past his ear.

Two warriors—together, swirling blades—and then apart, both still standing, the echo of ringing steel hanging in the air.

The ogre’s short charge brought him a few steps past the dwarf, and he turned to face the rockeater once more. But the dwarf did not turn with him. He stood there frozen in his last pose, left sword out and high, right sword back and to his left, pointing behind him where the ogre now stood. The ogre thought the dwarf must be mad at himself for missing, then looked closer at the dwarf’s twin blades.

The one in his left hand, the one that had parried his stroke, was still clean, poised in the air where it had finished its arc. But the other blade, the one that had come whistling past his ear, was coated at the tip with fresh, dripping—

The Boss stumbled, raised his left hand up to his neck, felt numbness taking over his senses as he tapped with his fingers around his neck. He felt no pain, but brought his hand up in front of his clouding eyes. His thick calloused fingers were covered in yellow-brown blood. He looked over at the dwarf, frozen in position, tried to spit out one last taunt, found his tongue wouldn’t respond, then found his legs had failed him too.

Draupnir did not have to turn around. He plainly heard the gurgle in the ogre’s throat. He waited several heartbeats before the sword clattered to the ground, then bounced as the lifeless body crashed to the forest floor.

He was looking straight at Barsht now, his swords frozen in that final pose. He stared unblinking at the lone ogre, whose wide, dancing eyes glanced from the dwarf to his dead chieftain, back to the dwarf and back to the body.

“Go,” Draupnir said. “Now!”

Barsht slowly nodded, then nodded again, and with a last glance at his dead chieftain, turned on his heel and lumbered off to find his sole surviving friend.

o o o

That was the first time S'Reen had watched Draupnir fight, the first time he had seen the matched dwarven longswords unsheathed. He stared intently as Draupnir polished them later at the small campfire they had made. The elven village was some leagues in the direction of the Rising, and it was a full sun and another after that before they would arrive. They had set up camp in a circular grove of alders a league or two Shadoward of the battle with the ogres, and while S'Reen tried to concentrate on retying his salvaged arrowheads onto new shafts, he could not keep his eyes off the two blades the dwarf was sharpening and polishing in front of him.

Elves harbored a fair knowledge of magic, and had a sixth sense that allowed them to almost 'smell' magic when it was close by. And S'Reen smelled it here, that strong, heady aroma of power that called out, sung out its energy to those with the ability to hear. He had set enough arrowheads in his life, tho 't'was short by elven standards, that he was able to continue his task even while his eyes remained fixed on the angled, dark-steel surface of the two blades.

The flat of the blade was different than the razor-sharp edge. Running a barely perceptible depth in from the sharp slice, danced a small pattern of curves, rising and falling one over the other, formed by some process of layering the steel, though the technique was foreign to him. The metal was like a midnight frozen lake in winter, all curved edges flying up and out from the surface, ending in still black waves that sang through the air in an oddly rapturous sound, though they made no discernable noise to others. He thought he'd heard it before while he kept his arrow trained on Barsht, but he was far away and he couldn't be certain. Now he was sure, for at this close proximity, when the sword was barely moving it gave out a strangely audible glamour, like a pulse timed with its movements through the air.

The colour of the blades was pitch black, made of an almost light-absorbing steel, not the shiny mithril the elves had heard was the dwarves' favorite. Their dark length contrasted beautifully with the white-and gold crossguards and hilts, thick and ornate, with which they were finished. Excellent, amazing workmanship. He could only guess at their value though the elves worked little metal themselves, valuing the growing woods around them more than any precious gem. Still, their great warriors in the past had need of such weapons to defend themselves from powerful creatures of legend, dragons and meltess and such. Only the best enchanted weapon would even harm such a beast, and so those weapons became heirlooms to a family, passed from generation to generation on down for centuries. With such weapons, elves had defended one area or another from invader's without defeat, providing bulwarks against which wave after wave of opponents spent themselves and went back to the soil. An elder of long-past legend called M'Lillisev once owned a great magic bow called 'Lightkeeper,' for (it was said) it could snuff out a candle at the distance that a young elf could see.

But it only performed in the hands of its true owners. Magic weapons, it was also said, acted with their own goals in mind, working splendidly with some owners, not at all (or even cursedly) with others. 'Lightkeeper' at first worked for no elf who used it, skewing arrow after arrow either way left or far to the right. Only when M'Lillisev found it discarded after a tourney one night and tried it in the dark, did its real power come to pass. He had shot an arrow almost without thinking at a young archer who was about to fall from a tree, and pinned him by his cloak to the trunk until others could help him down. Challenged, he repeated the shot again and again, until it was plain that an extraordinary weapon had indeed been discovered.

Ahhh. S'Reen felt the stone edge on his arrow tip. *There's the problem. There's the reason why I'm worried at bringing him to our village.* He swallowed his thought: *It's the reason why I'm taking him the long way around, passing him unknowingly in front of every elven sentry on the Settingside Ring before we enter the village.* He looked down momentarily at the ground between his feet, hidden by the evening, lit only briefly by the campfire's dancing flames. Though the dwarven warrior had certainly saved him a good deal of trouble—S'Reen had not yet come to accept the possibility that he had been facing the loss of his life during the encounter, and the fact that he might owe a blood debt to the dwarf—the warrior could not yet be trusted, specifically because of his fighting skill. He was such a dangerous, deadly fighter. S'Reen wondered if that was why he was here.

The elf mentally corrected himself as he studied the care with which Draupnir rubbed oil into the blade with a blue cloth from his belt pouch. It wasn't exactly like he expected Draupnir would raise his sword against his brethren, yet where specialists of his trade went, they seemed to always find others who dealt in the same trade, and those caught in between usually had the worst of it.

The blades pulled his eyes back to their sleek lengths. They were long enough for a human to need both brawn and agility in order to wield them properly. But Draupnir was able to use one in each hand, on a frame that, though stocky and rock-hard, should have been too short for the ease of their use. Perhaps one of the enchantments that he 'smelled' made them lighter in the hands of the proper user?

Draupnir felt the elf's eyes on his blades, and honored his new-found ally by not removing the two swords into a darkened corner to finish their cleaning. He could hear the unasked questions, sense the unspoken awe at the swords, one his, the other his father's. He knew that only he, his father and a handful of dwarven elders had ever been able to tell them apart, they each looked so identical to the other. Legends older than Mohrkronin itself spoke of the two, the *Samaarincloss*, the twin swords of myth and fable.

As S'Reen became aware that Draupnir was looking at him, he realized his impoliteness and knew he should return his eyes to his work. Blades were for killing and the Elves were a race of peace. So his elders had taught him from his earliest suns, repeatedly instructing him to use his bow and his longknife only to bring needed food to his kin, or to save his life or others only if all other efforts failed.

But the blade held his eyes and his concentration. He thought he felt the sword's ego toy with his briefly, before a sudden snap of Draupnir's wrist flipped the weapon over in his hand, in order to clean the other side.

"Yer right on the money on one thing, elf," Draupnir said with a mixture of gruffness and familiarity. "They're powerful, they are. Forged by master craftsmen back before the time when humans walked the land, and the mountains were short and had not the white circlets 'round their ears." He looked up briefly from his rubbing to lock eyes with the elf, then went back to his polishing.

"No, they weren't forged by the dwarves, much to our dismay. They were created *for* a dwarf by a great weaponsmith of the Winter Realms, back in them suns when the humans had a realm worth the speakin' of. They had themselves a great tradition of creatin' tools of splendor and unusual ability, so when the dwarves of the clan of the Red Veins offered to trade 'em a pile of moon-steel for a weapon of honor for their King, well..." he trailed off, then leaned down to spit on the tip of the blade. S'Reen's eyes tricked him into believing he saw the spittal bubble for an instant and then melt into the surface.

"Them Wintermen, they did the ol' Red Veins one better. They sent back *two* blades for the great King's biennary—his two hundredth Great Moon of rule," Draupnir explained. He held the weapon up and admired it. The deep blue moonlight caught it on one side, the glow of the small campfire reddening the other. "They sent back these, the *Samaarincloss*, a matched set o' th' finest weapons any living dwarf had ever seen. Their beauty was obvious yet so amazing, that had they been non-magical in nature, their workmanship alone would have guaranteed them a place of honor in any dwarven treasure-hold."

Every so often he adjusted the rubbing of the blades, turning them this way and that, adding some bluish oil from an odd wooden bottle, using one rag that, though he'd finished with polishing the first blade and was half way through polishing the second, still looked as clean and dirt-free as when he pulled it out of the pouch it had been stored in. A sound seemed to emanate from the blades whenever Draupnir poured the bluish oil on them, a sound like the sea makes when it seeps into sand at the place where a great ocean and a continent of land meet.

"Thing is," Draupnir said with a winking nod in S'Reen's direction, "they are more than just pretty. They're...well, I don't completely understand it myself, an' my father, he...well, he didn't exactly get to clarify it for me 'afore he had...to leave." He gathered himself for a moment, then continued. "But it seems the Wintermen desired to create weapons of mystical quality to cement a bond of fair-trade 'atwixt themselves and this one dwarven clan. So they put a little of themselves into the steel as it was bein' forged, in the depths of a deep mountain no longer found on any map. They made the swords...*alive*, somehow." He looked across the flickering fire at S'Reen, regarding him closely. "You think I'm daft, don't you?"

"Oh no, certainly not for the story you describe. Long is the list of the times men and others fashioned weapons of power, made all the more dangerous because their creators gave of themselves and their spirit to power them. I am...familiar with one or two weapons of such ability." S'Reen leaned in a touch closer, smelling the odor of magic stronger now after the two blades had been bathed and cleansed. "But, and you'll pardon my great intrusion for asking, what

specifically do they *do*, if I might ask?"

"Do?" He laughed and spun the one in his right hand by the hilt, sending it twirling along the axis of its length, rising inches up from his palm as it spun, then instantly stopping in mid turn as he quickly reached up and regrasped it. "What do they do? Well elf, they do many things." He reached over with his left hand and picked up the other sword and hefted them together in his grasp. "This 'un," he indicated the left one, "can tell me, when I ask of it rightly *and in need*, where one may find food or ammunition for my crossbow, or an exit from a particularly nasty hollow. Anything you really believe you need, it'll guide you to it, sort of. But ya gots to really be in need, or it seems to ignore you. It won't find things you're afraid of, and it may not lead you deerectly to it." He held it away and off to one side, studying its fresh cleanliness as well as its design.

"And it seems it can block any weapon when it wants, or disarm a foe when ya think of it, just in the tryin.' This'n," he said, indicating the right, "is truly amazing." He said this with obvious awe in his voice. "It feels to be the stronger of the two. It can bounce a ball of magic dweomer back to the caster, or so 'tis said. It also carries about it some spells for its own use."

Draupnir smiled at S'Reen, laughed lightly and said, "Here's a trick that should be to yer liking." He held the weapon forward at the full length of his arm so that it stretched across the fire, through the flames, up to where S'Reen sat. "Go ahead, touch the end of the tip. 'Tis said they never burn with the heat of an ordinary fire, nor can they be rusted, nor harmed with the harshest of acids."

S'Reen, trusting his companion, reached carefully, slowly out with his gloved hand until his fingers were a hair's length from its edge. Draupnir's grip was steady and strong and the blade didn't quaver an inch, yet when S'Reen's fingers finally reached the tip of the sword, his fingers missed their expected contact. He jerked his hand back in surprise, then cautiously tried again. This time, his fingers more confidently stretched to make contact, yet the same thing happened: when his fingers got there, the blade somehow was not, and his hand drew back in unconscious reaction. Fascinated and a little frightened by this strange game, he tried one more time to reach the edge of the blades, as Draupnir spoke, "Close your eyes this time."

S'Reen cocked his head at this advice, then followed it. He felt, with his eyes closed, the energy pulsing from the long weapon, its power concentrated in the short thicker length nearer the hilt. The pulsing, beating power called out to him, asking him to accept its suzerainty over his ego and simultaneously daring him to experience its true command. His hand was drawn closer to that lodestone of power until suddenly—he was in contact with the blade! His eyes flew open reflexively and he witnessed an unreal sight.

His hand, his right gloved hand that before had been winding ordinary cord around a plain stone arrow head, attaching it firmly but simply to a stark wooden shaft, that same gloved hand now was impaled in the black-steel blade by a segment of the sword, driven through almost halfway down its length. His eyes could not reconcile the image of his hand half-buried in the steel, where his hand should not be. He daren't let go for fear of seeing his hand sliced off by the rest of the weapon that emanated out the back of his hand and continued on straight in the air.

Draupnir, closing his eyes himself, issued a low smooth note, almost like a hum, and the vibrations rumbled down the blade into the fingers of S'Reen's impaled hand. He closed his eyes again and held on tighter as Draupnir said, "Now open your eyes slowly, and concentrate."

He did as he was instructed, and upon opening his eyes once more saw his hand, whole and unpierced, holding firmly onto the end of the black blade. But now he could understand the conflict from before. Visible as a faint glow in the moonlight's radiance was a false image, a ghost image of the apparent length of the blade. the weapon did indeed seem to stretch almost five full feet in length, as long as the dwarf was tall or thereabouts. But that length was a mirage or some sort of an illusion, for the blade's true length was more on the order of three or three and a half feet in total, grip included. S'Reen's mouth fashioned the word 'why' though there was no air to propel the query forward.

Draupnir laughed and shrugged his shoulders. "Beats the mithril outta me," he replied to the unspoken question and, As S'Reen released his grip, Draupnir brushed the length of the blade twice more, calmly and nonchalantly. Cleaned and oiled, he returned both blades to their sheaths, then turned to work on the food in front of him.

The elf sat in wonder and with genuine awe for the rest of that night, as the moon sailed higher and the campfire burned lower. He watched the sleeping dwarf throughout the darkness, an occasional snore or a sleep-muffled shout escaping from the bearded fighter's lips. They shared a quiet meal in the morning, of baked sweetbread and vegetables from the elf's rations and ale and meat from the dwarf's backpack.

Draupnir sat in silence during the meal, recalling the tale he'd told the elf. He wanted to share the whole truth

with one as brave as the elf, and surely he should be trusted based on his aid in the fight alone. And though the story of the Samaarincross blades was accurate, he should have been more open with the elf about their power.

Oh, certainly he spoke truthfully when he mentioned that the left blade, the one his father Dvalin once had carried, *seemed* to parry any blow aimed at it. And yes, he had been vaguely right about his blade, the right blade, when he said it carried some magical defenses. But the parrying was mainly due to his quick reflexes and the decades of training he'd spent in the Hall of Arms, and the 'magic defenses' were still as much a mystery to him, it's wielder.

But some voice inside of Draupnir's heart had warned him: *Let the elf know of the great skill you possess, and he and his kind will fear you always, and worry when you are present. But let them think the power rests in the blades, and their caution will be turned to awe and respect.* No matter that the blades had resisted all efforts of the greatest dwarven clerics for centuries their secrets to unlock. Only this was known: they helped their wielder when it suited their purpose, aiding in combat or guidance when they decided. And this too was known: great, untapped power lay within them, not yet understood or released.

In that much, Draupnir had spoken the full truth.

o o o

A small square of plain white linen rested on the dry rock. The stillness of the evening broke gently under the rippling sound of stones falling, bouncing onto the linen. The cloth was divided with red paint into a circle, subdivided further into eight sections with a single dwarven rune painted in each section, and a large arrow pointing Shadoward.

The dwarf studied the fall of the runestones, then inspected their juxtaposition with each other and from his viewpoint. His rough fingers reached out and touched two of the runestones, the ones laying in the section signified as 'the Future,' and nodded as he recognized the runes for 'danger' and 'hard victory' close by the rune for 'companionship.' He paused with his hands hovering over the runes before quickly gathering them up and placing them and the square of linen into a small green felt bag.

Draupnir stood up and tucked the runebag under his belt, wrapped in concentration on the cliffside near Lindenrest, his eyes staring out into the empty night. He wrapped his hands on the thick bow at his side while his mind considered the possibilities ahead, the dangers he'd have to face, whether the challenges outweighed the chances for success. So when a lone figure approached, walking silently down the trail, he was oblivious to the sound of the footfalls.

The two elves shrouded beneath the shadows of the trees heard the distinctly quiet feet. Fetla picked her head up, cocked it to one side, then looked over to S'Reen next to her. She raised her right hand and moved it quickly, making a silent communication with her gestures, and S'Reen nodded his head in understanding. They made no move to intercept the approaching figure, nor did they try to warn Draupnir.

The figure walked into the clearing. It paused, waiting for an opportune moment to break the silence. When none presented itself after a few moments' wait, a female voice delicately cleared her throat. At the sound Draupnir raised his head and, still looking into the distance, said, "You need never be cautious interrupting me, my lady."

Alcrais, standing there behind Draupnir, smiled. She approached closer, her movements sending soft ripples through the long green gown she wore. She came alongside, rested the tip of her bow on the ground next to her left foot, and looked into the night, trying to discern the object of the dwarf's interest. Her elvish sight picked out the softly swaying silver leaves of the *jehellum* trees on the far ridges, and the movements of some deer on a hill to their left. She detected the flight of a scree of night birds floating in the mist of a distant stream. She knew that none of these occupied Draupnir's attention.

"It is peaceful out here at night," she said. She glanced behind her at the shadows where S'Reen and Fetla sat hidden and added, "Especially when you're alone in thought."

Draupnir grunted, loosened the tight grip on his bow, raised his hands up a few inches and retightened his grip.

"Interesting stories that Klishnauran has," she said quietly. "He seems to bring new ideas to us each moon. Our own personal town crier."

Draupnir again declined to answer, looking to his right, to the Shadoward. Somewhere in that direction lay the Hold of Maasricht, an uncle on his step-mother's side, and the only lord of the Iron House remaining in the area. Only a fortnight's travel...

"You're planning on leaving, aren't you?" Alcrais asked, looking straight at him.

He dropped his head, then raised it and said, "Yes, lady, I am thinking that."

"The last time you returned, you said you were through with aimless adventuring, that you wanted to settle down for good. I remember your comment about a home: 'A warm home and a permanent hearth is more valuable than a chest full of gems.' Was it not you who said these words?"

"Tis true, lady, I did say those words. And my mind is still o' the same thought. I need me a place to call home, a deep and dry place where a dwarf can think about raisin' a family."

Alcrais wrinkled her brow. "It sounds like you have some place in mind other than Lindenrest."

Draupnir adjusted his hands on the bow again and hesitated before replying. "It's nothing you or yours have done. It's just that..." His voice trailed off as his excuse ran out of steam.

"I too was there during Klishnauran's storytelling," Alcrais said, "and I also witnessed the looks aimed at you, my friend." She moved closer to the dwarf, her robes swishing softly in the night breeze. "You have every right to feel offense at their distrust."

"No, lady, surely 'tis not that. I understand their wonder at me, for am I not wholly different than they? Forest-dwellers will never fully understand those who have lived below the earth. I also have experienced the disorientation of learning the ways of those different from myself." He turned to face the elven noblewoman. "But one nugget of Klishnauran's story has hit me hard. Bruonar Warhammer's in the Shining Mountain? Hah! I was fighting goblins and kellnarhgs when he was still learning how to shine his shield!" He paused and continued softly, "The omens appear in agreement, that the retaking will be difficult but not impossible. I feel...confident."

Alcrais glanced down to the hem of her gown, then looked up to reply to Draupnir's comment. "I know that you return here Great Moon after Great Moon because of Lindenrest's proximity to the Mines." At Draupnir's nod of agreement, she asked, "When do you leave?"

"On the morrow, at first light."

Alcrais began to say something, thought better of it, then decided to say it anyway. "I would feel honored if you...would consider coming with us...when we make the Retreat." The sentence seemed to pull a breath out of her, but she composed herself at the finish.

Draupnir's eyes opened wide at the offer, then returned to their normal size. He grunted in reply, then smiled and lowered his head in embarrassment. "Sure and that's the most difficult offer I've ever had to refuse."

"It is not widely known, but many non-elves have been invited to accompany us when we pass across the seas. It would certainly be within my right as High Elf of this community to extend the offer." Her normal non-emotional state evaporated as she added enthusiastically, "And you would not be the only dwarf there, for many great craftsmen and a few clerics have made the passage already."

"Your offer is truly a generous one, lady, but my heart would not be in it, were I to accept."

Alcrais recovered her formality and her dignity, turning her body to face the great wide expanse of cliff at their front. "Then what are your plans?"

Draupnir waved his right hand to the Shadowside. "Some leagues away in that direction is the hold of Maasricht Forthright, the elder of my clan. I plan to head that way and ask for his blessing." Draupnir drew in a deep breath before continuing. "I plan to retake the Mines of my ancestors."

Alcrais held her head high. "I thought that Klishnauran's story might raise a fire within you. Now I see that it has already burned inside you for some time, and he has only stoked it higher. Is there no way I can dissuade you?"

"No lady, my heart is set. 'Tis at the Mines of Mohrkronin that my future lies."

Alcrais sighed deeply. "Then may I make a suggestion?"

"Always."

"There is a certain place I would have you visit. Sunward of here there's a town called Grey City. In that place is an inn I am familiar with called Beezel's Tap. I think t'would be to your advantage to stop there, sometime on your quest. And I would that you take one of our ponies with you, that your mission be quicker and your return the sooner."

Draupnir bowed from the waist. "As you wish, m'lady."

The two walked slowly back up the trail, leaving the glade and reentering the forest. They talked low between themselves, and their words hid the sound of soft crying that came from the shadows under the trees.