

# Tales From Underfoot

by  
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Dust and dead bushes blew down the deserted main street of Underfoot. No one trod down the wooden planked sidewalks, no animals were tied up in front of the smithie, and the double swinging doors of the Commons house were unusually still. For the middle of the day, the town seemed dead.

The only movement came from a single individual, rocking in a straight-backed chair, inches away from the thick limestone walls of the gaol. With his bare feet just touching the wooden hitching post at the edge of the walkway, the fellow pushed off, first with his left foot, then with his right, rocking in the straight-backed chair.

The fellow seemed completely at ease, rocking back in his chair. But a closer look at his dark gray eyes displayed a tiredness that belied his outward calm. He seemed to have gone without sleep for days, and the bags under his eyes added more evidence that he'd not been sleeping well.

Which was surprising, since elves don't usually sleep at all.

The stillness of the street was broken by the sound of hurried footsteps, a pair of heavy booted feet. Around the corner of the brick building that housed the smithie, a muscular, olive-skinned figure rushed towards the gaol. Dressed in simple leather pants and a brown vest over a blue checked shirt, he hurried as best he could, with one hand holding onto his wide-brimmed hat, his other wrapped around the hilt of a short wide sword dangling from his belt.

On his vest, a small silver shield was pinned over his heart. It was a perfect match to the one worn by the fellow leaning back in the chair by the gaol.

The muscular one huffed right up to the front of the gaol, stopping a few feet from the hitching post. His wide flat nose heaved as he tried to catch his breath. "Shirriff, it's – it's time!"

"Yeah, Benosh, I c'n tell what time it is." He craned his long thin neck around and glanced up at the large brass clock over the banque, the device they called The Old Gnome's Clock. Its two deeply engraved hands both reached straight up, as if they were pleading to the hot, unforgiving Orb riding high overhead.

The shirriff leaned his head slowly over to his right, and spit a disgusting gob of 'bacca juice straight into a silver cuspidor next to the gaol's front door. With a deep sigh, he lowered the front legs of the chair to the planks, then reached behind the chair. Propped up against the limestone wall were a long wooden bow and a green leather quiver with a handful

of arrows, each topped with yellow-and-gold karemma feathers. From the quiver, the fellow pulled out a copper-and-leather wrist guard, and slowly drew it onto his left forearm, while he gazed out at the empty street. "He's not here yet," he thought, adjusting the straps on the guard, "but he'll be here soon. These fools are always on time."

Sure enough, at that moment, a small dustcloud appeared behind the banque, and a figure appeared at the end of the street. He was a tall human, almost as tall as the elven shirriff, but with much more meat on his bones. He wore fancy silver tips on the toes of his boots, and a silver belt buckle and hat rim to match, which stood in stark contrast to the rest of him. All his clothes were deep red, as if he'd been dipped in a bucket of barn paint, and he had red gloves, hat and quiver to match. But his bow, a fancy Sunward double-recurved type, was crafted from many pieces of wood, horn and sinew, and appeared almost striped in the stranger's hands.

"Good – good luck, shirriff," the deputy said, earnestly.

"Maybe I'll lose this one, Benosh, and you'll git t' be shirriff for a while," the elf replied, slowly and without humor.

Deliberately, he got to his feet. His clothes were made of an oddly lifelike green-hued leather, though they didn't appear dyed. He bore a long narrow blade in a dark brown sheath on a matching belt around his thin waist, with a small pouch on the opposite side. Upon his head, covering his fine silver hair, was a pale yellow wide-brimmed hat with a dark green feather jutting low from the band.

Around his neck he wore a red bandanna, knotted in the front. The color of the cloth almost hid the ancient dried blood stain on it.

The shirriff strolled slowly out into the middle of the dusty street, as the Old Gnome's Clock over the banque struck the midday bells. He slid his quiver casually over his head and around one shoulder, where it dropped into place with well-worn ease.

As he took his position in the middle of the street, facing the close-built wooden buildings across from the gaol, the shirriff called out, "What's yer name, stranger?"

Looking surprised, the stranger halted, then grinned a wide-eyed grin and called out, "They call me the Scarlet Thorn!"

"No, no," the shirriff said, "yer real name. Th' one you were born with."

"Oh," the stranger said, in actual surprise. "Uh... Mearl. Mearl Nathanson." His confidant smile returned to his face. "Why's that matter?"

"Well," the shirriff replied laconically, looking up at the clouds over the distant mountains, "I always like t' know who a feller is, 'afore I kill 'em."

The confidant smile dropped from the stranger's face. But before he could return the challenge, the shirriff added, "It don't have t' be like this, Mearl. You c'n git back on your mount and ride out, an' I'll have nothin' agin' ya."

The stranger grew another smile, though this one was nowhere near as confidant as the last. "Sorry, shirriff, but ah cain't do that. Got m'self a contract," he said, patting a small leather pouch on his belt that jingled with the sound of many coins. "And Ah always fulfills m' contracts."

In the midst of the tense standoff, the shirriff's thoughts strayed. "Will this be the last day I watch the sky's ever-changing beauty?" he thought to himself, not even looking at the stranger. "Will I go to join my brother Colyn in that unseen land of the Afterworld? Is this to be the last good breath I draw?" as he inhaled deeply.

"Did you git at least five hunnert?" the shirriff asked, his gaze dropping to catch a few partially hidden faces poking out from the second floor windows of Miz Jessick's Boarding House.

"Five hunnert?" the stranger echoed. "Why, shore, shirriff. Yo're purty well known these days. They hired the best to bring you down."

"Well, that's good," the shirriff said, finally turning just his head to face the stranger. "At least, yer funeral will be paid for." The stranger's smile stiffened, and the shirriff added, "Ah'll make shore they use real nice red velvet for th' linin'."

Suddenly, a rage overtook the stranger and he reached back to his scarlet quiver for an arrow. But as he brought it up to the bow, he noticed the shirriff already had an arrow knocked! The stranger's right hand shook for a brief moment, then slowly pulled the arrow up near the bowstring.

"Don't do it, son," the shirriff called out, his bowstring already drawn to his ear. "Let it be. Turn away."

For a moment, a heartbeat, the stranger seemed about to concede. He lowered his bow a fraction and turned his body partially away, as if he were about to leave. But suddenly, he pivoted back to face the shirriff, the arrow knocked and the bow bending as he pulled back the string.

"No, no!" the shirriff cried out, still holding his fire. But when the stranger's bowstring reached his cheek the shirriff let fly. The green-and-yellow feathered shaft spun straight and fast, and caught the stranger just below his left armpit, slamming in deep. The stranger's arrow flew off at a crazy angle, breaking a window in the Boarding House and scattering a few observers there.

The stranger staggered, his scarlet boots kicking up small dust devils. Drunkenly, he reached up with a scarlet-gloved

hand to touched the green shaft protruding from between his ribs. A wide wet stain grew about the shaft, though little change in color could be seen in the scarlet cloth.

The stranger gazed blankly down the street at the shirriff, whose bow was still in position and his arm still beside his ear, frozen in place. The last thing the stranger ever saw was the sorrowful grimace on the shirriff's face, then the stranger crumpled over into the street.

The shirriff lowered his arms as he watched the stranger's body jerk twice, then lay still.

Overhead, the Old Gnome's Clock clicked one minute past the hour.

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Before the dust around the body had settled, heads began to pop out along both sides of the street. Shopkeepers and townspeople, wives and children, all wanted to glimpse the latest victim.

"That makes eight," whispered Channeer, peeking out of the door of his shop, the Compleate Provisioner.

Beside him in the doorway, Freiter the miller corrected him in an equally low whisper, "No, that's nine."

"Whaddya talkin'? That's eight!"

"Not so. You're forgettin' those devils from over by Gareth Major. They were twins."

"Ah, so they were. My mistake." Channeer peered out at the shirriff, alone in the middle of the street. "Nine fellers killed, all inside o' three moons."

"Wasn't like he had any choice," Freiter added. "They came after him, y' know."

"Hmfmf," was all Channeer said in reply. "Almost makes his brother seem like a nice guy."

Their eyes bored holes in the shirriff's back, but he didn't care. All he knew was another man he'd never met was now dead, and it was because of him. Him, and his dead brother Kellyn. "My brother, how I wish you'd never laid eyes on this town," he muttered under his breath, though none were near enough to hear.

But the deputy, running again, changed that. He huffed over and came to a wheezing halt by the shirriff's shoulder, staring down the street at the dead body, now beginning to attract some serious attention from some children and a few stray dogs. "Wow, shirriff, that was somethin'! That was even better than when you hit that windbag Hotshot from a moving wagon –"

The shirriff cut him off. "Get him outta the street, will ya, Benosh? Ain't no fit place fer a decent bowman."

The deputy's nostrils flared in surprise. "Yeah, but shirriff, he just tried to –"

"Just do it, will ya?" the shirriff snapped back, irritated. "Take him down t' the Pluggers. Make sure y' fetch his mount over t' Smithie's." The shirriff was already half way back to the gaol. "And get my arrow outta him."

As he mounted the wooden walkway in front of the gaol, he noticed the townsfolk, now openly staring at him from up and down the street. He drew himself up straight and turned about, addressing the entire street: "Who sent him?"

Not a sound was heard in reply. The shirriff called out louder, "Which one o' you did this? Huh? Speak up!" He charged back down into the street, challenging the entire town. "Which one o' you cowards keeps sending these poor fools to their death? Don't you care how many have died? Don't you?!"

Dozens of people heard him, but no one replied. Closing his eyes until they were mere slits, he said, "Well, you just keep sending them, an' I'll keep puttin' 'em down. But I'll find you, you spawn of a jackal. I'll find you!"

The shirriff was about to retreat to the gaol, when he noticed a small group of travellers at the other end of town, down by Smithie's, whose corral marked the boundary of the shirriff's jurisdiction. With a muttered "Ah, void," he trudged down to meet the party.

As he approached, he held his bow partially raised in his left hand, not necessarily expecting trouble, but ready for it if it came. He appraised the small band from the minute he started towards them, and his sharp elven eyesight told him much. All four rode the flightless birds called *mackees*, strong, powerful creatures from high in the mountains. Their short stubby wings did nothing to lift their heavy bodies into flight, but they were powerful enough to knock an unmounted man to the ground with a single swipe. That, plus their hands-long talons, their large sharp beak and a notably vicious temperament, made them valuable riding beasts, though rarely seen this far from the central mountains.

The group's leader was a stout dwarven warrior, obviously their leader from the way the other three deferred to his nods and nonverbal commands. He wore a sturdy breastplate of dusty steel, engraved with subtle but impressive scenes of dwarven victories. Across his back were sheathed two even more impressive longswords, almost too long for any dwarf to wield, despite this one's exceptional size. Even from this distance, the elf noted that the hilts were evenly worn, meaning he fought with two weapons at once. As if to prove that, no shield was visible among the mount's gear, though a long bowcase-and-quiver were strapped to one of the animal's rumps.

*A dwarf with a bow, and no shield? An unusual warrior; the shirriff decided, experienced from the looks of his gear; obviously successful, uniquely talented if he does indeed use both of those two fine blades.* The shirriff drummed his own

bow's grip with his fingertips, an old reflexive action, something he'd always done subconsciously when he'd decided which target would need his primary attention, should arrows have to fly.

Beside him sat another dwarf, whose face smiled unconcernedly up at the sky and the scudding clouds, as if he'd completely missed the entire scene in the street before him. He was much closer to an average dwarf in size, but displayed no weapons and was clothed in simple homespun cloth and dyed breeches. But most unusual was his nearly bald head and complete lack of a beard. *Some dwarven females do appear beardless*, the elf recalled, but one look at this one's arms and wrists told him this was no female. They were almost as muscled as the much larger dwarf beside him. *This one bears watching, too*, the shirriff noted.

Behind the two dwarves sat a female warrior, her tanned skin and facial tattoos announcing her as a member of the Tannak'alles, the tribe of female huntresses from the deep woods far to the Shadoward. Her clothing, fashioned from the furs and plates of exotic and dangerous beasts, completed the statement her tattoos made loud and clear: I am not to be trifled with. But oddly, her bow was stuffed into a thick bedroll across the beast's hindquarters, and it was unstrung. *A huntress without the means to hunt? A strange party indeed.*

The fourth member was another female, a human, dressed in simple but fashionable riding attire. But the elf nearly rubbed his eyes (though to do that in the presence of non-elves was an unpardonable sin), for this human female, were she off her mount and on foot, would stand a good two hands taller than the shirriff himself, and outweigh him by a boar and a half. She had a warm face, even a pretty one, but her size and demeanor bespoke power and quietly controlled rage, as if at any moment she might explode like a greatbear with her cubs. Her mount carried a few bundles, not the least of which was a long-handled tool with the poorly concealed head of a massive hammer. *Oh, my brother, you should be here to see this. Let's just hope they're not here for me.*

Warily now, the shirriff approached the group. He aimed his approach with only the leader to his front and the huntress directly behind, so that only one of them would get a clean shot at him. He performed a shallow bow and waved outward with his right hand, bringing it to rest slowly on his quiver, with an arrow between two fingers. He noted that the leader merely tossed his head to one side and managed a rough smile, as if the elf's barely-concealed move to arm meant little to him.

"Welcome to the town of Underfoot, strangers," the shirriff called. He nodded back down the street. "Sorry you had to see that. We don't normally greet visitors with such a... an unpleasant spectacle. Don't let it give you the wrong impression."

The leader appeared about to speak, but before he could, the other dwarf piped up, in a strong but reedy voice, "I always do prefer a quick and speedy execution. As long as it's not my own."

The elf bristled at these words, but before he could reply, the leader spoke, in a deep bassundo. "Pardon my dim-witted friend, sirrah. I know what it is to have folks defy the proper authorities, and also what it means to be called out in challenge. You gave the man enough chances to back down, more than would many. He chose his own death."

This time, the elf bowed for real, though he never took his eyes off the group. "Fairer words are seldom spoken between dwarf and elf." The shirriff slowly placed the end of his bow on the ground and leaned upon it, the way a weary traveller leans on a walking staff at the end of a long day's march. "You'll find our little hamlet is usually quieter than this, more days than not. One way we keep it that way is with our no-weapons policy." He nodded to his left, where a simple two-plank sign was nailed to one of the tall posts of Smithie's corral.

The rough hand-lettered words read, "All Visitors, upon First Entering the town of Underfoot, must deposit ALL their weapons in the locker Below, and register with the Shirriff at the Gaol. No Exceptions!" The words 'ALL' and 'No Exceptions!' had been painted in after the rest, in bolder, angrier script. Below the sign sat a wide, deep box, crafted from expensive woods and finished with fine brass hardware. A wide narrow slit, as long as the box itself, was cut into the top, apparently the place where the weapons were dropped. An oddly shaped lock adorned the box's face.

"I see," the dwarven leader said. "I don't suppose it would matter that we were only staying for a short time?"

"No, it doesn't matter to me a whit," the shirriff replied, smiling.

The group looked pleased and were about to ride in past the shirriff, when he added, "But you're still gonna leave your weapons here. You'll get 'em back when you leave. You can board your animals here. Smithie'll take good care of 'em."

"And how do you handle those who choose not to leave their weapons?" the leader asked genially.

"They can always turn and ride out," the elf said, leaning less of his weight on the bow, then nodded to his right, "or they can stay." His nod was in the direction of a sweeping hill opposite the corral, reached by a short path under a wooden arch where the words "Skyraith Hill" were carved deep. Beyond the arch, the hill was pockmarked with a couple of dozen wooden grave markers and a few stone ones. At least eight or nine graves bore signs of recent activity.

"I see," the dwarf said, seriously. "You'll have no trouble with us."

The human female leaned over in her saddle and said, "Please don't take this the wrong way, but I wouldn't want anything of mine to come up missing when we leave. I'd take that... very hard," she said, smiling, but serious.

The shirriff smiled right back. "No weapon's ever been stolen from the Old Gnome's Box of Holding."

The unadorned dwarf spoke out loud, staring up at the sky, "Now that sounds like a challenge to me." He turned to the leader, who was dismounting. "And you said I wouldn't have any fun on this trip."

"Knock it off, Hobehn," the leader replied, unamused. With great reverence, he unbuckled the harness that crossed both shoulders and carefully handed the twin sheathed swords to the shirriff, who just as carefully placed them down into the slot. They slid down gradually, as if unseen hands were accepting them down into the Box's womb.

The dwarf's bowcase followed, as did a few odd hand weapons and the huntress' unstrung bow and long hunting knife. When it came time for the human woman, she handed over an expensive knight's sword, then held the lengthy wrapped hammer, outstretched in one beefy hand. "Here," she said, politely.

The shirriff accepted the long-handled weapon, and as soon as the woman let go, the weight of the massive weapon dragged the elf's hand straight to the ground. The woman and the dwarf called Hobehn laughed out loud, good-naturedly, but laughter just the same.

"You never get tired of that, do you, Lythops?" Hobehn said.

Between deep-chested chuckles, the woman replied, "Nope. Never do."

The shirriff struggled with both hands to lift the heavy weapon – easily the weight of a full suit of plate armor – up and over the slot. But just as before, the weapon slid slowly, easily down into the Box, though it descended at an angle as if accommodating its unusual length. Oddly, though the weapons seemed too big at first to fit comfortably within the box, it disappeared inside without a sound of scraping or bending.

By this time, Hobehn had also dismounted. He rubbed the neck of his mackee, the soft brown feathers ruffling slightly in the early afternoon breeze."Would it help any if I told you I carry no weapons?"

The shirriff was receiving a small parrying dagger from the large female which slipped out of his grasp. Before it could hit the ground, Hobehn had reached out and snatched it out of thin air! He balanced it for a moment, then twirled it point-end up, then flipped it high and caught it once, twice and again, before tossing it into the air and catching it by the blade. He finally offered it back to the shirriff, pommel-end first, with the words, "Besides, what would a peace-loving fellow like me do with a weapon, anyways?"

The shirriff let out a small gasp of laughter in spite of himself. "And just what is it you do do, when you're not performing knife tricks?" the shirriff asked.

The other three in the group instantly looked skyward for help as the dwarf launched into an obviously overused introduction. "I am called Hobehn of the Seven Senses, Master of the Teleporting hand and Lord of all I survey!"

"Which isn't that much, considering..." the large female called Lythops chipped in.

"Considering?" the shirriff asked.

"That he's as blind as a bat. Depending on the bat," said the leader, as he unsaddled his mount.

"Really?" said the shirriff, appraising the dwarf. "And your chosen profession?"

"Oh I do a little of this and that. Anything I can get my hands on."

Their leader coughed suddenly, and turned to face the elf. "I am Draupnir Dvalin'son, late of the Mines of Mohrkronin, at your service."

"The Mines that just were reclaimed from the goblins? I've heard of that little adventure." The shirriff's impression of the group changed yet again. "What hand did you have in that, pray?"

"Oh, we... helped out. You know how it is." The dwarf seemed reticent to discuss their participation. Instead, he turned to introduce the two human females. "Our tall friend here is Lythops." The woman reached across to shake hands with the elf, wrist-to-forearm in the traditional way. But her grip was so strong the elf's eyes widened in surprise. "And the quiet one back there is Crystal." The tattooed female merely nodded once in the elf's direction as she finished unsaddling her mount.

The shirriff stepped out of the way as the group headed their mounts into the corral. "And just what do you plan on doing while you're in town? Here to gamble?" the elf asked genially.

"No, sir," Hobehn called out cheerfully. "We've come to pay a visit on your boss."

The elf looked confused. "My boss? Who do you mean?"

Hobehn's sightless eyes rolled from left to right as he replied, "The shirriff. We're here to meet the one called Kellyn."

The elf's eyes slitted as his face grew red. Unconsciously, he raised the bow in his left hand as his right fingered a green shaft in the quiver. "Really? Was he expecting you?"

"I'm afraid not," Draupnir said, swatting his beast's rump as it bounded off into the corral. "We just got word as the thaw arrived that he needed help, and it's taken us a bit of time t' get here." He glanced over at the quiet huntress, who led her mackee gently into the corral. "Had ourselves a spot o' trouble along the way."

"Well then, I'm afraid your trip will find no good purpose." The elf leaned heavily again upon his bow, which bent under his weight. "My brother rests up there."

Draupnir's gaze followed the elf's towards the summit of Skywraith Hill. There, a few feet below the crown, was a

graveside surmounted by a delicately carved stone marker. Draupnir's eyes were no match for the elf, but he knew instantly that upon the stone would be engraved the name of his old friend, Kellyn of the elven glade of Lindenrest.

Draupnir stood silently, head bowed, beside the shirriff. It was a few moments before Hobehn interrupted. "Pardon me, but did you say 'your brother'?"

The elf raised his head with a proud expression upon it. "Yes, my elder by many cycles, but my brother still."

Lythops joined them, and asked delicately, "What, may I ask, happened?"

The elf sighed deeply. "He got involved with something unsavory in this accursed town. He wrote to me about the same time as he sent for you. I got here sooner than did thee, but alas! Not soon enough."

"And the badge?" Lythops asked.

The shirriff looked down at the small shield upon his chest with contempt. "I took the open job, with hopes of finding the ones responsible for his death. Though little good it has done me."

"I assume he met his end at the hands of someone not unlike the red-clothed fellow who has so recently departed?" Hobehn said softly.

"Yes, he was – say, how did you know that archer was clothed in red?" the elf asked in surprise.

But this time it was Draupnir's turn to cut off the other dwarf. "You know, sirrah, we've been riding for some distance. Would this fair town be equipped with a place to which men of a drinking nature could retire?"

The elf laughed. "Yes, the Commons can take care of any thirst you may have worked up. You can settle in at Miz Jessick's across from the gaol, over there." He pointed with the tip of his bow. "The Commons is up and around the corner from there. I have some business to take care of, but I'd like to join you afterwards?"

"It would be our pleasure. I'm... I'm sorry for your loss," Draupnir said, with a deep, long bow.

This time, the elf bowed low and long in return. "To know that my brother had such valuable friends who'd travel a great distance only to join him in danger, tells me he made the transition a rich fellow indeed."

He turned to leave, but before he took two steps, Crystal called after him, "Your name, shirriff?"

The elf turned around, scratching his chin. "You know, you're the first people in this whole bloody place that's bothered to ask me that, and I've been here for almost four moons. Funny, when you think on it." He drew off his quiver and headed wearily for the gaol. "It's Konnaul," he called out over his shoulder.

Inside the thick-walled gaol, the air was still and cool. Konnaul unstrung his bow and deposited it carefully into a rack with five others along an interior wall, then propped the quiver against the wall just below. He was about to drop, exhausted, into the oak chair behind the wide darkwood desk, when he noticed what was laying on top of the desk: a single green-shafted arrow, the metallic head glistening in the dim room, as if it had just been cleaned. The shaft, however, bore a dark stain for nearly half its length.

The elf snatched up the arrow and whirled around, ready to hurl it against the far wall. But slowly, his anger faded and left him and, resignedly, he tossed the arrow into his quiver with the rest.

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