

# **Death of a Dwarf**

*The Chronicles of Dorro (Book Four)*

by Pete Prown

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

[Read the Entire Acclaimed Series](#)

[Dramatis Personae](#)

[Preface: The Autumn of Discontent](#)

[The Harvest Faire](#)

[Boom Times](#)

[Drinking with Dwarves](#)

[The Grippe](#)

[The Campaign](#)

[A Hush in the Wood](#)

[The Pinch-Thief](#)

[Dwarves in the Perch](#)

[Speechifying](#)

[The Ghost's Walk](#)

[Pro Tempore](#)

[The Black Stones](#)

[How to Bag a Thief](#)

[Break-In](#)

[The Whip Comes Down](#)

[Seeds of Doubt](#)

[The Missing One](#)

[Missed Apologies](#)

[Creeping Death](#)

[Return to the Deep](#)

[Funeral](#)

[A Robbery](#)

[Supper's Ready](#)

[Battle Dwarves](#)

[Aramina](#)

[The Chamber](#)

[Malachite Molly](#)

[Wanted](#)

[The Fugitives](#)

[Snatched](#)

[Cheeryup Alone](#)

[The Thief's Mistake](#)

[Northward](#)

[Back to the Library](#)

[Wolf Pack](#)

[Run to Earth](#)

[Band of Dwarves](#)

[The Oilcloth](#)

[Gildenhall](#)

[Caverns of Wonder](#)

[Professor Larkspur](#)

[Confession](#)

[A Thieving Hand](#)

[An Audience is Granted](#)

[The Seer](#)

[The Wide Green Open](#)

[Goblin Necks](#)

[The Battle of the Burrows](#)

[Counterattack](#)

[Pages of Science](#)

[The Smoke Clears](#)

[The Trouble with Wump](#)

[The Weapon](#)

[Fool's Gold](#)

[Lessons](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

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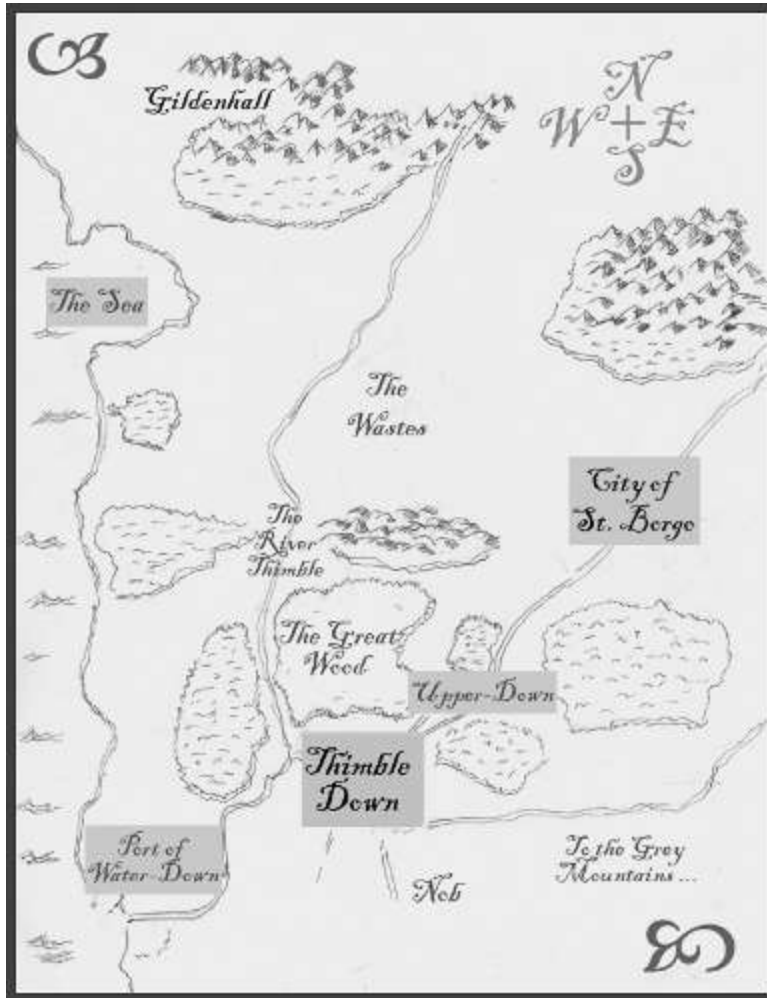
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## **Dramatis Personae**

### *At the Library*

**Dorro Fox Winderiver:** Bookmaster of Thimble Down (*door-oh, winn-da-river*)

**Wyll Underfoot:** Dorro's nephew (*will*)

**Cheeryup Tunbridge:** Daughter of the village seamstress

### *In the Village of Thimble Down*

**Sheriff Forgo:** The law in Thimble Down

**Bedminster Shoe:** The village scribe

**The Mayor:** The mayor and magistrate of Thimble Down

**Mr. Timmo:** The metalsmith

**Nurse Pym:** The healer and midwife

**Gadget Pinkle:** The new deputy

**Mr. Mungo:** Owner and barkeep at the Hanging Stoat tavern

**Farmer Edythe:** A local farmer and aspiring politician (*edith*)

**Minty Pinter, Dowdy Cray, & Bog the Blacksmith:** Local tradesfolk

### *At the Smeltery*

**Hiram Bindlestiff:** Proprietor of Bindlestiff's Smelting Works

**Silas Fibbhook:** His chief foreman

**Stookey McGee & Mrs. Mick:** Workers at the forge

### *From Gildenhall*

**Crumble, Wump, Two-Toes, Magpie, & Flume:** Dwarves from the Northlands

**Aramina:** A lady with lethal skills

### *In the Burg of St. Borgo*

**Professor Taddeus Larkspur:** A scholar of Ancient Dwarfish

## **Preface: The Autumn of Discontent**

After the harrowing events of August, in the year of 1721 (recounted earlier, much to my dismay, in a saga entitled *The Lost Ones*), the transition from Summer to Fall in our village of Thimble Down was otherwise blissful.

Once the heat had dissipated, the clambering roses returned as resplendent as ever, while the tomatoes and eggplant reached their zeniths, along with squash, beans, radishes, pink and white cleome, and carpets of marigolds.

As usual, the folk in the village were bustling about, preparing for the inevitability of Winter and storing up as much of their garden offerings as possible. They were jarring, bottling, pickling, and fermenting by the hour, as well as saving finer examples of their horticultural handiwork for the upcoming Harvest Faire, held each year on the third Saturday of October.

Yet by the end of that month, things had gone awry ... *again*. Instead of quiet, charming Thimble Down, our small hamlet had descended into the chaos of industry and villainous actions. A Halfling moved into the village and brought with him a boisterous business: a large smeltery that specialized in the heating and fusing of metals and ores as well as the fabrication of specialized alloys. It was all very complex and profitable, and brought with it the need for many workers, which was good news for some.

Yet for others, the forge's smoky, smelly discharge was repellent and not in keeping with the gentle ways of our community. And thus the two sides came to a clash—and what a thunderclap it was—like two mountain rams butting heads in combat.

In addition to this, there were other matters that proved vexing: an unhealthy miasma spread through the village, bringing sickness and a rash of strange burglaries. There was also a political contest in progress, a rather uncivil one. All this, plus the arrival of strange visitors from the North made the Autumn of 1721, *A.B.* a wholly irksome and dark period.

Truly, at various points one could not say whether Thimble Down as we knew it would continue from one day to the next. We seemed forever—each and every day—on the verge of catastrophe.

And those were the good days.

Yours in literary kinship,



Mr. Bedminster Shoe, scribe, Ret.

*May 21, 1774, A.B.\**

*[\*After Borgo, the first Halfling King]*

## The Harvest Faire

*“Not bloody well likely!”*

Heads snapped in the direction of the loud, bellicose voice, which turned out to be Mrs. Fowl, who was somewhere between laughing and hacking as she shouted those words. She was addressing Mr. Dorro Fox Winderiver and playfully poking a finger into his chest. He was flustered and tried to defend himself.

“All I said, my dear Mrs. Fowl, is that I’ve entered some lovely apple pies this year and I think I have a chance at beating you—for once,” noted the village bookmaster, trying desperately not to get humbled by a tiny old woman.

Mrs. Fowl cackled loudly.

“The day your crisps and pies beat mine will be the day I turn twelve again and begin doing cartwheels across the grass.”

At that, she hacked again, slapped poor Dorro on the back perhaps harder than necessary, and walked off to watch the judges at work throughout the Harvest Faire.

Nearby, Sheriff Forgo and Mr. Timmo, the metalsmith, were trying to stifle their own guffaws at this amusement, but weren’t doing a very good job. Neither were Wyll, Cheeryup, or any of another half-dozen Thimble Downers. Dorro, for his part, turned as red as a Flitwyck apple, pretending he hadn’t been humbled by a Halfling nearly half his height and twice his age. The Halfling stomped over to his friends, looking for allies.

“You’d have thought that old bat would remember who her best customer is. Why I’ve bought more pork pies, loaves of bread, and cakes from her than anyone in the village!”

“But Mr. Dorro,” chirped the wee voice of young Cheeryup Tunbridge, “the Harvest Faire is Mrs. Fowl’s biggest moment of the entire year. You can’t begrudge a sweet old lady her moment in the sun—she’s the best baker in the entire county. Besides which, you’ve already won twenty blue ribbons!”

“But still . . .”

“You’re being a little greedy, Uncle Dorro,” chided his nephew Wyll. “I know how competitive you get, but you’ve already done better than ever. Your apple ’n’ walnut tart was delicious, and your Candleberry apple cider is the best in the village.”

“Well perhaps,” Dorro brightened at the sound of praise. He added, “It was rather good this year, wasn’t it?”

“Yer a piece ‘o work, Winderiver,” laughed the Sheriff. “But I’ll grant you that the cider was outstanding. You know, this Winter, we should take some of that brew and make some applejack brandy for the cold days of February.” Next to him, Mr. Timmo—also an imbibor of Dorro’s strong spirits, which he only made in the smallest of quantities—nodded in agreement.

“Flattery will get you everywhere, Forgo, so fear not—I shall set aside a dozen baskets of apples for us to press and ferment this Fall. By mid-Winter, we shall be sipping applejack happily by the fire.”

“Hurrah!” shouted Forgo and Timmo in unison as the village’s Harvest Faire rollicked in full swing around them. There were Halflings young and old, tall and short, bustling around the newly rebuilt Hanging Stoat tavern, its bits of lawn now turned into a faireground for the event, always held on the third Saturday of October.

There were games of skill and games of chance; crafts and fine creations for sale; and more food than you can imagine, much of it made portable for the happily ambling village folk

*“Come get yer braised rabbit on a stick! There’s nuthin’ more savory for yer tum,”* shouted Mr. Parfinn, who was grilling game meat over an open fire of cherrywood logs. *“And don’t miss the roasted eggplant spears, delicately flavored with olive oil, rosemary, and real sea salt from Water-Down!”*

Nothing, however, was more exciting than the Judging, the crowning highpoint of the faire. Halflings from far and wide had entered their best fruits and vegetables, flowers, cooked foods, and handicrafts for consideration. And over in Farmer Edythe’s adjacent field, the best farm animals were being eyed (*“There’s no finer hog than my Esmeralda,”* shouted Farmer Duck. *“She understands every word I’m sayin’ ... and can play the mandolin, too!”*).

There were contests of strength and guile, as bulls pulled enormous sleds weighed down with logs and rocks, while dogs rounded up sheep and moved them smartly along. The Harvest Faire was truly one of best days in Thimble Down each year and, true to form, it had never rained on that day.

Wyll and Cheeryup ran off to play and have a nibble with the few pennies and tuppens Dorro had given each of them, while the gentlemen retired to a shady tree for conversation and a quaff of brown ale freshly brewed by Mr. Mungo to mark the opening of his new Hanging Stoat.

Checking his pocket watch, Dorro opened the conversation with an observation. “Sheriff, you seem distracted today. Still thinking of the lad?”

The lawman was quiet for a moment, but then spoke.

“Aye—he’s never far away from my thoughts,” said Forgo, looking up into the ash, hornbeam, and maple trees overhead. “I miss him more than I ever thought I would.”

“Bosco was a fine young deputy, Forgo,” added Mr. Timmo. “I know you’re proud of him, as is the whole village. And he saved a great many children from a horrible fate—maybe one worse than death.”

By this time the Sheriff’s eyes were brimming with tears, and he made no effort to wipe them away. One by one, they began spilling down his whiskery cheeks. “That he did. Bosco wasn’t my natural son, but he was the boy I never had. I shall think of him and his bravery every day for the rest of my life. He was a better Halfling than I ever will be.”

At that, Forgo bowed his head and let the tears flow freely for a few minutes. Eventually he snorted loudly, wiped his eyes, and carried on as if nothing had transpired. That was his way.

“Any news of Porge and Dumpus?” chimed in Timmo, trying to find a brighter subject. “You seem to have a hard time holding onto deputies, Forgo—you can always hire Mr. Mungo again!”

“No!” barked the Sheriff. “He was the worst deputy I ever had! But as for the other lads, from what Dump’s mother has told me, Porge and Dumpus are doin’ fine. The boys bought a piece o’ land well outside of town and are happily farming the earth. I’d say that by this time next year they will have all sorts of crops entered in the Harvest Faire and will walk away with a goodly number of the ribbons. I couldn’t be happier for ‘em.”

“Still, you’ll need a new deputy or two. Maybe in a few years my Wyll can join up, but he’s too young now. What are you going to do?”

“I’ve already interviewed a young feller—a certain Gadget Pinkle from Fell’s Corner,” said Forgo warily. “He’s not from the best of neighborhoods, but he’s a decent lad, as far as I can tell. He’s always tired—I’ve never seen a boy yawn so much.”

“He’s a growing fellow—give him time to get used to the work.”

“I do need the help. There’s been a rash of thefts all around Thimble Down lately. Tools, clothing, bits of tableware—even pies! This bugger has the nerve not only to snatch cool pies off of windowsills, but to creep into the kitchen and grab a piece of beefright out of the oven. That’s pluck, I tells ya!”

“If it is, in fact, a *he*. We’ve made that mistake before,” admonished Dorro, referring to Lucretia Thrip’s infamous attempts on his life not half a year earlier.

“Quite so,” said Timmo. “I have something to add to this conversation, Sheriff. Someone has been raiding my storage burrow. It sits in a small hillock behind my shop, and I store bits of metal for my work there: tin, copper, iron, and so on. I keep the heavy door locked, but I swear, someone keeps jiggering the lock and taking wares. Nothing too valuable, but with the arrival of that new smeltery, I was planning on using some of it for some special contract work they’ve asked for. I am quite vexed!”

“I’ve heard about that new industrial venture—best of luck to ’em, I say,” murmured the Sheriff. “Say, has anyone noticed all the coughin’ around here today? You’d think the flu has come early this year.”

“True enough,” noted the bookmaster. “The dart throwers kept missing their intended targets this morning because of all the hacking. Half of them were doubled over with a persistent ague.”

“Nurse Pym will have a busy Autumn, much less Winter,” said Mr. Timmo. “And she’s already run ragged with all the births, scrapes, and bruises of everyday life in Thimble Down. I dare say, *she* needs a deputy!”

They all burst out laughing, but it was cut short when a freckled, red-haired lad of eighteen or so ran up to them, completely winded and gesturing wildly.

“Sheriff! Sheriff! ... *gasp* ... the bandit struck again!”

“Calm down, Gadget,” said Forgo, lifting his bulk off the ground. “Did anyone see him?”

“Some folks saw a lad grab a few pies and take off behind the tents, like the wind. But not close enough to recognize ‘im! He’s headed towards Fell’s Corner!”

“Sheriff Forgo! My pies!” It was Mrs. Fowl, running frantically across the Harvest Faire grounds. “That weasel stole my blue-ribbon pies! The blueberry–rhubarb and the cinnamon–apple crisps, my best ones ever. I want you to catch that thief, Forgo, *dead or alive!*”

## Boom Times

“Calm yourself, Mrs. Fowl,” said the Sheriff, slowly standing up. “We’ll go find this scalawag, but really—*dead or alive?* We’re talking about a feller that stole pies, not broke into the bank.”

Mrs. Fowl looked at the lawman like he was a moron. “I know you’re not the brightest creature in the world, Forgo, but my pies are works of art! If I catch that miserable crust criminal, I’ll stuff him with cherries and bake him until *he’s* a corpus hisself!” The normally genteel lady’s eyes were on fire.

Ignoring the insult, Forgo barked out a few commands. “Gadget, catch your breath and follow us. C’mon Winderiver—we’ve got a pie thief to apprehend.”

“Oooo, Sheriff, can I come too?” said Mr. Timmo with excitement. His life as a small metalsmith was quiet and often dull, so this was thrilling to him.

“Let’s go!” At that, the three Halflings bolted from the fairegrounds and up the road towards Fell’s Corner, the seediest neighborhood in all of Thimble Down. Within five minutes, they’d scoured the area and found no sign of the scofflaw, despite asking a few of the more sober denizens of that street. A second later, Gadget showed up, again wheezing and bent over double to catch his breath.

“Gents, this is my new deputy, Gadget Pinkle.” The deputy waved weakly before going back to his panting and groaning. He was thin and on the tall side, with bright red hair and freckles from head to toe. Dorro even wondered if he had freckles under his hair. “Lad, if you’re going to be my deputy, you’ll need to get in shape. I want you to start jogging and lifting bags of oats. That’ll serve you well.”

“Did you find him, Sheriff?” asked Gadget, finally finding a little wind in his lungs.

“No, you ninny. The thief is not here, nor was he ever. Are you sure he came this way?”

Forgo was beginning to have second thoughts about the young deputy, but remembered Bosco’s early days. He too had been an incompetent wreck, but had grown into one of the greatest heroes Thimble Down had ever known.

“Since we’re here, why don’t we swing by this new smelting enterprise everyone’s talking about. Timmo, would you introduce us?”

Not but a moment later, the trio was in front of what seemed a large cave opening. Some workmen were going in and out of the giant maw, while others were busily framing it in for the

colder days to come. The structure was really an enormous burrow, perhaps more of a cavern, but technically, was simply dug out of the side of a hillock. From its roof atop the hill, chimneys spouted out all manner of black smoke and steam, and the sounds of industry were in full gear. To the right of the huge opening was a hastily painted sign on a post: Bindlestiff's Smelting Works.

As Forgo, Dorro, and Timmo entered the dark factory, they were dazed by the loud noises and bright, flickering glare of fires within. One moment, they were outside enjoying the cool October day, and next they were in an underground labyrinth of flames, smoke, and mystery. The trio walked further into the void, trekking past giant vats of hot liquids, while musclebound Halflings banged on metal with huge hammers and hollered out commands at the tops of their voices.

"Watch out, Stookey—we're about to pour the iron batch! If you don't move, you'll be a piece of toast in seconds."

"*Bwwwwa-haaa*, Micky, I'd like to see ya try! No one's ever cooked Stookey McGee and no one ever shall!"

"You two lunkheads shut up and keep your mind on yer work. I don't need any more injuries; I need healthy workers. Unless, of course, you ladies would like to work somewhere else!"

"But *I am* a lady!" bellowed Micky.

"Oh, sorry, Mrs. Mick," said the foreman. "No, *errr*; offense meant."

The Halfling named Micky—formally, Mrs. Henrietta Mick—was a short, powerfully built woman who could hammer a piece of iron as well as any of the fellers. She picked up a hot pipe of iron with her tongs and began thrashing it with a mallet, sparks flying everywhere. Singing and whistling, Micky loved her work.

"This is wonderful!" exclaimed the normally placid Mr. Timmo. "My work at the shop is so quiet—this is like a circus to me. I've spent my whole life around metal, making household wares and jewelry, yet know so little about how it's made."

"That's because it happens under the earth, my friend."

The trio turned around to find a portly, well-dressed Halfling in coat, knee breeches, and vest, grinning broadly. "Welcome to my smeltery, Mr. Timmo."

"Ah, Mr. Bindlestiff! So good to see you again. These are my friends, Sheriff Forgo— and Mr. Dorro, who runs the library."

"Please call me Hiram. Would you perchance enjoy a tour of our facility?" The three nodded enthusiastically and began following Bindlestiff around the deep, dark space.

"As you can see over here, these large vats are for the smelting and refining of metal ores. We procure vast amounts of ore from the northern mountains and transport them here in wagons. Then we use our coke-powered furnaces to make refined iron, tin, aluminum, copper, nickel,

bronze, and zinc. Its brutal work, but the metal industry is the wave of the future! It's time for Halflings to come out from their dark burrows and step into the light of modernity."

"Do your workers ever get sick from the fumes?" asked the bookmaster.

"Far from it, Mr. Dorro. Indeed, all the fire and fumes kill hazardous germs and make this the safest place to work, aside from the odd Halfling who gets burnt to death or falls into a boiler. In those cases, at least their demises are swift and painless. They're just turned into cinders in the briefest heartbeat."

Dorro gulped at the image, but Bindlestiff just laughed. "Like I said, we have a hard life smelting ore, but someone has to do it, and my workers are happy and enthusiastic."

Somewhere over his shoulder the sound of a hacking cough echoed throughout the cave, but the industrialist paid it no mind.

"What are *they*?" said Sheriff Forgo, perhaps a tad too loudly. Sure enough, ambling across the floor of the smeltery were a handful of squat, barrel-like figures carrying long shafts of metal. They were mostly in shadow, but even when silhouetted by flickers of firelight, it was clear they weren't Halflings.

"Ah, those are our special guests from the North. They are, in fact—"

"*Dwarves*," blurted Dorro. "Actually, I've never seen one in the flesh before."

"Quite right, sir," continued Bindlestiff. "We need to get our precious ores from somewhere, and the Dwarves of the Northern Realm harvest the best from deep within the earth. Granted, it costs more than other minerals, but at Bindlestiff's Smelting Works, we use only the finest for our alloys."

"I must say, Hiram, I'm quite grateful you've asked me to take on some of your finer projects," said Timmo glowingly. "It's been a little slow in my shop this year."

"You came highly recommended, and, more than that, our work here is for bigger pieces of metal sheeting, rods, and beams. We need specialists like you for the delicate work. Delighted to have your services, Timmo. But I'm afraid that's all the time I have for you today. Here comes my foreman now—we're running a surprise inspection this afternoon and are eager to make sure everyone is pulling their weight. Even those Dwarves! Good day, gentlemen."

The trio all nodded farewell, but Bindlestiff was already on the move with his burly foreman. "Well, Fibbhook, are you ready to crack some heads? 'Tis my favorite part of the day!" He laughed as the pair departed into the murk.

Left alone, Forgo, Dorro, and Timmo made their way back to the sunlight outside the smeltery and had to shield their eyes from the jarring brightness. They were silent for a few moments.

"I don't know whether to be impressed or depressed," said Dorro, breaking the lull. "It's certainly grand to have more Thimble Downers working and prosperous, but at what cost?"



“I don’t see the harm, Winderiver—it’s a solid business,” added Forgo. “And it leaves fewer village folk sitting around drinking honeygrass whiskey and stirring up trouble. That’s good for me.”

“But I do see Dorro’s point,” squeaked Timmo, almost whispering and looking about furtively. “It’s a terribly dirty way to make a living. I don’t like all that black smoke either, despite the fact that I’m actually profiting from this enterprise. Worse, I’m not sure how I feel about that fact. In a weird way, it makes me feel—*dirty*.”

## Drinking with Dwarves

“This is a treat, Mr. Dorro!”

“My pleasure, Cheeryup. Tell you the truth, I’d been wanting an excuse to visit the new Hanging Stoat, so why not bring my favorite two young folks for supper?”

The bookmaster ushered his nephew Wyll and young Cheeryup Tunbridge into the new tavern, which had been rebuilt during the Fall after its predecessor had burnt to the ground [*previously recounted in the harrowing tale, “Devils & Demons”*].

Like the original, the new Stoat was a circular, freestanding building of wood and plaster, with a largish main room for dining and a long wooden bar along one side.

There, busy as ever, was the proprietor, Mr. Mungo, pulling beers and ales as fast as he could for his thirsty patrons. Freda, the barmaid was buzzing around the floor, taking orders and delivering drinks and food, while Mungo’s bride, Farmer Edythe, was greeting visitors and showing them to their tables. Dorro was happy to see the Hanging Stoat back and better than ever.

In a jiffy, the three were seated by Edythe and perusing menus. “What’ll you have, children? I’m looking at that roast partridge stuffed with nuts and gooseberry dressing. That, some turnips, and a glass of red wine will do me fine.”

Freda soon appeared to take their orders and jot down Wyll’s request for a slow-braised beef loin with Brussels sprouts and rice, whereas Cheeryup asked for the buttery fish pie, red potatoes, and squash.

“I’m sorry your mother couldn’t accept the invitation. Is she coughing much?”

“All the time,” said the twelve-year-old girl, a shadow of deep worry passing her face. “She’s never been this ill before. Nurse Pym gave her a nasty syrup to take, and it hasn’t helped. I’m worried, Mr. Dorro.”

Dorro noticed that under the table Wyll had slipped his hand over hers and given it a squeeze. He said with a wink, “Never fear, young lady. One of Pym’s syrup’s will knock over any germ within a mile of your burrow. Frankly, you could remove paint with her concoctions—but they work!”

But secretly, he was concerned. There were Halflings coughing all over the village, including at the Hanging Stoat, and he was afraid a new contagion was on the loose. Whether it was related to Bindlestiff’s smeltery, he couldn’t be sure, but an outbreak of disease would devastate the

village. He'd seen it before, though it had been many, many years. Dorro had helped bury the dead and shuddered at the memory.

Suddenly, Dorro became aware of a certain violent jostling, as their chairs were banged from behind. A second later, a pungent stench permeated their table, causing the children and him to plug their nostrils and groan loudly.

*This is intolerable*, thought the bookmaster. *I shall give these hooligans behind us a sound tongue-lashing!*

"Now see here!" but the rest of the speech died on Dorro's lips as he turned in his chair and looked straight into the eyes of a Dwarf. In fact, there were quite a few of them, and they all stared back at the bookmaster as if begging him to start a fight. They all knew it wouldn't last long. "Ummm, sorry gentlemen, I beg pardon. I thought you were guests we had been expecting," lied Dorro poorly.

"No harm, Halfling. We Dwarves are unaccustomed to your species' sense of space. In our country, Dwarves live over, under, sideways down of each other, and are used to being bumped. I'm still learning the ways of your strange folk. My name is Crumble, by the way."

"Charmed to meet you, Mr. Crumble. I am Dorro Fox Winderiver, the village bookmaster."

"Just Crumble will suffice, Mr. Doorfox-a-River. I'm a digger, as are my brothers: Wump (*burp!*), Flume (*groan!*), Two-Toes (*sniffle!*), and Magpie (*belch!*), as well as my fine son, Orli (*fart!*)."

Wyll and Cheeryup giggled at the display, while Dorro flushed red. "Oh my, there must be beans on the menu tonight!"

"No, a jolly burst of bodily gasses or noise is a customary greeting in the Dwarf lands. It is a sign of manners and good breeding."

"I see," said the bookmaster, mildly appalled. "This is young Cheeryup Tunbridge here, along with my nephew Wyll."

Without missing a beat, the boy let fly a massive burp, horrifying his uncle, but drawing big grins and applause from the Dwarf clan. "Well done, young master, well done!" crowed Crumble. "Perhaps you are part Dwarf and don't know it," he said, adding a wink for good measure.

By this time Wyll and Cheeryup were laughing madly; in other circumstances, Dorro might have scolded the impudent boy, but present conditions dictating otherwise, he politely grinned.

"Would you like to [*shrug*] join us for dinner, friends?"

In a trice the Dwarves abandoned their table and seated themselves around Dorro, Wyll, and Cheeryup. They hooted at Freda for drink and food, and everyone had various ales in front of them. Dorro noticed the Northlanders sharing a tiny glass vial, which they used to pour a few

drops of liquid into their beers. He wasn't sure what it was, but made a mental note to ask them later.

Finally, their suppers had arrived—plates of sausages and chops, and crocks of savory stews—and Crumble yelled out, “Lads, we’ve hit the mother lode—dive in!”

Although Halflings were known for their own formidable eating habits, they couldn't hold a candle to a North Country Dwarf. The six stocky creatures tore into their plates with violence, eating with their hands, including the stew. There were bits of meat flying across the table and littering the Dwarves ample beards, between gulps of beer. Wyll and Cheeryup couldn't help but quietly snicker at their guests' behavior, as neither Mr. Dorro nor Mrs. Tunbridge would have tolerated that behavior for a second.

Dorro, meanwhile, delicately cut his lamb chop with his fork and knife, savoring the flavor and dodging clots of flying gravy. He would break to take sips of red wine from a glass goblet, but paying no mind to the gorging guests across the table.

“So, Mr. Door-a-River, I figger you must live in a *burr-ohh*,” noted Crumble, already a little tipsy on his ale. “I’ve never been inside one until we got here, y’know.”

“Please, call me Dorro. And yes, I do live in a so-called burrow—a rather nice one, I should think.”

“It’s uncanny to us Dwarves—we live deep under the earth in great halls and caverns, but it would never occur to us to live under inside a clump of dirt.”

“Hold on, good sir! It’s hardly a clump of dirt, sniffed Dorro with a smidgen of rancor. “A burrow is a warm, cozy haven based on the needs for comfort and convenience. In olden times, the earliest Halflings were able to survive because of their quick wits and ability to disappear when predators or enemies came near. Over time, they learned to dig into the good earth itself for safety, and this evolved into the burrows we enjoy today. Why, my home, known as the Perch, is renowned for its charm and excellent views of the River Thimble. It even has running water.”

There were quite a few raised eyebrows among the Dwarves at that, prompting the one called Two-Toes to ask, “May we see it?”

“See *what?*” snorted Dorro.

“See your grotty burrow-hill,” added Wump. And the one called Flume added flatly, “Tomorrow.”

“*It’s ... I’m ... well ... Oh, fine!*” snapped Dorro perhaps less graciously than he ought, but pinned on the end, “And it’s not *grotty*; the Perch is a lovely burrow. Come see for yourselves! In three days! At three o’clock in the afternoon!”

That seemed to satisfy the six Dwarves, and they nodded perfunctorily while resuming their dinners, or at least what tidbits remained. Dorro and the younglings finished up as well and bade the newcomers good evening, leaving a few silver coins on the table. He hoped that they would

realize it didn't cover everyone's meal and that they'd have to pay for their own food. And he didn't wait around long enough to find out.

\* \* \*

No sooner had they exited the Hanging Stoat than the three ran into a pair of Thimble Downers arguing furiously.

"You're ruining my business, ya interloper!"

"That's tough, my friend. Not our fault you haven't kept up with the times." By this time, the first Halfling had already thrown his first punch, catching the second on the chin.

Dorro instinctively threw his arms around Wyll and Cheeryup and drew them away from the brawlers, who were going at it tooth and claw.

"Your rotten smeltery is ruining our village," shouted Bog the Blacksmith, who'd moved in a few months earlier. "I'm sick of your foul, black smoke!"

"Maybe you're just too weak for this line of work," sneered the second chap—Silas Fibbhook, the foreman from Bindlestiff's smeltery. "Why don't you try needlepoint or something more suited to your talents?"

At that, Bog charged Fibbhook and tackled him around the midriff, causing both to go down in a heap. Sadly for him, the latter was faster and a mite stronger, as he flipped Bog over and began pummeling him in the face. "If you can't take the competition, get out of Thimble Down. You've gotta learn that only the strong survive."

By this time, Mr. Mungo had already come out, alerted by the noise and yelling.

"Oy, this is bad for *my* business, so knock it off!" A big man, he grabbed Fibbhook from behind and pulled him off Bog as if he were a stinkbug. He stood between the two, in fact quite bravely, and held the two fighters apart. "There's no more fighting at the Hanging Stoat or its environs. We're a respectable establishment now. And if anyone disagrees, they'll get a poke from me!"

"Or *me!*" chimed Mungo's equally burly missus, Edythe. And certainly, a poke from Farmer Edythe could do some serious damage, as everyone knew, inspiring the pugilists to retire.

"I'm not done with you, blacksmith," hissed Fibbhook as he disappeared into the darkness.

Mungo and Edythe helped Bog to his feet, his face contorted with rage. "Mark my words, everyone, that smeltery will be the end of Thimble Down. It's not natural. It's filling the air with black smoke, and folks are getting sick. Mark my words!" he bellowed before he too headed for home.

The crowd of villagers standing there, along with Dorro and the younglings, all stared at one another. No one knew what impact the smeltery was having on the air or general health of the

place, but everyone felt Thimble Down was changing and becoming more modern. Problem was, no one knew if that was a good thing or not.

## The Grippe

“G’ morning, Gadget,” Forgo said as the young deputy ambled into the gaol. “What’s the word in the lanes?”

Scratching his mop of dull red hair, he paused for a few seconds, but had a thought, “Did you hear about Mrs. Leery?”

“No, what, happened?”

“She came down with the cough a few days ago.”

“So? Lots of Thimble Downers have this damnable flu.”

“Yeah, but this lady is dead,” murmured Gadget. “Don’t remember any folks dying from the plain ol’ flu.”

“She *died*?” Forgo stood up like a bolt. “Why, Mrs. Leery babysat me as a youngling. Poor, dear lady ....”

“And another oldster in Fell’s Corner is on the verge—a certain Milvis Tanner. I heard he won’t make it to see another dawn. Coughin’ himself inside out, they say.”

“I vaguely know him—keeps to himself. Still, that’s a shame. Nurse Pym must be exhausted.”

“’Tis true, I have seen her bustling all over the village these days.”

The door banged open and none other than Nurse Pym herself strode in. “Forgo! I need yer help. *Now!*”

“Now calm down, Jessie and take a seat!”

The nurse shot him a baleful eye—*no one* called Nurse Pym by her first name. She only let her long-deceased parents call her that many years ago and, since then, it was reserved for only her closest friends. Forgo, who knew her as Jessie back from their childhood days, pulled out a chair and gestured for Thimble Down’s foremost healer to park it and shut it. She quietly sat down, though still glaring at the Sheriff. “What’s the problem?”

“What’s the ...?” Pym let it die on her lips. “Are you pulling my leg, Forgo? I’ve got over thirty sick Halflings of all ages in bed with this cough and they ain’t improving. And they’re all over the place, so I’m being run off my feet. If I get the so-called Grippe, we’re done—there’s no other healer in town.”

“What do you think the blight is caused by?”

“Hell if I know, Sheriff,” said Pym, adjusting her beefy profile on the chair for more comfort. Indeed, she was right—if she got ill, Thimble Down would be in grave danger; in some ways,

she was its most important citizen. “It must be a virus blown in from the country by traders. But I’ve given patients my famed nettle soup, along with cranberry and oak-leaf tinctures, and none have shown signs of improvement. You’ve heard about Mrs. Leery, no doubt. By tomorrow, we could lose another one—maybe two.”

“Do you think it has anything to do with this smeltery?”

Nurse Pym scratched a few of the hairs on her chin. “I’m no scientist, but it makes some sense. Halfling lungs aren’t made to suck in black smoke, but sure enough, most of ’em smoke pipes like chimneys anyway. But that’s the finest pipe weed from Nob, not a fog of smelted metals and ores.”

“If you need more help delivering medicines, you can use my cart and my pony, Tom. He’s slow, but reliable. And speaking of slow but reliable, feel free to employ Gadget as well. He’s a good lad.”

Gadget perked up at the sound of his name. “Huh? What? *Who?*”

Lowering his voice, the Sheriff added, “Maybe not the sharpest knife in the drawer, but still useful.” Nurse Pym smiled back.

“I’ll take you up on both. Gadget, come with me. I have ten Halflings who need my soup and tincture right away. If you can deliver them for me, it would do a world of good for these old bones.”

The ever-affable Gadget Pinkle grinned and nodded, happy to be of help. Not the brightest lad, again thought Sheriff Forgo, but he could grow into something more. Like Bosco. A cloud briefly passed over his eyes, but he shook it off and quipped, “That’s our plan for the moment. Jessie—*I mean, Nurse Pym!*—please keep me apprised of the sick. Hopefully, there won’t be any more deaths.”

Pym looked grim for a moment. “Oh, there will be, Sheriff. You can count on it.”

\* \* \*

No sooner had Nurse Pym left than the door burst open again, and in flew Wyll and Cheeryup, along with their new friend.

“What ho, young ones! And who’s this fine fellow?”

“Sheriff Forgo, may I introduce Orli, a Dwarf from the North Country,” said Cheeryup in her most formal voice.

The lawman held out his hand to shake, which Orli returned, though looking curiously at the custom. “Hullo, Mr. Sheriff. My Pa says *yer* the boss in this here village.”

Forgo laughed. “Maybe I am, good sir. Who’s your papa?”



“He is Crumble of the Northern Realm, known far and wide for his gifts with metals and ores,” happily continued Orli. “We are here with the rest of my uncles to work for Mr. Bindlestiff at yon smeltery. My dad and uncles are the best smelters around, which is why they were called for. And they’re teaching me, so someday I can be the best, though I ain’t sure that’s what I want to do with my life.”

“What would like to do, Orli?” chimed in Wyll. “I’m going to be a lawman, just like Sheriff Forgo, and fight villains all day long.”

Forgo guffawed again. “I wouldn’t go that far, young Wyll. So what about you, Orli—will you be a lawman, too?”

“I was raised deep in the earth, but I do like life under the naked sun,” said the stout lad, who was as tall as Cheeryup and Wyll, yet wider than both put together. He also had a few scratchy black hairs on his chin and neck, a mark of a grand Dwarf beard to come.

“I enjoyed our trek through these woodlands, Wyll. We don’t have many trees in the colder places, but I quite like them trees o’ yers. I could become very fond of them in fact. Can you make a living as a tree man, or ... a tree *Dwarf*?”

“Of course you can, Orli,” chirped the thin yellow-haired girl. “You could be a carpenter or a lumber-Dwarf. Can you climb trees?”

“I dunno.”

“That settles that,” added Wyll with a gleam. “This afternoon, when it warms up a little, we’ll go search for my favorite climbing trees. I know a good many, especially in Mr. Dorro’s orchard.”

The children clapped hands joyously, but Sheriff Forgo interrupted. “So what did you three actually come her for?”

“Oh dear, I forgot!” snapped Cheeryup, not happy with herself for forgetting. “There was a hullabaloo at the library this morning; many village folk were there complaining of the thefts. Apparently, that thief was a busy bee last night.”

“Why didn’t they come to see me?”

Wyll jumped in, “They’re comin’ soon. They just bumped into each other at the library while Mr. Dorro was there, and he began asking all sorts of questions. Soon, half the library patrons had stories of things that had gone missing.”

“Like what?”

“Minty Pinter lost a nice tin pot from his cart, and Dowdy Cray said a whole axel was stolen from his wagon shop,” piped Cheeryup.

“... and Farmer Duck can’t find his scythe or any of his baling twine. And Freda at the Hanging Stoat says her apron is gone. So is her beer tray!” rang in Wyll. “Folks are missing pies and hats and coins and books and socks and more!”

“Dorro must be out of his melon about missing books.”

“He is, Sheriff, he is,” groaned Wyll. “Steam was coming out of his ears this morning when he discovered that Bladgett’s *Illustrated Portfolio of Burrows and Hillock Homes* was missing. He was going to show it to Orli’s father and uncles, but now he can’t.”

“So I’ve got a thief who steals with impunity from burrows and public buildings, and a mysterious illness that is felling my fellow citizens. What’s next?” Forgo frowned and looked out the window of the gaol. Suddenly, he coughed. A loud, wracking cough.

He stared at the children, and they back at him, all quite alarmed. “Not a word of this to anyone, younglings—you never heard me cough. Understood?”

Wyll, Cheeryup, and Orli nodded mutely and departed. Behind them, they heard the Sheriff start to hack and cough again. It didn’t seem like it would ever stop.

## The Campaign

With Wyll and Cheeryup back in the library and watching the front desk, Dorro made plans to see the Mayor's speech at noon. The chief magistrate of Thimble Down was up for reelection—maybe his twelfth or thirteenth term—and was ever the commanding orator, even if he was also a sneaky weasel.

The Mayor was only ever interested in his own welfare and didn't care two hoots for populace at large; fortunately for him, no one ever rose to challenge his vice-grip on the village. For all his shortcomings, he was a brilliant politician and knew how to build networks and alliances throughout Thimble Down, notably among its merchants and business leaders.

The Mayor was less popular with the farmers that surrounded the village, but that's because they never did anything for him or vice-versa. Thus when elections rolled around, the leader was able to call in all the favors he'd been doling out and lock in votes before even starting the campaign.

As Dorro arrived to the site of the Mayor's speech near the Bumbling Badger tavern, he noticed a lectern hastily mounted on the back of a wagon and a crowd beginning to swell. At noon on the dot, Thimble Down's wealthiest citizen, Osgood Thrip (newly returned from his family's exile in Water-Down), mounted the cart and snorted loudly to get everyone's attention.

"Hear, hear! Halflings of Thimble Down—this is your hour!" he began with overt theatrics. "Today, we begin the campaign for the Mayorship of our fair hamlet, between our fine Mayor and any contestants that may emerge today."

By now, over a hundred Thimble Downers were present, all jostling each other and grumbling about this and that. Few were actually listening to Osgood Thrip and many were complaining that the speech was keeping them from their lunch. In fact, you could hear more than a few stomachs rumbling.

"... as I was saying," continued Thrip, "Our esteemed Mayor is about to address you today. But before that, I want to ask you good folks of Thimble Down if there is anyone who plans to join the race this year. You'll need two nominations and the support of the crowd. Is there anyone? Anyone at all? No, well that's fine, we'll just carry on ..."

"*Oy!*" came a loud voice from the crowd. "You hold on there, Mr. Osgood Thrip! Always in a rush, pushin' people around and not letting them think things out. I know something about that, I do!"

Pushing his way through the mob was Mr. Mungo, the venerable tavern keeper of the Hanging Stoat. The big Halfling was red in the face and puffing heavily, but he kept pushing his way forward until he stood next to the wagon and spoke up. "I ... [*wheeze!*] ... hereby nominate ... [*gasp!*] ... my lovely wife Farmer Edythe ... [*puff!*] ... to be the next Mayor of Thimble Down!"

There was a cheer in the audience, as everyone loved a good race and glad they didn't have to listen to the Mayor dawdle on with his vague promises and lies. "I second the nomination!" came another voice from the throng. The Halflings all turned their heads to see who had dared to speak up. Even Osgood Thrip scanned the motley assemblage looking for the source, but stopped and frowned.

"The nomination of Farmer Edythe has been made by Mr. Mungo and seconded by Bog the Blacksmith," sneered Thrip. "However, Mungo's nomination is null and void owing to the fact that he is the candidate's husband. No relations can nominate their kin!" A sly grin stole over Osgood's face.

The crowd of Thimble Downers all started shouting and grousing at the technicality, with more than a few "Boos!" ringing out and echoing down the burrow-lined lane. "I'm sorry, but rules are rules," said Thrip in a deep basso voice.

"In that case, I nominate Farmer Edythe for mayor. I do so with great joy and think she would make a fine leader for our village!"

Again, there was a mad uproar from the citizens, necks turning left and right to find the speaker who dared to challenge Thrip. He too scanned the crowd, a nasty snarl on his face. "Who said that?" he roared. "I demand to know who made that nomination."

A figure on the periphery of the crowd stood up on a wooden box, puffing on his pipe. It was a tall, soft-middled Halfling with tousled brown hair and wearing a reasonably posh jacket and waistcoat.

"I said it."

"Why's it's Mr. Dorro!" crowed half a dozen village folk, in quiet awe. "It's the bookmaster! *Good on ye, sir!*"

Slowly, the tremor rippled through the crowd, building until it reached a deafening round of applause. His snarl became a horrible grimace, and to restore order Osgood Thrip pulled out a wooden hammer and began banging on the lecture. "Hear, hear!" he shouted in his formidably loud voice. "I regret to say that ... [*sigh*] ... Mr. Dorro's nomination of Farmer Edythe is perfectly legal and binding, as is Bog the Blacksmith's seconding. I hereby announce that Farmer Edythe will challenge the Mayor in the upcoming election."

The crowd exploded into a frenzy of joy, as they knew this would be an excellent contest and would require many hours in the pubs and taverns of Thimble Down discussing the merits of each candidate. That these discussions would further entail the downing many mugs of ale and

pipefuls of Old Nob weed was incidental; this was serious politics and required such actions. If consuming a plateful of chops or two were a further requirement, so be it.

By now, the village folk were cheering and dancing all over the lane, so much so that they forgot about the Mayor's speech and set off for the nearest tavern to slake their thirsts. As for the poor Mayor, he arrived at the scene only minutes later, only to find an empty lane, a wagon with a lectern atop, and a morose-looking Osgood Thrip next to the wagon, his face buried in his hands.

"Say, Osgood," asked the Mayor, "Did I come at the wrong time? Where is my crowd of jolly supporters?"

Thrip merely looked up at the Mayor, rolled his eyes, and shook his head whilst he stepped away. The Mayor stood there baffled, looking more a fool than usual.

## A Hush in the Wood

“Orli, do folks like to go fishing in your realm?”

The Dwarf boy was walking along the edge of the River Thimble with Cheeryup and Wyll, skipping rocks and taking in the color around them. It was a beautiful Fall’s day, warm and crisp with a hint in the air of the cold days to come.

The big lad scratched his head and thought for a moment.

“Wyll, we Dwarves actually ain’t much for water, y’know. Every once in a while a trader or tracker will nab a big salmon in a river or a carp from a deep mountain cavern where the cold water runs free and fast like veins of silver. Otherwise, we prefer rooting about for diamonds, gems, gold, and copper. For food, there are tasty game animals who wander our lands and rest in our caves—like elk and snow hares. Them’s we eat, along with mushrooms—we grow lots and lots of ‘shrooms in our caves.”

Wyll was befuddled that there were folk that didn’t love fishing; it was one of his favorite pastimes and something he shared with his Uncle Dorro. “Someday we will take you fishing, Orli, and you will see how much fun it is. In our village, we have anglers who fish even in the middle of Winter, sawing holes in the ice for sleeping trout below.”

“That sounds more enjoyable—we Dwarves do not care for boats or falling into water, unless it’s a hot spring.”

“How do you cleanse yourselves?” wondered Cheeryup.

“Why do we need cleansing?” Orli asked in return. “We are Dwarves—we live under the earth and love the smell of dirt and rock and gravel. That is why we are who we are!”

Cheeryup chose not to pursue this line of inquiry, quickly understanding that Dwarves do not bathe with any frequency, which accounted for their rather pungent aromas.

“Let me ask you, Master Wyll, are those the kind of fish you seek?” wondered Orli. “If so, I do not see much sport in gathering them. Seems too simple minded.”

The children looked to where Orli was pointing; Cheeryup was the first to shriek. “Oh dear, what happened to those poor fish.” The three raced down the rocky shoreline to a small eddy that was completely filled—with dead fish: trout, bass, perch, walleye, sunfish, pike ... some quite large and of prize weight.

Wyll was horrified. “These are some of the biggest fish I’ve ever seen in the river. And they’re all dead, just dead! Who could have done this?”

“Not *who*, young master Underfoot. But *what*.” The children jumped and grabbed each other as a figure stepped out from behind a winterberry holly bush, whose rich, red fruit was just coming into color. It was a small Halfling, very old, and with wrinkly, leather-like skin.

“Oh! It’s you, Mr. Dalbo. You always spring out like that,” said a visibly flustered Cheeryup. “You’re such a sneak!”

“I’m sorry, dear, but I have ye ol’ Halfling gift of stealth.” It was Dalbo Dall, the villager wanderer. “You’ve seen yon horrible tragedy. I found it this morning and cried many tears over those lost souls.”

“What caused it, Mr. Dalbo?” cried Wyll.

“There’s something wrong in the water, friends. And in the air and soil, too. The Great Wood has been poisoned, I fear.” Dalbo’s words just hung in the air with profound sadness.

“What can we do?”

“I don’t know as yet, but am I am in consultation with thy trees, and they’re as upset as I am. I should know more after I confer with Big Otto.” Dalbo Dall adjusted his floppy, pointed hat as he spoke.

Wyll and Cheeryup briefly looked at each other, wondering if Dalbo had finally lost his melon. “Big Otto?” they said in harmony.

“Ah, he’s a friend of mine. Actually, a mutual friend with yon Uncle Dorro. You know the fine fellow.”

“You mean Big Otto, the pike?” inquired Wyll. “Why, he’s a fish! Out there, *in the river*! How can you talk to him?”

“We have our ways here in the Wood, and Otto is one of the most perceptive minds in the river. I rely on him to tell me about changes in the currents, scents, and temperature of the water—this is information I need to know!” added the vagabond most emphatically, his eyes bugging out. “I’ve spoken to others—I met some villagers near the Meeting Tree yesterday, who were out for a hunt. Yet they’d spent the whole day scouring the Great Wood and found no game. No birds, no squirrels, no deer—*nothing*. This troubles me.”

Wyll and Cheeryup edged closer together, wondering if Dalbo was insane and could become dangerous. “My words may seem strange to you as yet, but give it time. O’er the years, they may begin to make sense. But never mind for now—introduce me to your young friend.”

“Ermmm, this is Orli. He’s a ...”

“Dwarf, yes, I know,” said Dalbo. “I’m a great admirer of ye kin, young sir. The Dwarves of the Northern Realm are strong folk and legendary diggers. They are as close to the earth as any creatures alive. I assume that’s why you’re here—to *dig*!”

“Yes, Mr. Dalbo,” said Orli with customary shyness. “We’re here to help Mr. Bindlestiff at the smeltery.”

“Aye, that’s what I was afraid of.” Dalbo looked off pensively and began rubbing his chin. “But I won’t make hasty judgments. I just wanted to say I’m glad to meet ye and look for’ard to being introduced to thy father and uncles. Welcome to Thimble Down!”

At that, Dalbo Dall bowed awkwardly, nodded at Wyll and Cheeryup, and disappeared back to the shrubbery from whence he came. The children remembered Mr. Dorro was home at the Perch right at the moment and knew what to do.

“C’mon, Orli!” shouted Wyll.

The three ran as fast as they could back to the burrow of a certain bookmaster.

\* \* \*

Some hours later a silhouetted figure entered the large entrance at Bindlestiff’s Smelting Works. No one paid much attention to the Halfling at first. Yet he started to cough—not the sick type of cough, but the *I want your attention right now* kind. Finally, that progressed to a few utterances of “Excuse me!” and, last, a defiant “I want to see Mr. Bindlestiff. Right *now!*”

A few of the workers stopped their toiling and looked around to see who would deal with this intruder. A shadow advanced from out of the cavern’s depths. “Who wants to see Mr. Bindlestiff? And do you have an appointment?”

“My name is Dorro Fox Winderiver. And *no*, I have no silly appointment, but I demand to see Mr. Bindlestiff anyway.”

“*Oooo*, we demands it, do we?” snarled the gruff voice. “I could toss you out of here onto your backside, but I’ve been instructed to make nice with the populace of your fair hamlet. Let me see if the proprietor is in. Stay put.”

At that, the big Halfling disappeared back into the flickering light of the forges and fires within. A few minutes later, he reappeared with a short, chubbier fellow, this one finely dressed with well-combed mutton chop sideburns. “What seems to be the problem, sir? I’m a busy Halfling and don’t have all day for lollygagging.”

“Lollygagging?” croaked Dorro. “Why, Mr. Bindlestiff, we have a certain amount of feasible evidence that you and your smelting operation are poisoning our village and environs.”

“Oh really, Mr. Winderover? What so-called feasible evidence do you have?” Bindlestiff had heard this kind of complaint many times before, in other communities where he had established his smelteries. He’d learned how to deal with the complainers—*firmly*. “I run a respectable business that’s been endorsed by your Mayor. And provided many jobs for your residents, yet you come in here to tell me I’ve done a heinous thing. How dare you, sir!”



Dorro typically didn't like confrontation, but this time his dander was up, notably on the news that Wyll and Cheeryup had brought him. "Half this village is coughing due to your black miasma, and some of our elderly residents have even died."

"I said *proof*, Mr. Wander-Rooter, not foolish hearsay," barked Bindlestiff in return. "Do you have scientific facts?"

"My nephew and two witnesses found perhaps thirty dead fish in the river today, and they had no signs of violence upon them," fumed Dorro. "They died of poison in the water! And in the Great Wood, hunters are complaining that most the game have left. You can give Thimble Downers all the jobs you want, but how will they work if they can't eat?"

"I've listened to enough of this hogwash, Wanda-Rigger. Get the heck out of my smeltery or we shall smelt *you*!"

A red and flustered Dorro raged back, "I shan't leave until I have satisfaction. I want answers and proof *from you* that your business is not delivering black soot and death to our residents and animals."

"Fibbhook, our esteemed guest wants 'satisfaction.' Please remove him from our premises and give him some. Good day to you, Mr. Waddle-Riddle." With that, Hiram Bindlestiff turned on his heels without saying goodbye and disappeared back into the black heart of the cavern.

"I'm not going anywhere," snorted the resolute Mr. Dorro, folding his arms and jutting his chin out for good measure.

"That's what you think, Guv." With that, Fibbhook swiftly grabbed Dorro's right arm and twisted it nastily behind his back.

*"Arghhhhh!"*

"Is that enough satisfaction for you, Mr. Dorro—y'see, I remember your name," hissed Fibbhook in the bookmaster's ear. "I remember all the putrid lowlifes that threaten my livelihood. Now, we're going for a little walk."

The foreman tightened his grip on Dorro's arm, causing the bookmaster to cry out louder again. "You'll pay for this!" came the bookmaster's empty threat as Fibbhook pushed him outside and shoved him to the hard-packed lane. For good measure, he kicked up a cloud of dirt from the roadway into Dorro's face, causing him to choke and sputter.

"Next time, little one, bring a knife, so we can fights proper-like," said Fibbhook, bending over Dorro and addressing him like a child. "If you do, I can knife and gut you legally—in self-defense—and that fat, stupid Sheriff can't do anything about it. I haven't killed anyone in a while and, y'know, I do believe I miss it!"

Slowly, the bruised Halfling turned and began trudging back towards the library, where he could clean himself up. Out of the corner of his eye, Dorro saw something else, just in the shadows of Bindlestiff's Smelting Works. It was for only a second, but yes, there was no

question about it. He saw Crumble and the other Dwarves with whom he'd chatted so amicably the other night. But today, they stood by and watched him get thrashed.

Worse, the Northlanders pretended they didn't know who he was.

## The Pinch-Thief

The Sheriff's head felt as if it were going to explode. All morning, Thimble Downers had been assailing him at the gaol with details of the items stolen by the thief. Mrs. Fowl had just lost two more shepherd's pies, and Dowdy Cray had lost an axel, two oak wheels, and a steering board.

Poor, ailing Mrs. Tunbridge was heartbroken that an intricately beaded dress had been taken from a rack right inside her burrow. It had been intended as a gift for a young girl about to come out in society, and had taken one hundred hours to make.

About twenty-five Halflings filled Forgo's office, all of them shouting and making a ruckus, while his deputy, Gadget Pinkle, using parchment and a lead pencil, was furiously keeping track of the missing items. The ruckus subsided when Osgood Thrip entered the room, looking fit to be tied. "This is *outrageous!*" he fumed. "I'm holding you personally responsible, Sheriff."

"You too? Good grief!" moaned the seated Sheriff, his face buried in his hands. "What did he get?"

"My gold-plated inkwell! Right off my burl writing desk. The impunity of it all!" Thrip bellowed for another few minutes, but Forgo ignored him, concentrating on more relevant matters, such as who would do this and how could they hit so many targets at once. It was inconceivable that any one criminal could be so proficient; perhaps it was a gang working Thimble Down over. Whatever the answer, the crook or crooks were brilliant in their execution, and Forgo had nothing in the way of clues.

"Well?" barked Osgood. "Are you just going to just sit there like a buffoon or are you going to do something? This pinch-thief infiltrated Thrip Manor and committed a crime! My poor Lucretia is not well, you know, and this has set her over the edge." (Indeed, Osgood's wife was not completely balanced, as we've learned in the past.)

"The only thing that's going to bring in this thief—or perhaps, thieves—is having him caught in the act or offering a reward. I would suggest we talk to the Mayor about coughing up a few gold pieces, and I'll write up a few wanted posters. Gadget can distribute them around the village taverns."

"See that it's done, Forgo—or else!" Osgood grimaced and turned to leave, but stopped cold. There, standing in the doorway, was his frequent nemesis—Mr. Dorro.

“I’m sorry to hear you’ve lost something to this nefarious crook, Osgood,” said Dorro with cold courtesy. “I’m afraid that I’ve been victimized as well. Twice, in fact.”

“Well, that’s *your* problem, Winderiver,” and out strode Osgood Thrip, verily pushing Dorro out of the way.”

“Charming as always,” purred the bookmaster with rueful sarcasm. “Mr. Pinkle, you may write down the following items that have been purloined from me: one basket of Candleberry apples, one basket of Green Gem apples, a jug of last year’s apple brandy, and two freshly baked apple-crisps.”

“That’s all?” croaked Forgo.

“Hardly, my dear Sheriff. “We’ve also had several books and scrolls removed from the library. You may find it interesting that they all have to do with thievery. Apparently, our thief stole books about thieving in order to become better at it. It’s quite uncanny. Got that, Gadget?”

The red-haired deputy was scratching away furiously. “Yessir, Mr. Dorro. A right shame, that is! It’s like we’re teaching the villain to become a better villain!”

“Very astute, young Mr. Pinkle. Forgo, I think you have yourself a very promising deputy here.”

The deputy blushed a color of pink that clashed horribly with his fiery locks, but there was nothing to be done about that. The lad’s grin, however, was worth a hundred gold pieces.

“Folks, you’ll have to go home now. We have all your information, and honestly, I don’t see how this can continue without anyone seeing *anything*. Keep your eyes open and let me know if you see even the strangest little thing. It could break this entire case wide open!”

At that, the grumpy victims shuffled out the door, muttering to themselves, but also clearly titillated to be involved in a real case involving a real thief. They would surely tell their friends and neighbors about it all day and night.

To help with his headache and growling gut, once alone, Forgo sent Gadget out to get him some grub from the Bumbling Badger. He was further instructed to go to the stable and give his pony, Tom, some fresh oats and a bucket of water.

“Now what, Dorro? I’m stumped, and frankly, I’m not feeling so well at the moment.”

“You don’t have the Grippe, do you? We can’t afford to lose you, Forgo.”

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” lied the Sheriff. “But we need to catch this crook—it’s out of control.”

“Our next step is perfectly clear, dear Sheriff.” The lawman looked up bleary eyed. “We need to set a trap and a damn good one at that!”

“Okay, I’ll tell Gadget and begin to set things up. You, of course, might have a plan . . .?”

Dorro paused. “Forgo, I wouldn’t tell Gadget about it, nor shall I tell Cheeryup or Wyll. We trust these young folks, but we don’t know whom they talk to. For the moment, let’s hold this between ourselves.”

Forgo nodded groggily in agreement. "In the interim, Sheriff, you should take a nap and see Nurse Pym. You look like death!"

No sooner had Dorro had uttered these words than he instantly regretted them.

## Dwarves in the Perch

His mind sifting through the day's myriad of events (and nursing more than a few bruises, courtesy of that ruffian Fibbhook), Dorro lay in his study, contemplating the cooling weather outside.

*If the temperature drops past freezing soon, it could stop the Grippe in its path, he reasoned. Warmth tends to spread contagions, while cold moves them indoors. So if the Grippe is caused by Bindlestiff's smelting and borne by the warm winds of early Fall, a sharp, frost might greatly reduce the infection rate.*

Unfortunately, as he looked out the window, it was yet another splendid Autumn day, not quite cold, not quite warm, but just perfect for a germ to travel anywhere it liked. He was jolted by the sound of a firm knock on his door. As far as Dorro recalled, he hadn't been expecting company. Rising from his favorite settee (the one he used exclusively for reading and napping), he crossed to the front door and opened it with some suspicion.

What he saw was the last thing he expected. For there on his stoop stood six serious-looking Dwarves, all of whom were gazing back intently at him as if expecting something. Finally, Dorro came to his wits and spoke first. "*Ummm ... greetings, Crumble and friends. What, errrrm, brings you to my neck of the woods?*"

"We are here for our tour, Mr. Dorro," said Crumble. "Just as you requested."

"I did?"

"Yes, certainly," continued the leader of the Dwarf band. "You invited us the other evening at the Hanging Stoat, where we enjoyed some degree of jocularity. You must recall."

"Ah, yes ... yes, I do," feigned the bookmaster. "A tour of the Perch, of course!"

"And by tour," chimed in Wump, who had dark, braided hair and a thick matted beard, "we assumed that meant *with* luncheon included."

"Which is why we have brought some fresh bread," said Two-Toes, who possessed bright yellow hair, and one assumed, fewer toes than he had possessed at birth.

"And fresh apples," added Flume, a portly Dwarf with rosy cheeks, holding a number of fine apples in his outstretched scarf.

"And some pipe weed," giggled Magpie, the one who giggled the most. "I hope you like dwarfish tobacco, Mr. Dorro, sir. I tried yer Old Nob variety, which was potable, but dare I say—ours is *better*."

“*Ooo*, much better,” the Dwarf brothers all crowed at once, before they all broke up laughing. Dorro didn’t know what to make of their strange jokes and inside banter, but decided to give up and get on with the tour. And, as he reflected later, he had invited them over for a visit, but had stone forgotten the appointment.

“Please come in, gentlemen. And try to wipe some of that mud off your boots, if possible.” But Dorro saw that it was no use—these were Dwarves and dirty by nature. He would have to put his normally fastidious nature on hold for the day and let his guests stomp around his beloved burrow. “Welcome to the Perch, in any case.”

Suddenly, the entry to his home was filled with loud *oooo’s* and *ahhh’s*, as the quintet of Dwarves pointed and gestured at all the fascinating features.

“*Them’s be real, quality iron nails holding them beams together. Must be from a dwarfish forge, I’ll bet,*” gloated Wump.

“*Oy, Crumble—look at that trim work. Ash. Oak. Figured maple. Quite masterful!*” fawned Magpie.

“*Note all them rounded windows and door lintels. That’s Dwarf work, no doubt!*” Two-Toes speculated.

Crumble himself didn’t say anything. He just looked around, raising and lowering his bushy eyebrows like they were attached to a pulley, and slowly stroking his long brown beard. Dorro, for his part, was lapping up the compliments like it was his birthday, loving every second he heard a kind word for his home. (He was rather vain like that, but perhaps you knew that already.)

Realizing that the tour might work out well after all, he began, “This burrow was built over one hundred years ago by my grandfather Lorro, who named it after the fine view it commands of the River Thimble. He carved it out of this hillock with the help of a few local Halflings, though his diary did note that he’d traveled widely as a youngling and met Dwarves along the way. Whether they inspired the construction of this burrow, I cannot say, but there you have it. He also planted the fine apple orchard out back.”

“We already know that, Mr. Dorro,” said Flume. “Where do you think we picked the fine apples we brought you?”

Dorro groaned inwardly, but remembered these were Dwarves and not used to the etiquette of Halflings, such as not to pick their special apples and deliver them as gifts. *Ugh!*

He continued, “Here to our right is my study, where I conduct my correspondence, read, and take my daily naps—two if possible—on that elegant settee. Now, please, Mr. Two-Toes, don’t sit on my settee, *please!*”

But it was too late; Two-Toes had toddled across the small room and hoisted his rump up onto the cushions. To Dorro’s everlasting horror, he flopped around and laid himself out into a

recumbent position, with his filthy boots on the cushion and his filthy hair on an intricately stitched pillow. The bookmaster almost gagged, but decided to carry on stoically. He was brave like that.

Dorro moved the Dwarf clan back through the chambers of the Perch, showing them hidden closets and cozy bedrooms, stopping for a long time in the washroom, where they inspected the privy and tin sink's faucets, pipes, and spectacular running water. Indeed, they were amazed at this technology, and each agreed, "... it was Dwarf work. No Halfling could have thought of this." Dorro rolled his eyes, knowing perfectly well it was Halfling work, but forged onward.

The tour ended up in the kitchen, where the Dwarves took time to praise him directly, as Dwarves and Halflings are kin when it comes to their favorite hobby—eating.

*"Look at them copper pans! Beautifully maintained, Mr. Dorro,"* cooed Two-Toes, though he whispered to Flume on his right, *"... though clearly made by our folk."*

*"Look at that cutlery! From the finest steel, no doubt!"* exalted Wump, though thinking to himself, *No question—we Dwarves made 'em.*

*"And what knives! You could flay a troll's hide off his back with one of Mr. Dorro's paring blades"* cheered Magpie, *"Much like own of our own, fine knives,"* he added for good measure.

A moment of awkward silence followed the Dwarves' oaths of admiration, which Dorro finally understood to mean, "When do we eat?"

"Would you gentlemen like some luncheon, dare I ask? I don't want to hold you up from you other appointments," teased Dorro, knowing all too well the answer.

"Boys, let's set the table!" belted out Crumble, his brothers springing into action, putting out plates, napkins, cutlery, and preparing the minuscule amount of food they'd brought.

Fortunately for all involved, Mr. Dorro's kitchen was ready to go at a moment's notice, and he too jumped into action. It was fortuitous that he'd spent the morning preparing a thick squash-and-geese soup to go with his supper, but now redeployed it for his ravenous guests. He called for Two-Toes to bring the sliced bread they'd brought and toast the pieces in his clay oven for a few minutes. They'd slathered the tops with butter and raspberry jam to go with the soup.

"Now, Mr. Wump, if you wouldn't mind, in that pantry there, you'll find a small keg of ale labeled Dorro's Draught, and ceramic mugs hanging on the walls. I think you can take it from there." Wump's eyes glistened with excitement. "You'll also find some aged cheeses and sausages. Be a good fellow and bring some of them along. Magpie, perhaps you can help your brother."

The two Dwarves leapt up and retrieved the tasty goods. Within five minutes, Dorro and his five guests were seated on benches around sturdy oak kitchen table, taking in the spread of soup, endless rounds of toast, cheeses, pork and beef sausages, chutney and pickles, apples, and large



mugs of ale. Again, the bookmaster noticed the Dwarves passing around a small vial of liquid and putting a few drops into their cups. He finally decided to call them on it.

“Crumble, might I ask—what is that nectar you pour into your cups?”

“Ah, that’s belladonna,” replied Wump nonchalantly.

“But isn’t that poisonous, or, at least, enough to make you ill?”

Flume chimed in, “Not for a Dwarf—we’re made of sterner stuff. We add a few drops to your Halfling ales to, *ahem*, enhance the experience.”

“I’m not following you.”

Noted Two-Toes, “Your beer is too mild for us; *now*, a good Dwarf Stout has the kick of ten mules behind it!”

“So you’re increasing the alcohol?”

“Not really,” confirmed Magpie. “Belladonna adds a more dreamy effect to the beverage. It makes it more powerful, but also makes our brains do funny, loopy things.”

“So it’s more like a medicinal affect ... interesting,” posited Dorro. “Might I try some?”

“*No!*” shouted all the Dwarves in unison.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to use up your supply.”

“Not at all, Mr. Dorro,” added Crumble diplomatically. “But friend, you are a Halfling and we are Dwarves—not the same at all inside. What toxins we can more than handle would make you very sick. Dare I say, our belladonna extract might kill you! And that, certainly, would make this excellent dinner end, *errmmm*, most awkwardly.”

“Ah, now I understand you completely, and thank you for the explanation. Now, before the soup gets cold, let’s tuck in!”

What transpired over the next half hour defies description, but when five Dwarves and a Halfling sit down for luncheon, there isn’t much time for conversation. Bits of soup and bread and sausage and cheese were shooting all over the table, while frothy ale dripped from chins and beards until the floor was sopping wet. Dorro knew he’d be cleaning for the rest of the day (and heaven knows, how long for the settee’s cushions and pillows), but was surprised to learn that Dwarves are also adept at cleaning up and, once the meal was completed, the brothers set to rapid work and the kitchen looked relatively back to normal in no time. Magpie even swept the halls and bedrooms of dirt the Dwarves had trekked in, while Two-Toes took the settee cushions and pillow outside for a good clapping, creating a small dust cloud outside the front door.

Afterward, the six new friends sat quietly in the kitchen, smoking Magpie’s excellent Dwarf tobacco in their long, earthen pipes. It was at that moment that Dorro chose to ask a delicate question. “You know, gentlemen, I had an incident yesterday at Mr. Bindlestiff’s smeltery. I was, how do you say, *roughed up* by the foreman, this vile Fibbhook. And, I saw you there, observing the incident. I’ve wondered why you didn’t—*help me*.”

The Dwarves suddenly became very quiet, uncomfortably so, and the five Northmen eyed each other nervously. It was Crumble who finally spoke up. “Ah yes, that ‘incident,’ as you say. That was most unfortunate. We do understand your point of view, Mr. Dorro, but maybe not your approach. Like good Mr. Bindlestiff, we are creatures of business, and you entered his workplace essentially to insult him and his toils. That fact that you got *roughed up* could have been predicted even before you entered. In Dwarf terms, you let your emotions get the better of you.”

“You don’t think the black fumes from the smeltery have anything to do with the Grippe or the diminishing of animals and creatures in our forests and waterways?”

“That is not for us to say, Mr. Dorro. We have been forging metals and ores for centuries in our own lands, and have not lost animals, nor have our folk fallen sick. We Dwarves spend our lives surrounded by smoke, fire, and rock—it’s our way. Not sure about your folk, but there it is. The two may be related or just strange coincidences.”

“And you don’t think Bindlestiff is up to anything crooked or holding back any pertinent information about his forge?” queried Dorro again.

Crumble looked the bookmaster in the eye. “Mr. Hiram Bindlestiff is a Halfling of business, and he pays us regularly. For a Dwarf, that is a sign of honor and integrity. I don’t know about your birds and fishies, but he is a sharp and astute gentleman. And if you got poked in the eye for insulting him in his own place of business, so be it. I’m sorry, Mr. Dorro, but ’tis no *business* of ours. Nor yours!”

Inwardly, Dorro felt insulted, as if his new friends had thrown him under the wagon. But a twinge of guilt crept up his spine. In his heart—he knew they were absolutely right. And worse, he probably he owed Bindlestiff an apology.

## Speechifying

The next day, Thimble Downers were again gathered on one of the lanes, this time to hear official speeches from their mayoral candidates. The Mayor was a known quantity, but Farmer Edythe was the wild-card, bringing her unknown notions into the campaign. Again, the obligatory wagon was rolled in and an obligatory lectern mounted on top.

Dorro strolled up with Wyll and Cheeryup, as well as Orli, who had only light duties at the smeltery assisting his father and uncles. Indeed, Crumble thought it wise for the boy to get to know these Halflings as part of his education. It would be good, he reasoned, to understand the Southerners' strange ways as Orli grew into a mature Dwarf.

"Do you elect your leaders, Orli?" asked Dorro.

"What does 'elect' mean?" said the beefy Dwarf boy.

"You know, when the majority of the populace vote to elect a leader. The candidate with the most votes wins."

"We don't live in villages like you; we live in a vast network of caves and caverns. We have a few leaders—we call them *Torkae*—but no one votes for 'em. Every once in a while, an interloper challenges the leader to a contest. Aye, they throw rocks at each other until the one that's weakest and most bloodied retreats into the deepest caverns and never returns. He lives in shame until the day he or she dies a horrible, lonely death. Pretty straightforward, actually."

"That's terrible!" cried Cheeryup, "I thought you were a nice boy, Orli."

Mildly offended, the Dwarf countered, "I didn't invent this ritual. Us Dwarves have been pickin' *Torkae* like this for thousands of years, and it has served our people well. We don't judge yer silly elections where people stand on top of wagons and blither endlessly."

"Good one, Orli!" laughed Wyll. "I think you just lost your first debate, Cheery."

"Did not!" screeched the girl, and she stomped off into the crowd, her bright yellow hair whipping about angrily.

"What did I say?" ask Orli.

"Oh nothing. Cheeryup is a smart girl, a'course, but she doesn't like to lose an argument. Your points were perfectly valid, and there was nothing she could do to outflank you. Well done, sir." Wyll shot out his hand and shook hands with the confused Northern boy, but their attention was diverted by the moderator on top of the wagon.

\* \* \*

“Hello everyone and good morning.” It was Dowdy Cray, who ran the cart and wagon repair shop, and it was his dogcart they were standing on. “Today, we’ll be hearing from our two candidates for mayor: Farmer Edythe and ... *the Mayor!* (He’d been mayor for so long that no one really remembered his true name.) As always, the incumbent gets to speak first. Mr. Mayor!”

At that, the tall, spindly figure of the Mayor ascended the wagon steps, trying in his pained way to smile—it was more of a leer—from within his heavily mutton-chopped face. He even removed his top hat, revealing a few oily locks hiding his balding pate. He coughed once or twice for theatrical effect and began to speak.

“My dear, dear Thimble Downians,” he began grandly, drawing out each syllable. “I am *sooooo* humbled to be in your presence today. I’ve enjoyed many terms as your mayor and I seek to continue working for you good, good Halflings, and do the noble work which we’ve started!”

There was cautious, scattered applause. Most villagers knew the Mayor was a weasel, but he was *their* weasel and was sure he’d win the election somehow anyway. Dorro, meanwhile, leaned on a post and thought about the Mayor’s preening, pandering delivery: *Oh, he’s a slick one. Look at him up there in all his glory, lying and cajoling the crowd. Wake up, people—the Halfling is a cad and a fiend!*

The Mayor continued: “In the past year, we’ve had some challenges, but have conquered them together. We dealt with a band of murderous elves and sent them packing from the village.” The crowd didn’t know if this was true or not, but it sounded good. “And we killed a monster goblin who had ravaged the Great Wood and taken the life of our blacksmith, Tom Turner!”

The Thimble Downers started to cheer, thinking they had actually killed a goblin. “And we chased bloody pirates that stole our children and we successfully recovered them, while tragically losing a few of our own.” The Mayor stifled back a false tear, while the audience began to cheer wildly.

*Listen to that varmint,* thought Dorro. *The Mayor didn’t do any of that, the big liar! It was Forgo and I and the children ... and poor Bosco. I want to scream right now!*

“And this Summer, during a horrible drought, we fixed the plumbing and the flow of fresh well water in Thimble Down, thanks to a generous donation from Mr. & Mrs. Osgood Thrip!” crooned the Mayor. Big yells of approval followed, as well as the sight of Osgood tipping his hat and waving to the folks. “Not everyone in the village has indoor plumbing—like that fancy-pants Dorro Fox Winderiver, up there in his snooty burrow on the hill.”

The Mayor let that comment hang for a second as the crowd wondered if this was true or not. Even so, a few Halfling teens booed, and one even yelled out, “Dorro stinks!”

*How dare he?* Dorro was mortified that the Mayor had pitched him under wheels to score political points. *He has running water in his burrow, as does Osgood Thrip. The hypocrites!*

Fortunately, the Mayor was done with his assemblage of lies and half-truths, thanking the populace of Thimble Down for their many years of support, even in the face of threat from his nefarious opponent. He even went on to insinuate that Edythe was a dangerous voice for new and untried things.

“Why do we want to try radical concepts when the good old ideas have served us so well for so long? And who is this so-called candidate? All we know of her is that she grows tomatoes and is married to a tavern keeper. A lowly *tavern keeper*, I ask you!”

The crowd was confused for a second, as most of them loved taverns and tavern keepers, but if the Mayor said they were bad, well, maybe they were! And did they really want a lowly one’s wife as their mayor? As we’ve previously noted, Halflings weren’t the brightest creatures in the world and, among them, Thimble Downers did not rank very high. (On occasion, they made chipmunks seem like great intellectuals.)

The treacherous Mayor thanked his audience to lavish cheers and stepped off the wagon, while Dowdy introduced the other candidate. *Now this should be interesting*, thought Dorro warmly.

In a second, with the agility of a much younger and slimmer gal, the large figure of Farmer Edythe mounted the wagon. Granted, the wagon creaked and threatened to buckle, but Edythe was certainly a presence. Off to the side, her husband Mr. Mungo cheered and hooted loudly to whip up the crowd, and indeed, more than a few villagers politely cheered her arrival.

“My goodness, what a wonderful reception!” shouted Edythe in her big, burly voice. “I love this village!” A big roar from the crowd. *She knows how to work ‘em*, thought the bookmaster. *Go, Edythe, go!*

“Friends, our village has sat idle while progress and innovation takes flight in every other Halfling village. Upper-Down and Nob put in new pipes for their wells years ago; our Mayor just got around to it this year. And other villages have schools for their young folk, but not ours. Sure, we have a fine library, thanks to Mr. Dorro,” (“*Hooray for Dorro*,” someone shouted out, while another yelled, “*Dorro still stinks!*”)

“But it ain’t enough. We need to educate our younglings, so they can bring their smarts back into the village and help improve our lives. Especially when we start getting old!” More cheers for Edythe.

“Yet folks, that’s not why I’m here today. I’m here, because we have a problem in Thimble Down and it goes against everything we stand for. I’m talking about all the smoke and dirt that’s filling our air and making us sick. Every other Halfling has the Grippe and we all know where it’s from. Sure, the smeltery brought jobs, but at what cost? Dead fish in the river? No game in

the Great Wood? Our elderly getting sick and dying? (*Lots of boos and shouts from the audience*). Is it really worth it?

Edythe was on fire, and a few in the crowd responded with passionate cries, save from those who worked there, to close the smeltery. The Mayor, as Dorro noted, stood whispering feverishly with Osgood Thrip, as they clearly recognized what a threat Farmer Edythe was. If she won, she could undo years of work the pair had cooked up to keep the villagers in check, while they pocketed all sorts of profits, taxes, and kickbacks. This was their livelihood that Edythe was threatening. Dorro was sure they were cooking up a way to discredit her. It was inevitable.

“In closing, my friends, you know me. I’m Farmer Edythe and I’ve been growing fresh, healthy food for Thimble Down for twenty years. And my Mungo Poo’kins—*I mean*, my husband Mr. Mungo—has been a friend to all at the Hanging Stoat for just as long.”

Mungo had turned beet-red by this point, but still waved to the crowd.

“We believe in good, honestly grown food, fresh air, clean water, and good, cold beer!” This drew a *massive* cheer from the crowd. (*Oooo, she’s good!* Dorro crowed to himself.)

“So let’s not corrupt our water and air with black smoke and disease,” continued Edythe. “While it may cost us work in the short term, in the longer view, Thimble Down will be stronger for it. As your mayor, I will improve the dirt lanes and plumbing throughout the village, build us a school, make sure we live on clean, pristine lands—yes, even in Fell’s Corner! (*a big laugh*)—and make sure we have enough ale and pipe weed handy at all times. (*Yet another big whoop from the crowd.*) So come to the Hanging Stoat tonight. I will be there talking about my dreams for our wonderful village ... and all beers will be half off!”

At that, the crowd went into pure pandemonium. Even the Mayor and Osgood Thrip knew how good Edythe’s speech had been. No question, the race was on!

## The Ghost's Walk

It was late in the evening, and very few Halflings were on the lanes of Thimble Down. In front of the gaol, Sheriff Forgo lit his pipe and waited. And waited. Finally, a shadow slipped around the corner.

“Where the hell were you?” growled Forgo in whisper.

“Washing the supper dishes, of course. I can't stand a sink full of dirty pots and crockery.” Dorro shuddered at the thought, while the Sheriff scowled at him in the dark, wondering if this was all a big mistake. “Are we all set for our little adventure?” asked the bookmaster, rubbing his hands together.

“Yes, we're good to go. I didn't tell Gadget a thing about it, and I'm praying you didn't tell you-know-who!”

“You mean Wyll and Cheeryup? No, I did not tell my young confederates. But I did mention it to Timmo, who's silent as the grave and will be joining us shortly.”

As if on cue, another shadow moved up the lane and it was none other than the metalsmith, Mr. Timmo. He was a modest fellow, quiet and shy, but possessing of a sharp mind and friendly sense of humor. In some ways, he was like Dorro, minus the bold and shameless vanity, which of course, was the bookmaster's calling card.

“Ah Timmo, me lad, welcome to the party!”

“Shut up, Winderiver! Do you want to let the whole village know what we're up to?” The Sheriff was somewhat crabby. He still hadn't shaken his cough and was feeling less than one hundred percent, neither of which helped his mood. “Let's go!”

The three Thimble Downers trod northward towards the Fell's Corner neighborhood, one of its less savory areas. Forgo had toured the area earlier, staking out just the right location. Eventually, he'd found it—a perfect place to snare his quarry.

It was called the Ghost's Walk, a wee alley between two burrows that lead to a dead end. No one seemed to remember why it had been constructed in the first place, but it was probably just the result of sloppy building, and left that way from laziness.

There was no reason to go down there unless you enjoyed claustrophobia or, more likely, you wanted to hide because you were a thief and wanted to evade the law. The locals, however, painted colorful tales of ghosts who walked the path, mostly to scare the younglings and keep them from going down there and getting lost.

To get the plan rolling, Forgo had laid a grand array of Mrs. Fowl's savory pies on a windowsill near the front of the path and paid a few trusted souls to keep watch over them, quite discretely. They would be irresistible to the thief, assuming he would be nearby.

The Sheriff also figured it might take a few tries to nab him, but he might as well as start his campaign, and what better place to do it than the nefarious lanes of Fell's Corner?

To make the plan work, Dorro and Timmo were positioned about fifty feet on either side of the Ghost's Walk entrance, near the entryways to various taverns. Each had a pocketful of coins and would use them to buy drinks for the locals and create a gathering on the lane. This would act as a cork to prevent the thief from going either way with his hands full of pies.

No, the logical conclusion would be for the thief to grab the pies and escape down the Ghost's Walk. And there, the only sensible thing for the villain to do was *eat* the evidence.

Of course, Sheriff Forgo would be observing the whole crime, and once the culprit disappeared down the lane, he'd signal to Dorro and Timmo. Together, the three would creep down the way, trapping the crook and ending the crime spree once and for all.

In short order, Forgo checked on the five pies he'd put there and, true to form, they smelled absolutely delicious. Next he installed his comrades in their appointed stations on the lane and disappeared himself into a carpenter's shop directly across from the Ghost's Walk. And thence began the hardest part of a stakeout—the sitting and waiting, which was rather boring. Timmo and Dorro, meanwhile, were out sipping beers and having a fine time.

An hour spun by and then two. Suddenly it was getting on midnight and Forgo was beginning to think this first stakeout was a failure. A few passers-by had been stopped by the amazing aromas of Mrs. Fowl's pies—these were rustic beef 'n' onion that exuded a mouthwatering fragrance—but if anyone showed any interest and lingered over the scent, Forgo had the old lady who lived in the burrow shoo them away. No, the crook wouldn't dally and smell the pies; he'd just grab 'em and run!

At precisely midnight, however, something *did* happen.

A cat screeched down the lane, and a few half-drunk Halflings began to yell and fight in the lane near Dorro's station. Quick as a flash, a dark shape stole down the lane, grabbed three pies and whooshed down the Ghost's Walk, just as Forgo predicted.

Clasping his hands together joyously, the Sheriff stepped into the alley and gave two quick whistles. In a heartbeat, Timmo and a visibly snookered Dorro arrived on the scene, ready to pounce.

“Winderiver, you were there to create the illusion of drinking, not get hammered *yerself*.”

The bookmaster giggled and rubbed his bright, rosy nose. “Yessir, Mr. Sheriff, sir! Lezz go catch *'im*—you too Timmo, me boy!”



Forgo rolled his eyes at the slightly slobbered bookmaster and began trekking down the alley, with his companions behind him. Halfway down, they slowed to a snail's pace, their feet barely making any sound on the earth and gravel pathway. The earthen, outside walls of the burrows were covered mostly with dank mosses and lichens because not much sunlight ever reached this deeply into the Walk.

Finally, they closed in on their quarry, a dark mass near the end of the alley, yet one that was enjoying Mrs. Fowl's pies and making all sorts of gustatory noises.

Fearing they'd lose their chance if they waited, Sheriff Forgo roared "*Now!*" and sprang forward.

Within seconds, all four Halflings were grappling violently in the dim light. "I got him!" screamed Forgo, putting the thief in a hammer-lock about the neck and arms. "Grab his legs!"

The criminal was kicking wildly and landed a few on Dorro and Timmo, but they eventually got a hold on each calf. It was at that moment that Sheriff Forgo realized the error in his plans. He had enough brute strength to hold the villain in place, but not enough hands to strike a match and finally see who it was. Moreover, they'd have a devil of a time maneuvering him back down the narrow alley, for he was strong and wiry.

At the moment, all they could do was stand there in near-blackness, three Halflings holding a fourth, who was struggling but paralyzed. Finally, Forgo realized they had to do *something*.

"Okay boys, who's got a match on ya?"

"I do, Sheriff," said Dorro, who was still tipsy and very much out of breath from the fight. "But if I let go of this bloke's leg, what happens next?"

Forgo doubled up the force on his hammer-lock around the crook's neck, shoulders, and arms, reminding him of his commanding position. "I don't think one loose leg will trouble us. Will it, you lousy pie-snatching creep!"

The thief said nothing, not giving anything away—not the sound of his voice, nor any other clues to his identity. "Now, on the count of three, Dorro, let his leg go and strike your match. Do it swiftly ... *one-two ... three!*"

As instructed, the bookmaster relinquished his grip on the cad's thin, bony leg and pulled a matchbook from his pocket. Though still a bit wobbly from the ale, Dorro was able to put the match to the tinder and strike a spark. It lit! But what happened next was a blur.

No sooner had the match created a spark and begun to ignite than the villain blew it out and, with his free leg, delivered a fierce sideways kick to Mr. Timmo's chest, sending him sprawling into a mossy wall. And with both legs now free, the rat shifted his weight, forcing the Sheriff to get a new grip. In the mere second that Forgo relaxed his hold, the thief threw his head back and butted the lawman in the face with sensational force. And Mr. Dorro, who was both inebriate and

stunned, didn't know what to do, yet the villain saved him the bother of deciding by punching him in the stomach, causing him to double over in agony.

"Grab him!" was all Forgo managed to say, as all three Halflings lurched towards the path that led back out to the lane.

But our crook had no intention of going that way; instead, he did the impossible and went *up*. Using Forgo, Dorro, and Timmo as steps, he ran upwards, using their shoulders as footings and vaulted himself onto a steep burrow wall. Like the nimblest mountain goat, he scaled the nearly vertical plane and disappeared over the top of the back burrow.

Even if the three had been able to run down the Ghost's Walk and onto the lane, they would have had to run all the way around to the next street to find the miscreant—a five-minute journey at least.

As it was, the three lay on the ground, moaning in the dark in misery and pain. *Oh*, and you can add embarrassment to the stew.

For not only had the thief evaded the trio of lawmen and thrashed them badly—he'd also slipped back around to the front of the Ghost's Walk and stolen Mrs. Fowl's remaining pies.

Forgo's plan to catch the robber lay in ruins, but he knew one thing: this wasn't your garden-variety purse pincher. This was a brilliant burglar who was wily, agile, and daring. They'd have a devil of a time catching him, especially with only dunderheads like Dorro to aid him, much less Gadget Pinkle.

The Sheriff's mind drifted back to memories of Bosco. *Now that was a deputy*, he sighed to himself. A tear quickly sprang to his eye, but he would have none of that. He abruptly wiped his eyes, grabbed the groaning Dorro and Timmo by the collars, and began dragging them down the Ghost's Walk and back to the gaol.

## Pro Tempore

Sheriff Forgo tried to see straight, but was having difficulty—his world looked blurry and strange. He stood at his desk and walked towards the door, though his balance wasn't perfect. He coughed a few times, too, but checked around to make sure no one was looking. At last, he stepped into the autumnal sunlight and felt a measure better. He stood enjoying the moment until it was broken by the sound of the Mayor's harsh voice.

"Forgo! Forgo! What are you doing? Taking a nap?" The Mayor was still peevish after the licking he'd taken from Farmer Edythe the previous day. "What progress have you made on the mad thief? I need you to catch him—I'm running for election, you know! Don't let me down, Sheriff ... *or else!*"

"I know, I know ... you'll make someone else sheriff," said Forgo in a deadpan tone, waving over his new deputy from across the lane.

He'd heard the Mayor's threats many times before, but his head was getting fuzzier by the second, and in an instant, three things happened. First, Sheriff Forgo coughed, deeply and malevolently, bringing up a horrible ague. Second, he violently threw up all over the Mayor's new suit and blue leather shoes. And then, the poor Halfling rolled up his eyes and collapsed on the street.

The Mayor was too mortified even to move, but wisely, Gadget Pinkle knew what to do and sprang into action. Shoving the Mayor (who was doubly shocked that a lowly deputy would dare lay hands upon his exalted person) out of the way, Gadget grabbed the Sheriff under his armpits and dragged him back into the gaol. A young lad was ambling by; the deputy deputized him with a few pennies to go fetch Nurse Pym. Another few boys helped Gadget move the Sheriff back into the cells and put him on a cot.

By this time, Forgo was burning up with fever, so Gadget dabbed his head with wet towels. The Sheriff's face was growing paler by the second.

\* \* \*

"How bad is it, Nurse Pym?" It was about an hour later, and Dorro was alarmed. Not only was Sheriff Forgo an important part of Thimble Down, but he was the bookmaster's friend—one of

the very few. “I saw the Sheriff yesterday, and he seemed fine. But Wyll and Cheeryup say they heard him cough as early as three days prior.

“Why didn’t yon kiddies tell me?” Pym was irked as she continued applying cooling towels to Forgo’s head.

“Apparently, the children were sworn to secrecy.”

“The fool! Forgo may be sharp as they come at sheriffing, but he’s an idiot regarding his own health,” she raged. “The gist of it is, Sheriff Forgo has the Grippe as bad as I’ve seen it.”

“But he will be better, right?” squeaked Dorro.

“That is no longer in my hands, Mr. Bookmaster.” Nurse Pym’s face was grave. “A few days ago, I’d have confined him to bed and with a wee rest, he might’a shown improvement. But at this point, his chances of survival are greatly reduced. I can hear it in yon chest and the way he’s wheezing.”

“You’re jesting, Pym. Forgo is strong as a bear!”

“I’m sorry, Dorro—but even they die. I’ll do my best, but he’s a sick lad. Big or little, fat or thin, young or old, the Grippe doesn’t discriminate. It’ll take anyone.”

Dorro was mute with shock. *This can’t be happening.* His mind was reeling. *Forgo is one of the strongest Halflings I know. He can’t die!*

Pym stood and scrawled out some basic instructions for Forgo’s care. She reminded Dorro that she was very busy with other patients and couldn’t come running over for every little thing.

“It’s up to Forgo at this point,” she said in the business-like way. “Either he’ll fight the Grippe off or not. But I’ve got to run—there are five more just like him in the village. Do your best, Dorro.” And Pym was gone.

Checking on the unconscious Sheriff one more time, Dorro wobbled to the front of the gaol, his mind in utter turmoil as he absently checked his pocket watch. Up front was a congregation including Gadget, the Mayor, Wyll, Cheeryup, and Orli, all looking concerned and bewildered.

“Look Winderiver, it’s unfortunate about your friend,” said the Mayor coldly. “But he has chosen this moment to leave us in the lurch. That said, I want you to take over this investigation into the thievery in the village. You are now our interim Sheriff.”

“What? Are you jesting?” Dorro’s eyes bugged out of his head. This was the most outrageous, ridiculous thing he’d ever heard.

“I am *not*, Bookmaster. You have aided Sheriff Forgo in the past with his investigations and, from what I gather, have had some success. The village of Thimble Down is currently in a crisis and, without the Sheriff, we have no law, aside from that idiot deputy. Thus, there is no one to hold down the fort, save *you*.”

“I am well aware, too, that there is no love lost between us, Winderiver,” the Mayor continued on. “But if you won’t do it for me, do it for Sheriff Forgo. Though it beguiles me that either of

you could actually have friends, it appears that you two *are* friends, so do it for him. Find the thief. Deal with the Grippe. And keep the peace during the election. Do all this and I will grant you the political favor of your choice—something not too outlandish. I shall sign paperwork tonight and have it posted all over the village tomorrow, appointing you Sheriff Pro Tempore. That is all I have to say at the moment.”

And that’s all the Mayor did say. He turned on a tuppence and walked out of the gaol, leaving Dorro Fox Winderiver, absurd as it sounded, as the acting Sheriff of Thimble Down.

## The Black Stones

“I’m eternally grateful, Mrs. Bluebell and Miss Elizabeth Ivy. Without your help, I don’t know what I’d do.”

“Oh tosh, Mr. Dorro, our pleasure,” sighed Mrs. Bluebell, taking her daughter’s arm, “We’re happy to do our part. Thimble Down is but a small village, and our Sheriff works hard for what I’d guess is very little income. And we’ve been blessed, thanks to my husband’s bustling shop and our perfect daughter.”

“Oh mother!” Elizabeth Ivy blushed, but of course, loved the attention. “When should we return?”

“I’d say every three or four hours,” added the bookmaster. “Just make sure Forgo is comfortable and has cool towels on his head. But Nurse Pym indicated the Sheriff might not wake up for many days—he’s in a deep sleep, which is why it’s called the Grippe. Once it has you, you may never awaken. Let’s hope that’s not the case, surely.”

At that, mother and daughter left for home. Dorro was lucky to have found them and even offered to pay for their nursing skills; Mrs. Bluebell declined, but suggested that Dorro make a small donation to her garden society next Spring during its daffodil celebration. He agreed immediately and the deal was struck.

Sheriff Forgo, meanwhile, hadn’t awakened at all, but was still feverish. He would stay that way until his body fought off the Grippe *or* .... Dorro didn’t want to think about that part.

His next plan of action was to make a public announcement in front of the Bumbling Badger tavern. He still hadn’t fully come to terms with being the Sheriff, but in a way, Dorro was quietly pleased to have this responsibility bestowed upon him.

*Think of what my parents would say!* He giggled to himself. *Our little Dorro, Sheriff of Thimble Down.*

His father would laugh and slap him on the back, while his mother would pinch his cheek and cry. He missed them, but heard their voices from time to time, reassuring him that everything would turn out all right.

Dorro checked on Forgo once more (*He doesn’t look good*, he rued), and bolted out the door towards the Bumbling Badger. If all was set to plan, Gadget Pinkle should have been working the lanes for the past hour, spreading the word and setting things up in front of the tavern.

At eleven o'clock, Dorro arrived and found a small group of Thimble Downers milling about outside, wondering what all this fuss was about. He'd hoped there would have been more folks present, but he couldn't argue. And for moral support, there were Wyll, Cheeryup, Mr. Shoe, and the ever-present Mr. Timmo. *Well, there's no time but the present*, thought Dorro as he climbed on top of a wooden crate.

"Hear ye, hear ye!" intoned the bookmaster a mite too formally.

"Oh aye, we *hear ye* just fine, Young Dorro!" crowed Farmer Duck, drawing laughs from the crowd. Now more folks were ambling out of the Bumbling Badger to see what the amusement was.

"Folks, we have some announcements today and it's important that you listen up and spread the word."

"Why should we listen to you, Dorro? You run the stinkin' library!" cried Poe Stitchwicket, a loud shepherd. More howls of laughter ensued.

"Because, Poe, our dear Sheriff Forgo has the Grippe and is knocking on death's door!" The tittering stopped in a heartbeat. "I know this is a shock to many of you and, you may laugh some more, but the Mayor—against my wishes, I'll have you know—has made me Sheriff Pro Tempore, which means, I'll be doing Forgo's job until he's well again."

"*If* he gets well again," said the gloomy Bog the Blacksmith.

"Let's hope he does, Bog; otherwise, you'll be stuck with me until a new sheriff is appointed," continued Dorro, finally finding his confidence. "Now, on to business. We all know about the Grippe. Take care to wash your hands a lot and take care of your families. We don't know how it spreads, but it's going around the village quickly. And sadly, this Pie Thief is still at it, though he steals more than pies."

"He took my best shovel!" shouted Farmer Duck. "If I find him, I'll dig his grave with it!"

"No, Duck, if you find him you will come tell me. Speaking of help, I need any tips or clues you may have. If anyone helps up capture the villain, the Mayor has offered a reward of two gold coins!" The crowd gasped at the exorbitant sum and started thinking of clues on the spot. A pair of gold coins would set any Halfling up quite nicely for a while.

"Lastly, I want to let you know that I'm not doing this alone. Gadget Pinkle will serve as my deputy, so let him know any clues. And I'm also deputizing Mr. Timmo, effective immediately."

"Yay, Timmo, me boy!" shouted out Duck, who clearly had already downed a pint or two of ale, despite the early hour. Timmo, for his part, opened his eyes as wide as possible, not sure if he'd heard his friend Dorro correctly. He assumed there'd been a mistake.

"Gadget and Timmo will help form the backbone of the constabulary in the village until Sheriff Forgo has recovered. Any questions?"

Shyly, Mr. Timmo raised his hand.

“What?” barked Dorro, in a gruff voice that sounded remarkably like Forgo’s.

“Did you really mean to deputize me? I mean ... *me*?”

“Yes, Timmo, I very well did mean you. Sorry there was no head’s up, but things are moving fast. And that’s the end of this announcement. Again—wash your hands, and if you know anything about the Pie Thief, let me, Gadget, or Timmo know. That is all!”

There was a small cheer, though Dorro didn’t know if that was for the reward or the fact that he was finished, but the deed was done. Dorro Fox Winderiver had just completed his first official act as Sheriff. And he liked it!

\* \* \*

After villagers had gone back to their respective tasks, Wyll, Cheeryup, and Orli decided to go for a walk in the Great Wood.

The two Halflings were gathering materials for terrariums, constructed in old ceramic bowls with sheets of glass carefully laid atop. They were going to instruct some of the smaller village lads and lasses how to make these miniature worlds under glass, so they needed lots of mosses and lichens, tiny plants, and an array of interesting rocks and bits of bark.

Orli had no idea what a terrarium was—indeed he couldn’t even pronounce the word (“*Terbarium? Tumariam?*” he announced to chuckles from Wyll and Cheeryup), but was eager to help anyway.

They were climbing a rocky scree when a big deer bolted from nearby undergrowth. It vaulted straight for the children and nearly ran them down when Orli leapt in front and waved his arms manically. The buck didn’t know what to make of this burly creature, but took a hard right at the last second and disappeared into the bush as if it had never been there.

“Are you alright?” yelled Wyll, grabbing Cheeryup by the arm. “I barely saw him coming!” The girl was visibly shaken, as was Wyll, though Orli didn’t think anything of it.

“It’s strange for a big beast like that to be lying about in the day hours—he should be foraging at this time of year,” announced the Dwarf boy. “Let’s track him.” Figuring that they’d already gathered enough materials for a terrarium, Wyll and Cheeryup agreed.

It didn’t take long for them to find the big buck, as he was lying on turf-laden ground about one hundred yards away. The beast was also quite dead, his once-glistening eyes now opaque and still.

“What happened to him?” squealed Cheeryup, running up to the felled beast, sadness in her voice. “He was such a majestic, strong creature. Did a hunter shoot him with an arrow?”

Wyll and Orli looked around the animal’s corpse for signs of a wound, but there was nothing.



“No, it wasn’t a hunter that took this fine animal,” said a queer little voice behind the trio. They all jumped, yet were not surprised to find Dalbo Dall lingering on the gorse. “Look closer at his mouth and nostrils. That will tell all ye need to know.”

The children moved closer and noticed black marks around the creature’s eyes, nose, mouth, and ears. “Is that the Grippe, Mr. Dalbo?”

“Aye, it affects animals, too, Wyll. This chap was already dying when you startled it back yonder,” murmured the village wanderer. “In a sense you did him a kindness. He could have just lain there for days, dying a slow death, but when you frightened him, he ran his last race until his heart burst. We should be thankful the beautiful buck died quickly. I am grateful to you.”

“Oh, Mr. Dalbo, what are we to do?” said Cheeryup, her eyes tearing up. “So many folks in the village are ill with the Grippe, even Sheriff Forgo.”

“My Uncle is worried he might die,” fretted Wyll. “Yet the Dwarves don’t have it, have they Orli?”

“No, we’re immune, I guess. I wonder why, but perhaps because we’re around it our whole lives.”

“I’m not a Halfling of science, of course,” added Dalbo, “but I’d pin my suspicions on the smeltery and the minerals they’re breaking up and boiling in there. Say lad, do you know what kinds of rocks are being used to heat the furnaces there?”

“Those are our black stones, a’course,” said the boy flatly.

“What kind of black rocks, might I kindly ask?”

“They’re mined deep in the mountains of the North and have magical burning powers. We used them to fuel our forges and furnaces, and now Mr. Bindlestiff is importing them to Thimble Down. Otherwise, he’d have to cut down half your Great Wood to power a forge that large.”

“Black stones, eh?” Dalbo Dall scratched his left ear and thought for a moment. “’Tis clear this is part of our problem. Black stones, black smoke, black marks on the deer’s face—I think ye rocks are releasing something into our air that we can’t see, yet is making us sick.”

“But we can’t prove that, Mr. Dalbo,” said Cheeryup.

“You are right, young lady—without proof, we have nothing to go by. If only we could get inside the smeltery and have a look-see around ol’ Bindlestiff’s office. But we’d get caught in a heartbeat.”

*“I wouldn’t!”*

“Eh? What did you say, laddie?”

“I said, I wouldn’t get caught,” coughed Orli with a little pride. “I work a few hours there every day, and the folks are used to seeing me go up and down the stairs by Mr. Bindlestiff’s office. He likes to see everything, so they built his office well off the ground, using wooden posts and iron joists. I use the stairs to run errands for Mr. Fibbhook. And the door is usually open.”

A big, toothless grin spread over Dalbo Dall's face. "Aye, young ones, I think ye have the beginnings of a plan. Maybe thy pie-snatcher won't be the only thief in town."

Wyll noticed that Cheeryup also broke into a big smile—the kind she wore when danger was afoot.

## How to Bag a Thief

“C’mon Gadget, we have business to attend to.”

“What about the Sheriff?”

“I just checked on him, and he’s resting comfortably—at least as much as can be expected,” said the Sheriff Pro Tempore. Checking his silver pocket watch for the time, Dorro looked around the desk for a piece of parchment and a few pencils; they’d need these tools on their current mission more than clubs or handcuffs.

“Mrs. Bluebell and her daughter will be stopping by within the half hour, so Forgo will be well cared for. I’ve also told all the shop merchants around the gaol to keep an ear out for him. Now let’s be off!”

Dorro and Gadget were soon on their way to the Hanging Stoat, where the former thought he might dig up information on the thief. Along the way, he wondered about the thin, awkward lad next to him; really, he knew next to nothing about Gadget Pinkle. Did anyone, in fact?

“Gadget, how long have you been living in the village?”

“Oh, just a year or two. I came from Water-Down, looking for work.”

“Ah, that nefarious seaport. I don’t love the place, I’ll be honest with you—I have bad memories of it,” said Dorro ruefully, remembering his recent mission there with Sheriff Forgo. “I’d have thought there were plenty of opportunities for jobs and apprenticeships.”

Gadget flinched and seemed reluctant to talk about his earlier life, but soldiered on, “I just didn’t like it there. I don’t care for water, nor would I take a position on a ship. It’s a hard life, and I like my feet on dry land, I do. I just want steady work and a nice place to settle. Thimble Down seems like that place.”

“Do you have family?”

“My sister moved here a few years ago with her husband and wrote that she loved it, but she moved on since her man, Fletch, is a carpenter and goes where the work takes him. I was working odd jobs around the village and getting by, enough to pay the rent on the burrow. Sheriff Forgo took me on for a few hours a day and, well, here we are. It’s not an exciting story, sorry to say.”

Dorro laughed. “I’m afraid few of us lead exciting lives. My life in the library, amongst books and scrolls would seem dull to just about anyone. Of your odd jobs, which did you like best?”

“I was a fair chimney-sweep! It was a profession that was well suited to my skinny nature,” he laughed. “Dirty, sure, but there was no one to bother you, and I didn’t mind the soot. Only the baths—those, I had too many of!” He laughed again.

“I should hire you at the Perch; it’s been far too many years since I’ve had the chimney done. Now, here’s the Hanging Stoat—let’s get to work!”

They ventured into the dark tavern on the sunny day and let their eyes adjust for a few seconds. They spied Mr. Mungo, who was drying mugs at the bar. “Mr. Dorro, a treat to see you, especially since you’re our new Sheriff! Congratulations, sir.”

Waving off his compliment, the bookmaster whispered, “Mungo, have you heard anything about our Pie Thief? Your patrons must be talking about him.”

“Oh indeed, sir. It’s a constant topic.”

“And ...?” Dorro was hoping that Mungo would take the hint.

“Oh! The long ‘n’ short of it is that no one has a clue. No one from the village, it seems. Maybe rogues in the forest or from Nob. Jonas Wyble says it’s a ghostly *wight*—some greedy beggar who’s risen from the dead to steal back all the things he lost or sold in life. And Minty Pinter says its them elves, come back to raze the village. Those are the two most popular theories, at least.”

Inwardly rolling his eyes, Dorro realized he was getting nowhere with Mr. Mungo, nor likely would he find anything of interest at the Hanging Stoat. To be polite, he ordered a cider for himself and Gadget, but otherwise, had nothing else to say. Suddenly he noticed a group at a back table in the shadows; he hadn’t noticed them at first.

“Excuse me, gentlemen. I’ll be back in a second.” Grabbing his cider, Dorro ambled across the room to the dark recesses of the tavern. “Hullo, Crumble! Hello all!”

“Why, if it ain’t Mr. Dorro,” said the grizzled Dwarf, putting down his mug of ale, its froth still clinging to his big beard. “Come have a seat. Wump—move over, you great goat, and let our friend have a seat!”

Crumble’s brother Wump grudgingly got up and snorted, taking his tankard to the far side of the table. “Sorry about that, Mr. Dorro. Wump is in a bit of a snit today; didn’t get a good night’s rest, I suppose. What brings you to the Stoat? I must say, we’ve taken a shine to it—the dim light here reminds us of home. And the ale is first-rate, at least once we add a little belladonna.”

Crumble took another big draught, as did his comrades Flume, Two-Toes, and Magpie. Wump just glowered in the corner, not acknowledging anyone.

“Since we last met, Crumble, our poor Sheriff Forgo has been taken ill by the Grippe, and stranger yet, the Mayor appointed me his replacement. My first order of business is to catch this thief who’s been plaguing the village. You haven’t heard anything?”

Two-Toes chimed in, “We haven’t heard much else beside that and the Grippe—my, you have a troubled town, sir. Dark times have befallen your Thimble Down.”

“True, I’m afraid,” continued Dorro. “What do you do about thieves in your world, Crumble?”

“It’s not too common an occurrence, as we share our food and hospitality freely. But our gold and gems are another matter, and on occasion, jealousy makes a Dwarf steal something that don’t rightfully belong to him.”

“So what do you do?”

“It depends, but if a Dwarf is caught in the act, he might be exiled from our lands. But all Dwarves become a little greedy at times—it’s our nature to revere stones and metals of the finest cut and forging—and well, I’m sure we’ve all pinched something at one time or another.”

At that, the other Dwarves snickered in agreement; even Wump cracked a knowing leer.

“But it must be illegal. What happens when you catch a thief?”

“We bag ’em!” said Flume with glee.

“Aye, we bag ’em up real good!” gloated Magpie, clapping his hands together. “I got bagged once—didn’t sit for a week!” More laughing and jocularities ensued. “Y’see, Mr. Dorro, when we Northlanders catch a thief, we actually put them into a large leather satchel, stitched together from animal hides.”

“And that’s it?” asked Dorro, which was met with more derisive laughs from the Dwarves.

“No, Mr. Dorro—next we kick the living life out of ’em!” roared Two-Toes, drawing the others into hysterics.

Crumble continued, “Y’see, we’re pretty tough, us Dwarves, so you can’t really hurt us too bad. But if you’re in a bag, you can’t run away like a coward—you gotta stay put and take your lumps like a Dwarf. And by lumps, I mean, we might hurl lumps of rock, clay, sticks, gold, or anything that’s hard at the fool in the bag.”

Added Flume, “We might toss in a few punches and kicks for good measure, too, and give him—and sometimes *her*—a good thrashin’, all to teach ’em not to steal again. After an hour or so, they’ve learned their lesson. Only a very few end up in the bag for a second time.”

“Only the very *stupid ones!*” roared Magpie.

At that, the five Dwarves were bursting into new fits of laughter, with Flume giggling so hard he actually fell off his chair. Dorro was horrified that this violent act could be the subject of such mirth, but he knew little of the Dwarves and their ways. Imagine, being stuffed into a leather sack, left in the dark, and brutally beaten by rocks, sticks, and fists.

The bookmaster shuddered at the thought. Yet another thought popped into his mind: could any of the Dwarves be his thief or, indeed, *thieves*. Indeed, they were crafty and agile and, moreover, had no threat of “the bag” hanging over their heads here in Thimble Down. They

could steal with impunity. Also, he wondered why they were loafing here at the Hanging Stoat and not working at the smeltery on this day.

Dorro thanked Crumble and his brothers for their illuminating stories and took his leave. He had gained some information, but also left the Hanging Stoat more troubled than when he arrived.

## Break-In

“I’m afraid, Wyll. This doesn’t feel right—we don’t even know what we’re looking for.”

“I’m with you there, Cheery. But you heard Mr. Dalbo: there might be something in ol’ Bindlestiff’s office, and we’ve got to nick it.” Wyll Underfoot had a worried look on his face as he crouched behind a big azalea bush near the smelting works. It was almost dusk and the light was fading fast.

“I know, but doesn’t it worry you that we’re being counseled by Dalbo Dall? He’s sweet and means well, but he’s *also* ...”

“Nuttier than a nutcake? Yes, there is that,” noted Wyll. “But in my heart, I know he’s right. I just don’t feel good about breaking into this smelting place. Gives me the creeps! All dark and smoky and fiery.”

“Did you see that?” chirped the slight girl. “I think I saw Orli’s signal.”

“I didn’t see anything—*wait!* Yep, that’s it.” Wyll pointed at the edge of the cavernous opening to Bindlestiff’s Smelting Works, where he saw a glimmer of light. “That’s Orli with that shiny piece of metal he showed us. Caught the last glimmer of sunlight on it. Let’s go!”

Like squirrels, Wyll and Cheeryup stole from shrub to shrub, working their way down the lane towards the large Dwarf boy who was waiting for them. Five minutes later, the three hunkered down inside the entrance, behind a wall of large, smelly crates. Cheeryup figured they were full of the black stones that Orli had mentioned earlier.

“What’s the plan, mate?” asked Wyll with rising excitement.

“We must be careful,” cautioned Orli. “but still, it’s the best moment to strike. The second shift of workers are coming offline in a few minutes. There will be many Halflings coming and going from the premises, so they might not notice us, and many know me by sight. Can you see Bindlestiff’s office?”

He pointed about seventy yards into the cavern, where a small series of wooden huts had been erected. Above them, a small hut rested on raised posts with stairs leading to it. That was it.

“I’m going to walk out in the open towards the stairs. You two follow me along the edge of the burrow-hill, staying in the dark as much as possible. When you see me at the bottom step, come out to join me, and we’ll climb the stairs; I’ll pretend I’m giving you a tour. If all goes well, Bindlestiff and Fibbhook will have departed for the day, and the night foreman will have come on. He’s a lazy drunkard and shouldn’t trouble us.”

“I’m ready if you are,” piped Cheeryup, and the children sprang into action.

It all went very smoothly. Orli walked down the main thoroughfare of the cavern in plain view, nodding to various Halflings who were coming off shift, tired and dirty from hauling ore and smelting it into new metals and alloys for tools, wagon parts, bolts, and shafts. Clearly business was booming, as there were three shifts working the furnaces nearly twenty-four hours a day.

Production was shut down only from two in the morning until dawn, a period in which a fourth shift of mechanics fixed, cleaned, and trouble-shot any problems with the forges and its many mechanisms. It was hard, brutal work, but provided a living for many.

Upon reaching the bottom of the stairs, Orli looked about and gave his head a quick jerk, telling Wyll and Cheeryup to appear from behind a tool hut.

“... and *this*, my friends, is where the bosses work and manage our grand smeltery,” said Orli with surprising deftness. “Now, upstairs, I’ll show you where Mr. Bindlestiff works.”

“*What’s* going on here, you lot?” It was Fibbhook, who loomed up out of the darkness like a wraith. “I thought your shift ended this morning, boy?”

“Errrrr, yes that’s right, Mr. Fibbhook,” said Orli trying to maintain his composure. “But I asked my Pa, and he said it would be alright for me to give my town friends a tour of the smeltery. Part of building good relations with the neighbors—Mr. Bindlestiff told us Dwarves to always do that. I thought my mates would be interested to see what we do all day.”

“That’s a pretty thin story, young Dwarf master ... but I’ll let it go this time,” hissed the foreman. “Be sure you make no trouble, and don’t stray off the path. I’ve been here for thirteen hours, and I’m tired and peevish. I want to go home, yet if I have to come back because of some mischief you’ve pulled, you’ll answer to *me*, not your Pa. Understand?”

“Of course, Mr. Fibbhook. I’ll make it a quick tour and get them out the door.” At that, the muscly foreman grimaced, turned on his heel, and left. Orli, Wyll, and Cheeryup collectively breathed a sigh of relief.

“Maybe we should go,” worried Wyll.

“We’re gone this far—we need to keep going,” said Cheeryup, ever the more action-oriented of the two. “We just need to get up these stairs.”

Wyll nodded, and the three padded up silently. There was an open walkway around Bindlestiff’s office, and a few windows they used to peek in. “It’s too dark to see anything.” Wyll was craning his neck to see inside, but couldn’t make out much. “We need to break in.”

“This is why it’s handy to have a Dwarf along.”

Orli withdrew a thin metal tool out of his boot and walked to the door. There was heavy padlock on the frame, but the young Dwarf set about fiddling with his device, and a few seconds later they were rewarded a “*click!*”



Once inside, Cheeryup produced a candle taper and some matches. The office's interior was crude, but functional. There were a few wooden benches, stools, and tall desks, mostly covered in papers and binders. The pages, they noted, were covered in lines of numerical figures, tallies of expenses, and moneys earned. There were also lists of inventory—ore coming in and metals going out. It seemed extremely tedious to the children; they wondered if this is what being a grown-up was all about.

“How boring!” whispered Cheeryup.

“Wait—*look*.” Wyll pointed towards the wall behind the desk. There in the dark corner was a tall black rectangle: an iron safe! “Whatever we’re looking for,” said the wee girl, “It’s in there. But how shall we open the door? Orli, can you crack this lock, too?”

“My Uncle Wump could; he’s a master at opening locks. I can try with my tool. Might take a while, though.”

“We should go!” hissed Wyll in the darkness. “We’re wasting too much time up here, and it might take an hour for Orli to open the lock. Fibhook might come back any moment!”

“Don’t be such a baby, Wyll. I thought you were a brave Halfling, but perhaps not,” chided Cheeryup in not her kindest voice. “C’mon Orli, do it.”

Stung from her words, Wyll fell silent and let the other two work on the lock. He stewed for a few minutes, but said, “I heard something.”

“Oh hush, Wyll, Orli almost has it open.” Flattered by her attention, the Dwarf boy smiled in the dark, but in reality, hadn’t made a dent in the gears.

“I heard it again! There’s a creak on the steps!”

“Wyll Underfoot, maybe you should go run home to the Perch and fluff up some pillows for Mr. Dorro. We’re spies on a mission! Leave if you want, but if you stay, shut up!” Cheeryup was downright rude this time, but she was dead intent on getting some evidence on the Grippe’s deadly powers.

Suddenly the door to Mr. Bindlestiff’s office flew open, blowing out the candle, and leaving the three children in the dark. They heard the rush of boots on the planked floors and rough hands grabbing them from behind. Their eyes were covered with gloved hands, while strong arms lifted them and began running down the stairs with cat-like silence. The children were terrified and began to weep, but their kidnappers said not a word.

The youngsters knew, however, they were in deep, deep trouble, which only made them cry all the more.

## The Whip Comes Down

Many minutes later, the child-snatchers pulled up short and dropped their victims on the ground. It was pitch-black outside and the young ones were terrified; a match was struck, and the scene illuminated slowly. Wyll, Cheeryup, and Orli each looked up, expecting to find Fibbhook and his gang about to do them in, but found themselves wholly mistaken. It was Crumble and his Dwarf brothers, looking down on them with a mixture of anger, sadness, and pity.

Orli's father spoke first, looking at his son with daggers in his eyes. "What have you *done*, boy? What were you thinking? You have shamed us!"

The Dwarf boy said nothing as his father continued ranting. "We are not wealthy and take pride in work when we can get it. If you had been caught by the Halflings, we would be sent from their village, probably without our due pay. Then what, you little fool? And why are these Halfling mice with you?"

"Let's turn them over to Mr. Dorro, who's now the Sheriff," grinned Wump. "He'll put them in gaol. Or better, let's give them to Fibbhook—now he's a chap who knows how to get folks to talk."

"It's tempting, Wump, I won't deny it. Orli, will you not tell your father what you were doing in Mr. Bindlestiff's office? And why you were trying to break into his iron safe?"

"I *won't*," said the boy, not looking at his father in the eyes.

"My son, a lowly thief. Back in the Northlands, we'd bag you in leather and beat you with sticks and rocks. You'd think twice about thieving again. Maybe you're the thieves that are terrorizing the village, though that is hard to believe."

"*We're not*," growled Orli. "And let my friends go—they did nothing!" Wyll and Cheeryup had been mostly silent to this time, weeping quietly on the ground.

"Agreed," said Crumble. "We don't know their role in this and we don't want to draw the ire of the Halflings. Two-Toes, Flume, and Magpie—bring them to the edge of Thimble Down and let them run back to their soft, warm holes in the ground. But you, boy, you will stay here with your Uncle Wump and I. We may not be able to find out why you invaded the boss' office, but we can make you remember it for a very long time."

At that, Wump pulled a whip from behind his back and smiled maliciously at Orli. The other Dwarves grabbed Wyll and Cheeryup and began dragging them back to the village.

“Leave him alone!” screamed the girl. “It’s wasn’t him—it was all my fault! Whip me instead!”

But a flick of Crumble’s chin told the Dwarves to keep going. For his part, Wyll shot Cheeryup a look of contempt, reminding her that this really *was* her fault—she bade them remain when they should have left the smeltery. The girl dropped her head in shame and began crying, knowing it was all too true.

In the distance they heard the snap of a whip, again and again. *And again.*

## Seeds of Doubt

The crowd at the new Hanging Stoat was in full gear. It was a Friday evening in October, and the brisk Autumn air was beginning to drive Thimble Downers indoors for cold-weather recreation and leisure—and ale! Mungo and Freda, the barmaid, were run off their feet, serving platefuls of slow-braised hog jowls with kale and herbed beef shanks, as well as endless pints of beers, ales, and wine.

Most precious of all, guests asked for small ceramic jiggers of honeygrass whiskey, a powerful drink sure to burn going down, but satisfy your innards, the locals thought. Add to that plumes of pipe smoke, gaggles of alternately laughing and arguing Halflings, and you had the Hanging Stoat rollicking as much as it before it burned.

The occasion was all the more festive as the Mayor and Farmer Edythe were scheduled to speak in an open forum. The Mayor and Osgood Thrip were sitting at a table with Mr. Hiram Bindlestiff, Fibbhook, and a few other business leaders. The pair was huddled in a most conspiratorial manner, exchanging heated ideas between sips of honeygrass whiskey. They had already conceded to having tonight's event on Edythe's home turf, with the next one to take place in front of the smeltery. It was fair—at least on the surface.

Farmer Edythe sat a few tables away with Sheriff Pro Tempore Mr. Dorro, Timmo, Farmer Duck, Minty Pinter, and Bog the Blacksmith, among others supporting her candidacy. They were discussing themes and ideas for Edythe to touch on, about balancing work and lifestyle, money and family, and most of all, preserving the natural state of Thimble Down, the Great Wood, and the River Thimble. Dorro, in particular, kept promoting this idea of balance, which appealed to the farmer.

At last, Dowdy Cray—who'd become the unofficial moderator for these speeches—called the crowd to order and noted it was time to proceed. Because the debate was being held in the tavern of Edythe's husband, she would go first, whereas the Mayor would get the preferred second slot. "Now, let's have a hand for Farmer Edythe!" roared Dowdy, whipping up the crowd as much as possible.

"Thank you, friends!" yowled Edythe, hopping up and down, showing her remarkable energy and enthusiasm. "Tonight, I want to talk about balance." At that, she proceeded to regale the Hanging Stoat's patrons with her views on quality of life and work in their beloved village. They

seemed largely receptive to her progressive ideas, gently leavened by the idea to move into the future slowly and carefully.

Dowdy shouted out, “Now it’s time for *yer* questions, folks! Just raise a hand, and Farmer Edythe will call on you.”

A hand shot up and was recognized by the candidate. “Edythe—what will you do about the price of beer and whiskey,” giggled Minty Pinter, “It keeps going up and up!”

“Well Minty, if you didn’t drink so much, you’d have more coins in *yer* pocket,” laughed Edythe. “Now sit down, you silly drunken fool!” The crowd burst out laughing and clapped at her barbed response.

“Edythe, I’m worried about the Grippe and my family.” It was Nutylla Parfinn, who ran the Bumbling Badger tavern with her husband Millin. “I have lots of babies and wee ones—I’d never get over it one of ’em got sick ... *or worse*.”

“Aye, Nutella, you don’t have to tell us about your wee ones—we know what a terrifying Summer you had,” said Edythe [*remembering the fierce saga recounted in The Lost Ones*]. “And you’re in the right to be afraid of the Grippe—every Thimble Downer in this room is thinking about it every day and night, not just for themselves, but for friends and family. It is a horrible disease that is consuming our village.”

Somewhere in the Hanging Stroat, a patron coughed lightly, but it was enough to bring about a dead silence—the cough was a harbinger of infection.

“I have told you before, I am not a person of education or the sciences, but I truly believe that something is fouling our air, soil, and water. And by extension of that, the food that we eat.”

More than a few guests looked down into their bowls.

“Fear not Mungo’s food!” said Edythe quickly and with a smile. “The way he cooks his meat for hours would kill any germs—or any flavor!” The room erupted in laughter, at her husband’s expense, but the candidate waved to Mungo and blew him a kiss. “But seriously folks, wash your veggies and fruit before you eat it raw, wash your hands, and don’t hug everyone you meet for a while. We have to be careful, every last one of us!”

One more question rang out. An old feller raised his hand, Tobias McGee; he once made musical instruments, but hadn’t in many years on account of weak eyesight and arthritic fingers. Instead, he talked with his friends in the lanes all day and drank a pint or two each night—something he attributed to his longevity. “Farmer Edythe ...,” Tobias said, slow as molasses, “I just wanna know one thing. Why the hell should we vote for you?”

The room broke out into laughter again, but Farmer Edythe waved her hands to simmer down the noisemakers. “Thank you, Tobias—you know, that’s a fair question,” she smiled. “Why the hell should you vote for me? I’m just a farmer. I’m not a politician. But then again, maybe that’s

the answer there—I ain't no politician. I won't make secret deals you don't know about. I won't do things that aren't in your best interests. And I won't lie *ever*. You can count on that!"

The patrons erupted into cheers, while the Mayor and Osgood Thrip exchanged worried looks. "I can only say I'll work hard for you every day and do the best that I can do for Thimble Down and its folk. Thank you and good night." There was more clapping and whistling for Edythe as she left the podium and returned to her seat. Dowdy Cray announced it was time for the Mayor to say his piece.

"Folks, you know me," began the Mayor with his customary leer. "I've been fighting for you every day as your mayor and magistrate for, oh, twenty years. And I'm ready to put in another twenty to keep our village the special place for families and friends it's always been. I've created new jobs that put beer money in your pockets."

"But as for my esteemed adversary, what *do* you know about her? She's a farmer, and maybe even a good farmer. Yet does that make her a leader? And we already know her views on industry—she's against it!"

"She wants to close the smeltery and take away jobs. And maybe other businesses, too! We don't know what we'd get with a Mayor Edythe. Do you really want to take that chance?"

The room at the Hanging Stoat went silent, and folks started looking at each other. *That Mayor is a devil!* thought Dorro, flaming mad. *He is intentionally discrediting her with lies. I thought I'd seen all his tricks before, but this was a new low.*

Suddenly, little pockets of bickering broke out in the tavern. Some folks taking the Mayor's side, others defending Farmer Edythe. Before Dorro could get a handle on what was going on, there was trouble—and it didn't take long for the first punch to be thrown. His mission accomplished, the Mayor grinned and slyly slipped out the back door with Osgood Thrip.

Soon, the main room of the Stoat was a melee of swinging and shouting Thimble Downers. Edythe supporter Theo Spark landed a punch on the rather large beak of Grubchuck, one of the Mayor's toadies, who responded with an excellent kick to Mr. Spark's left knee. Abel Parsnip took a swing at Fibbhook, which was a big mistake; the big foreman grabbed Abel by the suspenders and threw him over a table.

Even Mr. Bedminster Shoe, the gentle village scribe, was drawn into the affair, though he had just been listening to the candidates. Someone cuffed him soundly on the noggin, and he went out like a light. Jenny Thistleback and Mrs. Poddle helped carry his unconscious body out of the scrum and onto a cot in the back room. He eventually came around, and clutching his sore head, bemoaned that violence like this should not occur in such a sweet village.

It took Dorro a few seconds to remember he was the acting Sheriff of Thimble Down. Yet he was no Sheriff Forgo, and accordingly, no one paid any heed to his shouts for peace and tolerance. Fortunately, the trio of Farmer Duck, wee Minty Pinter, and the humongous Bog the

Blacksmith deputized themselves and fell like a fury on the savage brawlers. In a few minutes, the room was cleared out, thanks to Bog's brute strength and the teeth of Minty, who bit more than a few Mayor supporters on their calves and ankles, sending them scurrying into the night.

Dorro tried to bring some final order, but realized he had no authority. "I'm sorry Mungo," he said to the sad-faced barkeep, who'd seen too many fights in his day. "I'm no Sheriff Forgo, that's for certain." When Mungo didn't respond, he knew he was correct, which made him even more depressed. At least he could help clean up, which is what he did for the next hour.

But it didn't change his—or anyone else's—mind that the bookmaster wasn't much of a sheriff. Their minds quickly jumped to poor, ailing Forgo and prayed for his speedy recovery.

Dorro, perhaps, more than anyone.

## The Missing One

The next morning, Dorro was at the gaol, checking on Forgo and licking his emotional bruises from the previous evening's debacle at the Hanging Stoa. *What a disaster!* thought Dorro, wallowing in self-pity. *I'm a terrible sheriff—Forgo would have knocked some heads together and settled that fight before it even began. I should go back to the library and re-shelve some books and scrolls.*

Before he could continue roiling in black thoughts, the door banged open and in rushed in Mr. Bindlestiff and Crumble the Dwarf. "Sheriff, we have a problem!" cried the smelting boss.

"Me *bruvver* is missin'!" cried the Northlander through tears. "Wump never goes missin', ever. Something bad has happened, I know it!"

"When did you last see him?" calmed Dorro.

"Just last night, after we ... *errr* ... well, it was a family matter."

"There you go, Crumble, it's been only a few hours. He's probably under a tree, sleeping off a few beers or off exploring in the Great Wood."

"My brother Wump would never go off without his favorite floppy hat!" Crumble held up the blue felt hat as evidence. "I know him—he's a creature of habit. After our family business, I went for a long walk alone to sort things out. I came back to the burrow and fell asleep. When me and the other boys awoke, Wump was gone."

Bindlestiff broke in, "I need this matter rectified, Winderiver! These Dwarves do important work at the smeltery, and I can't have them distracted and worrying. Find Wump!"

Seeing through the fog, Dorro announced, "I shall form a search party immediately. Crumble, gather your brothers and son, for I will need their help. I'll gather my deputies, and we will meet back here in half an hour. Agreed?"

The other two nodded in accord and Dorro bolted from the gaol to make ready.

\* \* \*

Precisely thirty minutes later, Dorro and a gang of Halflings stood in front of the gaolhouse. He directed one search party of Magpie, Gadget, Minty Pinter, and Bog the Blacksmith to search the south and west of the village to the river, while his own party of Crumble, Two-Toes, Flume, Orli, and Mr. Timmo would take the north and east, towards Upper-Down.



“Gentlemen, we are looking for a Dwarf,” said Dorro, stating the obvious. “He has dark hair with braids on either side of his face and a heavy beard. We don’t know what state he’s in, but as a Dwarf, he is very strong and could be dangerous. If you find him in a precarious situation, report back to the gaol, and a messenger-lad will come find me. Are we clear? *Good*. Let’s move out!”

Dorro tried to sound authoritative like Sheriff Forgo, but it just didn’t come out that way. However, his logic was impeccable, so no one questioned him, and the parties moved off to find their quarry. Each member was lightly armed with a club, knife, or short sword, as well as a leather jerkin over a shirt or jacket. A few even wore leather helms, though they looked rather silly.

Dorro’s group moved north through Fell’s Corner, the most obvious place to find a lost Dwarf. The nefarious neighborhood was home to various types of skullduggery, from gambling and drinking dens to burrows of ill-repute and thievery. They even climbed the grassy roofs of several burrows to see if Wump was hiding in any of the nooks and crannies of earth and trees in these forlorn spots (indeed, small trees often grew unbeckoned on the roofs of burrows).

As they searched, Dorro noticed that Orli was not his usual chipper self. No, he was indeed looking sullen and most definitely was not speaking to his father, nor making eye contact. Crumble’s earlier comment about a certain family matter the night before might have something to do with it; he filed that idea for later retrieval.

Having no luck, the group circled back out of Fell’s Corner and moved down one of Thimble Down’s main streets, filled with shops and taverns, buskers and beggars, kiddies and grandmas, all going about their daily business. Crumble asked if anyone had seen his brother, but came up with nothing.

“Where could that Dwarf go?” he confessed to Dorro on the side. “He never goes anywhere without his felt hat. I have a bad feeling that he’s no longer among the living.”

“Did anyone have cause to do him in?” queried the bookmaster, perhaps none too subtly.

“Wump? Oh, he always has adversaries for one reason or another,” mused his brother. “He has a good heart, I’d say, but a grumpy disposition—doesn’t seem predisposed to be kind to anyone and perhaps he is a tad selfish, too. And if there is gold or precious minerals about, he’ll be the first to dig ’em up. Wump isn’t a great one for sharing his bounty either. Sure, he’ll pay a share to the community, but the rest he hoards. A true Dwarf, that one!” He laughed at his own joke.

“Did he have any family?”

“Oh no, Mr. Dorro. Our Wump is a bachelor these days—he lives for his own pleasure and satisfaction. A bit of a loner, and intentionally so.”

The search party turned a corner and headed towards the smeltery, where they were to meet up with Bindlestiff. “And how did he get along with Orli? Was he a loving uncle?”

Crumble flinched, hoping that Dorro hadn’t noticed, though he had. “Oh, they got along fine until ... well, last night. It was a Dwarf matter, though, to be honest, Orli did something wrong and had to be punished. I found it hard to do myself, so I let Wump do the deed. The boy is still sore about it—especially on his rear end!” The Dwarf laughed weakly, then he began to shake. “*Oh*, I hope nothing happened to my brother. He always meant well, he did!”

Dorro was mulling over this Dwarf matter when the figure of Mr. Bindlestiff came running out of the vast entrance to his smelting works, waving his arms. “Thank goodness you’re here, Sheriff Dorro! Come quickly!”

The portly man of business dashed off to the rear of the giant cavern that housed his industry. It was a long stretch of a hillock, but Bindlestiff knew the trail and climbed to the top, a sprawling hilltop of rocks, gravel, and scrubby vegetation, interspersed with enormous round metal chimneys and air vents. Naturally, it was smoky, but Mr. Bindlestiff seemed to know where he was going. Finally, he stopped on the edge of a ravine that dropped about thirty feet near the rear of the enormous hill. “Down there, Winderiver! Can you see!”

“See what?” said the lawman-cum-librarian, craning his neck. The four other Dwarves followed suit, peering through the drifting smoke.

“See that—right *there*, where Fibbhook is waving his arms like a lunatic,” cried Bindlestiff. “Look at his feet!”

Dorro finally saw something; it looked like a bundle of clothing, but instantly knew it was not. Crumble put his hand to his mouth and grabbed the bookmaster’s arm.

“It’s me brother, Wump. *He’s dead!*”

## Missed Apologies

“Nurse Pym, what do you make of it?” Dorro, Mr. Timmo, and the band of sad, weeping Dwarves stood around the body of Wump, who was lying in a culvert on the earthen cap of Bindlestiff’s Smelting Works.

The chief healer and midwife of Thimble Down looked up from the corpus of Wump and said, “Yep, I’d say he died, all right!”

*Thank you for the obvious, Pym*, thought Dorro sarcastically, but actually said, “Your keen powers of observation continue to amaze us, Nurse. Do you know the cause? Was he stabbed?”

“No, there are no puncture wounds anywhere on Mr. Wump’s corpus. However—and this is the interesting part—the head and body have bruises all over ’em and I’d say, more than a few broken bones. So, for the moment, my gut is that the fellow died from a savage beating with a club.”

“Or rocks?” said Dorro quietly, out of earshot of the Dwarves.

“Yes, could be rocks, but why? A thick cudgel might do the trick just as well. I don’t see any broken skin, which jagged rocks would likely cause.”

“Why does he have that strange look on his face,” queried the bookmaster. “It’s quite eerie and unnerving.” And indeed, Wump did have a bizarre leer on his face—part fright, part smile, with his eyes wide open, as if he died in a state of nervous excitement.”

“I noticed that, Dorro, but I think it’s a natural spasm that happened at the moment of death. I’ve seen the strangest looks of rictus on corpus’ faces before—happy, sad, surprised—and you can’t read too much into it.”

“So, here’s what we know so far. *Dead*: one Northlander Dwarf. *Cause*: blunt-force trauma, probably to the head. *Weapon*: Unknown, possibly a thick cudgel, or less likely, a rock. *Assailant*: Unknown. *Kin*: Four brothers and one nephew, at least so far as we know. Now, I suppose, you may dispose the body.”

“We’d like to take care of his corpus our own way, using our Dwarf methods.”

Mulling it over, “Certainly, that seems acceptable, as long as it won’t cause any risk to public safety. You’re not going to burn the corpus, are you?”

Crumble seemed perplexed. “Well, of course we’re gonna burn it, you daft fool! We’re Dwarves! We burn anything we can get our hands on. But rest assured, we will take our brother

Wump far, far outside your village and perform our farewell ritual in a place where no Halflings will be harmed.”

That seemed to satisfy the Sheriff Pro Tempore. “May I come along and observe? I promise not to intrude. And Mr. Timmo I’m sure would find it of great interest.”

Crumble glanced at his brothers skeptically, but said, “Yes—but don’t interfere! This is a sacred ritual and few, if any, non-Dwarves have ever seen it. Come—and keep your mouths silent!”

Dorro nodded and knew that it was time to withdraw, leaving the Dwarves alone to deal with their grief. “Timmo, let’s retreat to the gaol and compare notes. There are lots of things to discuss. And after the funeral, Crumble, what will you do next? Go home?”

“Don’t be absurd, Halfling. We will hunt down my brother’s killer and cut his still-beating heart from his chest while he watches helplessly.” But adding with a grin, “At least, that’s what we usually do.”

\* \* \*

Orli spent much of the afternoon in the company of his father and uncles, alternately sad and angry. By late in the afternoon, he decided to go for a walk—*alone*. He left the worker’s guest burrow where the Dwarves had been living (rather unhappily; it was no match for the vaulted caverns and spectacular mines and caves they called home to the north), and the big boy was happy merely to be out in the fresh air.

Orli rejoiced in the crisp Autumn air, though he sensed cold rain on the way, and looked at the maples, oaks, and ash trees changing colors before his eyes. The squirrels were busy stowing away nuts and seeds, while birds were departing for warmer climates, save the crows and owls, that didn’t mind frosty weather. Although Thimble Down was no match for the Dwarf Kingdom of the north, Orli generally liked the Halflings and the provincial charm of the place.

Still, he was very angry at one of them. Granted, Orli deserved a whipping for not confessing why he, Wyll, and Cheeryup had been poking around Mr. Bindlestiff’s office. And his Pa had been right as well—if they’d been caught by Halflings, the Dwarves would have lost their positions at the smeltery. But Wump whipped him with too much glee, he felt; it went beyond the realm of punishment. His uncle had enjoyed the beating, almost sadistically.

Why his father hadn’t interceded wasn’t clear to Orli; perhaps it was just a matter of pride. Over time, he’d forgive his Pa, but the Dwarf boy had never loved Uncle Wump and Wump had never returned any affection. He was mean and spiteful, nothing like his jolly brothers Flume, Two-Toes, and Magpie.

“I’m glad he’s *dead!*”

This remark shot out of Orli's mouth so fast he didn't have time to stop it. He looked around to make sure no one heard him, but there is was: he felt pleasure in his uncle's demise. Orli knew he should feel guilty about it, but he didn't.

Wump was a bad egg that deserved to be broken. He didn't know who killed him, but wondered, *Could my father have done it for his beating of me?* He let that thought hang there for a minute, too. *If he did it ... I would be proud of him. I would!*

Just then, voices rang out from down the lane. They were children's voices, and he knew instantly it was Wyll and Cheeryup. "Oy, Orli, slow down! We want to talk to you!"

Breathlessly, they caught up, and Cheeryup even gave the boy a quick hug, much to Wyll's dismay. "We just heard!" she said. "We're so sorry about your poor uncle."

"Yes, well, it is *done*," Orli said curtly.

"Still, he was your family. You must be heartbroken," she continued.

"We are Dwarves, Cheeryup—once a Dwarf is dead, it's final. We will always remember Wump in our hearts and minds, but that's it. He is gone from us."

Perplexed, the girl continued rattling on. "I'm sorry anyway, and if we can help out, you will ask us, right? I also want to apologize for bungling the break-in yesterday. I shouldn't have made us wait and you got punished for it."

"Why apologize to me? You should apologize to Wyll?" snapped Orli.

"Wyll? What does he have to do with it?"

Orli spun around and loomed menacingly over Cheeryup. "You're such a *stupid* little girl! Your friend Wyll—the one who cares and protects you—told you it was time to leave the smeltery, but you didn't listen. You think you're the smart one, yet you treat him like a dog. He is your protector; I've seen that over and over, and he stayed even though he knew trouble was coming."

"Me, I'm a Dwarf and can take the simple beating from a whip. But what about the way you beat Wyll with your blistering tongue? Who mends him? So don't apologize to me, silly, foolish child. *Apologize to Master Wyll!*"

At that, Orli turned on a heel and stomped off up the lane, headed back towards his uncles' burrow. Cheeryup, frozen with horror and shock, slowly crumpled and let tears roll down her cheeks. She looked to Wyll, who looked away just as quickly; they knew Orli was right, though telling her so was cruel.

Cheeryup ran. She ran away from Wyll as fast she could in the other direction, crying and cursing herself for being such a fool. Shame flowed like hot lava in her veins, a sensation she'd never felt before. It burned her savagely, and she knew this was her punishment.

## Creeping Death

The next few days were quiet in the village, as a large rainstorm swept through the area. This drove the Halflings indoors for the most part, some working in their shops cleaning their outdoor tools for storage over the Winter, while others knuckled under and did the ledger accounting work they'd been putting off for weeks. Others congregated in pubs and taverns to relax and talk to neighbors.

The library also did a banner business, as villagers came in to spend the day reading or looking at pictures in giant, leather-bound volumes. The rain put a damper on the mayoral elections, but Dorro mused that this was perhaps for the best. Things had become quite heated, and the brawl the other night at the Hanging Stoat didn't improve things.

Periodically checking the time on his elegant, Timmo-made pocket watch, Dorro sat at the main desk in the library, taking a break from sheriffing for a few hours and giving the always indispensable Bedminster Shoe a break.

Deputy Gadget was at the gaol, keeping an eye on Sheriff Forgo, who was still in a deep, restless state of unconsciousness. His caretakers managed to get a few spoonfuls of broth down his throat to keep his weight up, but certainly this couldn't go on forever. Forgo had probably lost twenty pounds already.

In another corner of the library, Wyll Underfoot was reading a book on Halfling history, which he found fascinating. With the lack of a school in Thimble Down, Dorro was insistent that as many younglings as possible borrow books and keep their learning up. Wyll didn't like it when the bookmaster forced him to read books on sciences and arithmetic, and perform some basic calculations on paper, but knew it was in his best interest.

This was history day and he was reveling in stories about the Battle of the Old Forest, particularly one where a villain named Uwe the Usurper was daring and romance, taking place a thousand years earlier in the dawning days of their folk, all of which enraptured Wyll's imagination.

Years later, King Borgo created many of the laws that Halflings still followed, as well as a standard calendar and structure of provincial government. Sometimes, when Wyll was out playing in the Great Wood, he'd pretend he was young Borgo, using a stick as his sword to smite his enemies. It was one of his favorite pastimes.

The door to the library banged opened, and in dashed Cheeryup Tunbridge, who looked like she'd been crying. She saw Wyll, but avoided him—they hadn't spoken since Orli's tongue lashing. Instead, she came straight up to Mr. Dorro and around the desk. He put a hand on her shoulder, and she quickly collapsed into his arms, sobbing.

"Oh my dear, what's wrong! You and Wyll aren't still fighting are you?"

"It's not that, Mr. Dorro. Well it *is*, but ..." she said as her face crumpled, "my mother has the Grippe. Nurse Pym just confirmed it! She's in bed and doesn't look very good at all."

Dorro looked around the interior until he found Wyll staring back at him and all the commotion. He quickly waved the boy over, which he obliged grudgingly. "Wyll, we have some grievous news, and your friend Cheeryup needs a steady shoulder."

It didn't take long for Cheeryup to blubber out an apology for her recent transgressions and vault herself into Wyll's arms. "I'm really sorry about your mum, Cheery. That's just not right. Your mum is one of my favorite ladies in the village!"

Dorro nodded approvingly, but worried about Mrs. Tunbridge. There were already about twenty Thimble Downers in the vice-grip of the Grippe and another elder villager—Amos Tidwiddle—had perished just last night. Granted, Amos was not in the best of health and was a smoker and drinker all his life, but certainly, this nefarious illness sped up his demise.

As for Mrs. Tunbridge, he'd ask the Bluebells to expand their nursing duties to include both Sheriff Forgo and Mrs. Tunbridge. This was something he'd only be too happy to spend his gold on. (Dorro had been left an impressive inheritance by his parents and grandfather Lorro, something he used to fund the library.)

Asking Wyll to take over library duties, Dorro excused himself and headed back to the gaol, where he'd an appointment with Nurse Pym. In a heartbeat, he left the library, ran through the rain with a floppy hat on his head (much good it did—he was still soaked), and got to Forgo's bedside in a few minutes. Nurse Pym was already there, looking over the Sheriff and murmuring to herself.

"How does he look, Pym?"

"I wish I could say grand, but 'tis not to be," grunted the healer. "He's not worse, though, and that's the good thing. But drat it, this Grippe has me stumped! I can't beat it, no matter how hard I try. I've used every draught and herb in my kit, Dorro, and to no benefit. And I'm exhausted, which doesn't help my mind focus on the problem. You heard about yon Amos Tidwiddle? Popped off smartly last night, and mark my words, he won't be the last. This is a plague upon us, it rightly is!"

Nurse Pym had dark bags under her eyes, and Dorro figured she hadn't received a proper sleep in weeks. "Do you think it has to do with the smeltery and its effluent smoke and vapors?"

“Could be, but we have no proof, do we? It’s not like we have yon professors from the College of St. Borgo to assist us. Though I wish we had—they could figure it out!”

“We can too, Nurse Pym, I know we can. Just give me a little more time,” said Dorro with quiet desperation. “I must talk to Timmo. And tell me, how bad is Mrs. Tunbridge?”

Nurse Pym looked at him sadly. “She has it as bad as anyone else in the village. We could lose her.”

\* \* \*

“There he is—the one who’s bringing death to our fine village!” said Berry Raeburn, who delivered produce for Farmer Edythe in the warm months. “It’s your muck in the air that killed Amos Tidwiddle. Who’s gonna be next?”

Hiram Bindlestiff stiffened as he walking into the Hanging Stoat for a bit of supper, surprised to be singled-out like. He waved away Berry, dismissing him as a drunk, but Raeburn wouldn’t back off. Sure, he’d had a few pints to get his dander up, but wanted to get this off his chest.

“Don’t walk away from me, Mr. High-Falootin’ Bindlestiff!” bellowed Berry. The patrons throughout the Hanging Stoat quieted down, and a few of the wagon driver’s friends tried to get him to sit down. “You can’t ignore me. My friends are sick ‘n’ dying, and you’re responsible.”

“You’re a drunkard, sir. Sit down before you embarrass yourself anymore,” snapped Hiram Bindlestiff, drawing himself up to his full height of four feet and seven inches tall and looking down his nose at his opponent. “What proof have you that my industry has anything to do with the illness that has befallen your poor village?”

“Proof? You want proof, Bindlestiff?” snapped Raeburn. “Why, I’ll give you a tour of my friends’ graves tomorrow, if you’d like. Is that proof enough for you?”

“No it isn’t,” barked the business tycoon in return, speaking loudly enough so everyone could hear him. Bindlestiff wanted to put this to rest right now. “I’ll have you know my employees are the healthiest folks in Thimble Down! We work around the smoke and vapors all day and night, and none of us come down with your so-called Grippe. In fact—I see a few of my boys here—they’re all hearty and hale, and ready to smelt some more!”

There were a few rousing cheers from around the Hanging Stoat. “And don’t forget the ladies, Mr. Bindlestiff, sir!” shouted Mrs. Mick, one of his best workers. Bellows of laughter followed.

“That’s right, Mickey, you’re looking fine, too. That’s because working around the rocks and ores from the earth give us vitality and strength. No, the plague that’s afflicting Thimble Down isn’t from us,” continued Mr. Bindlestiff in his commanding voice, “It’s from living in your dank burrows with sod roofs and too much moisture. It breeds the bad things that fester in your lungs.



Now, if you had smoke in your homes, you'd kill off all the bad germs and let good ones breed happily."

"So *you* there, Mr. So-and-So (referring to poor Berry, who by this time had sat down and tried not to be noticed), you can insult me and my great works, but Bindlestiff's Smelting Works and its labor force are paragons of health in this village. No *sir*—look in the mirror first. The cause of your horrible Grippe has to do with you and yours."

"I say, we start tearing down all these wretched burrows and let my workers start building you fresh new homes of wood and iron. You have ample forests here, and I have the will. We'd create another fifty jobs for villagers, cure your infectious disease, and create prosperity for all. Who's with me?"

A huge roar went up through the Hanging Stoat and echoed onto the streets outside. Hiram Bindlestiff had merely gone to the tavern for supper, having no idea he was about to make a huge amount of gold. But, as he sat down to cheers, waving and smiling, the merchant knew he'd hit upon another great business venture.

*Why, in a few years, they'll change the name of this crummy hamlet from Thimble Down to Bindlestiff-Town!* he cooed to himself. *I'll be richer than Osgood Thrip and Dorro Winderiver combined!*

He laughed out loud and gestured for Freda to come fetch his supper order. Hiram Bindlestiff was surprised how ravenous he suddenly felt!

## Return to the Deep

As per Dwarf custom, Dorro learned, bodies of the dead were not allowed to be sent to the afterworld until a full week after their death. He asked Magpie about this and the problems of, *a-hem*, preservation, but the Dwarf said in the Northern Kingdom, there were many caves that remained cold, even into the warmer months of the year. There were no worries of degradation of the corpus, and they were further swaddled thickly to prevent any meddling by small, nibbling creatures.

Further, the weeklong delay was given to the corpus to settle any debts—material or spiritual—he or she had incurred in life. Sometimes money changed hands, whereas other times, Dwarves who wronged by the deceased might come speak with the family and try to find some peace and closure. Dorro found this ritual highly civilized and wished the Halflings had thought of it first.

Thus enlightened, the bookmaster and his friend Mr. Timmo found themselves trekking into the Great Wood on a cold, windy morning with the solemn Dwarves—Crumble, Flume, Two-Toes, and Magpie—who carried between them the expired body of their brother Wump (Orli was feeling ill and stayed behind).

The Northlanders said not a word, but their thoughts were loud. They were alternately sad and bereaved, and angry and vengeful. As Crumble had told him a week earlier, when they found the Halfling who killed their kin, that villain would suffer a most painful death at their hands. Every time Dorro thought of this, he got a shiver down his spine.

By late morning, they broke their journey for a few minutes, allowing the two Thimble Downers to rest their achy legs and tuck into a second breakfast. The Dwarves lit up their pipes and sat against green, mossy rocks and trees, listening to the birdsongs above.

Dorro and Timmo brought out some handkerchiefs in whose folds they had stolen away wedges of cheese, seed-crust bread, and plenty of apples and pears. Sated, they moved on, moving briskly to the northeast until they came upon a place Dorro knew well—the Deep.

The Deep was an amazing natural chasm, a depressed fissure in the earth that ran for several miles through the forest. But unlike its arboreal high ground, the sides and bottom were strewn with boulders, gravelly beds, and tough, twisted trees and shrubs that somehow found the will to survive in such an inhospitable environment. (Earlier that year, Dorro had experienced one of the

most frightening episodes of his life in the Deep and had not been eager to return. It was recounted in the earlier tale, *Devils & Demons*.)

Another hour passed as the troupe maneuvered down a rocky, bramble-strewn pathway to the bottom of the chasm, one made all the more difficult since the Dwarves were carrying a corpus. But both Dorro and Timmo noticed something fascinating along the way—the Dwarves began to whistle and sing to themselves. There was even some playful banter and a few jokes.

Finally, he could bear it no longer, and nudged Two-Toes. “Why is everyone in such a jovial mood? We’re going to your brother’s funeral!”

The Dwarf chuckled, whispering, “That’s because of the rocks—they’re like old friends to us. Remember, we live in caves amongst rock and boulders and massive stalactites, so this is a relaxing place for us. Your so-called Deep is beautiful and makes us feel good. My brothers and I feel like we’re at home.”

Dorro and Timmo both nodded, but to them, the Deep was among the least hospitable locales in all Halflingdom. A bitter wind shot through the canyon right to his bones, and the scenery was nothing short of barren. “Timmo, do you know what kinds of rocks these are?”

“No idea, Dorro,” admitted the shy metalsmith. “Do you know, Mr. Crumble?”

“Eh? The rocks? Oh, this is sturdy schist, but it’s shot through with veins of agate, opalite, calcite, and gypsum!” replied the Dwarf, with uncharacteristic enthusiasm. “’Tis a fine spot you have here, my Halfling friends. And *look*—there’s a wondrous shelf of dolomite!”

“I must admit, Crumble, my knowledge of rock-lore is limited,” admitted Dorro.

The Dwarf kept talking about various rocks he saw and why he liked them. “Ooooo, I’d love to spend a few weeks here, taking souvenirs and cracking boulders with my hammer. It would be a lovely vacation for me.”

“Dare I ask why we’re here, Crumble? Are you going to inter your brother in one of the caves along here?”

“No, don’t be daft, Mr. Dorro, with all due respect,” said the head Dwarf. “We have an appointment in a few hours, and thence we will perform the ritual.”

Dorro said no more, shooting Mr. Timmo a look of apprehension. Again the troupe pressed forward, the Dwarves becoming ever more silent as the sun began to set. They moved ever north, towards their unknown goal, breaking now and again to give the Halflings a little rest. Dorro and Timmo kept their coats and scarfs fastened tightly as the northerly wind began to blow colder and harder. The two were even more shocked when wet snowflakes began to fall, whipping their faces in the howling wind.

“I say, gentlemen, we’re going to need to stop for the night at some point, aren’t we?” asked Dorro hopefully. “We’re not as rugged as you.”

Crumble looked back at him grimly. “We let you come as long as you didn’t interfere or say anything. Those were *your* words. We still have a ways to go.”

At that, the Dwarves turned and continued marching and the two Halflings had no choice but to follow, despite sore legs and rumbly tummies. Timmo fished in his bag and came up with two more cheese wedges, which they devoured quickly, but it wouldn’t keep them full forever.

After another two hours, Magpie—who was far in the lead—shouted out something in Dwarfish that neither of them understood. The other Dwarves became anxious and doubled their speed. In short order, they arrived at a flat, gravelly bit of ground near a chasm wall, one that had a sheltering outcrop above. It wasn’t snug, certainly, but was better than being out in the open.

The Thimble Downers were pleased to see the Dwarves put down the corpus of Wump and begin gathering wood. In just a few minutes, they made a large pile of sticks and logs from the debris-filled floor of the Deep, and built a fire for food and warmth. They were invited to sit and toast their hands and toes, while Two-Toes produced a sumptuous supper from his bag—venison, oat cakes, cheese, brown ale, and a variety of nuts and fruits.

Soon all the Dwarves and Halflings were happily seated around blazing fire, enjoying each other’s company and discussing anything but the matter at hand. Yet Dorro noticed, they were waiting for someone.

*Or some—thing.*

\* \* \*

On precisely the same evening as Dorro, Timmo and the Dwarves were trekking through the Deep, the door to Mr. Bindlestiff’s darkened office creaked as it was slowly pushed open. The smeltery was closed for the night, aside from a few mechanics walking about, greasing machinery, checking flues and chimneys, and making sure the gears of industry would churn ahead in the morning.

This time, there were no signs of Fibbhook about, nor Dwarves, nor in fact anyone. The same shadow that stole across the smeltery floor and up the stairs, and just now picked the door lock, now moved past high desks and stools towards its goal.

The shadow laid a leather case on the floor and unwrapped it to find an array of gently gleaming metal tools. It tried a few different devices until it selected the perfect one, the thinnest file anywhere in Halflingdom, so fine that you could barely see it. It began inserting it into the keyhole, teasing the gears and tumblers ever so gently. If there had been light in the room, you would have seen a smile on the face of this safecracker, as it so enjoyed its work.

After about ten minutes, there was a small *click!* and the door to Mr. Bindlestiff’s safe swung open on carefully greased hinges. The shadowy figure took only a half second to admire its

workmanship. It pulled a canvas bag out of its shirt and began stuffing it full of papers from the heart of the safe. These were Bindlestiff's most important contracts and most confidential memos. The shadow closed the safe door and made it seem like no one had been there at all.

It spun like a cat and dashed from the room, making sure to re-lock the office door as well. It scampered down the stairs, back along the wall behind boxes, and even dodged a few mechanics who were lounging around and sharing a laugh.

At last the shadowy thief emerged into the brisk night and laughed out loud. This was its greatest hour of triumph!

## Funeral

Dorro and Timmo dozed off in the leeward cave, as a cold wind whipped through the Deep, but left them alone.

If they had been awake, the pair would have found the Dwarves working feverishly in the dark, gathering sticks, branches, and logs and building a complex bier in the middle of the ravine. It was tiered into three levels and reached about twelve feet high—it was testament to the building talents of the Northlanders that they could construct this edifice so quickly and accurately.

On top of the bier, the body of Wump had been carefully lifted, from Magpie to Two-Toes and Flume to Crumble, who was at the top and gently laid his deceased brother on the platform. The corpus was heavily wrapped in cloth, though Wump's face was uncovered. The Dwarf leader bent down and gave his brother a kiss on his brow.

What woke Dorro and Timmo, however, was not something they could see, but something they *heard*. An enormous roar shattered the darkness, followed by several more, each progressively closer. The two Halflings both bolted awake and grabbed each other, thinking the camp was under attack by goblins. But in the glimmering light of the fire that the Dwarves had made off to the side, they saw the Northlanders working quietly and happily, paying no mind to the terrifying animal sounds.

Still, as the bookmaster and metalsmith noted, they looked up periodically, again, as if waiting for something.

“Magpie, what’s going on?” asked Dorro in the dark. “Is the ceremony about to begin?”

“Aye, that it is, Halfling. Soon enough, at least.”

Timmo chimed in, “When did you build this enormous structure? I can’t believe you did it as we slept.”

Added Two-Toes. “We’re rock hewers and engineers by nature, so constructing a small bier is child’s play for us. Only took a few hours, while you gentler creatures napped.”

Dorro felt the mild jab, but knew it was true. It would have taken twenty strong Halflings a day, much less a few hours, to build something like this in. Moreover, Thimble Downers liked to sleep at night and would have saved this project for early morning hours. If that made his kind gentler creatures, so be it.

There was another roar in the distance, but really, Dorro knew, not that far off—maybe just a few hundred paces to the north.

“What is that, Flume?” he asked, but at this point the Dwarves returned to their labors and would not speak. Within the scrubby treeline, he could sense something large moving their way, and it troubled him.

Suddenly, Crumble let out a mighty yell himself—*Whoooooleeelee!*—only to be answered by a beastly rumble in the distance. The Dwarves all scrambled off the bier and grabbed unlit torches, awaiting a signal. Dorro and Timmo moved off a few paces, knowing that something was about to happen—and it did.

Looming up out of the darkness came a hulking shadow, snuffling and shaking the ground with massive foot stomps. Then silence, only broken by the eerie sound of Crumble’s voice.

*Guardian of the night,  
protector of our dead.  
Drawn from the northern hills  
to grant passage to our fallen.  
Speak to me, oh mighty one,  
tell me of your woes.  
We commend unto you this corpus,  
pray guide him safe into the night.  
Speak now, Bravest One!*

At that, there was a crashing noise through the shrubs nearby, and the shadow finally emerged into shape. Timmo leapt perhaps a foot in the air and dug his nails into his friend’s arm: “It’s a troll, Mr. Dorro! A mountain troll!”

Dorro was just as terrified, but also fascinated by this monster. It was no troll, he knew, but still he studied it intently.

“I’ve heard of these beasts before, Timmo, but never actually seen one. I think we have color plates of the monster. Can’t be sure, I think it’s a—”

Suddenly, the creature stepped into the circle of light next to Wump’s bier, and Timmo grabbed Dorro harder.

“*See*, it’s a troll!” he cried.

“Don’t be silly. *That*, poor Timmo, is a northern cave bear. We don’t have them anywhere around here. But my word, they’re enormous!” said Dorro, half quivering in fear and half in awe. “It’s beautiful.”

The cave bear was now roaring freely, staring at the Dwarves, each of whom now carried a flaming brand as they approached. Strangely, Dorro noticed, they weren't at all afraid of this monster, which could have devoured any one of them in a second.

Instead, Crumble walked within ten feet of the beast and spoke to him, mumbling odd phrases in Dwarfish. In later years, the bookmaster would swear that the bear was not only listening and nodding, but also responding with quiet grumps and snorts. They were talking!

"Really, Timmo, this is most fascinating. Imagine, a Dwarf talking to a bear, and vice-versa." Dorro was enthralled, though the metalsmith just wanted to go home and climb into his warm, safe bed. "Look!"

Now the cave bear stood on its back legs and was as tall the top of the bier. It released its loudest roar of all, one that would have been heard for many miles. Even the owls in trees along the top of the Deep flew off in fright. Crumble spun around and tossed his flaming torch up onto the bier. Instantly the other four Dwarves followed suit.

Unbeknownst to the Halflings, the Dwarves had heavily doused the wooden structure in pitch and oil, and it burst into flame. The bear dropped to all fours and stepped back into the night, though its silhouette was still visible. The brothers stood as close as possible, grins on their faces and their arms waving in joy.

"I might be wrong, Timmo, but my guess is that the fire will release Wump's spirit from the corpus, and the cave bear will somehow commend it to the afterlife," posited Dorro. "What I can't understand is how the Dwarves communicate with the bear. It's like they have a shared relationship—maybe in a sense like the way we Thimble Downers have a spiritual connection to the Great Wood. It doesn't make sense on the surface, yet on another level, it really does."

It was at this particular moment that the giant conflagration reached its zenith and the bier collapsed in on itself, Wump's corpus falling into the heart of the flames and sparks shooting deep into the dark. Dorro and Timmo heard the cave bear roar again, but saw it turn and speed off into the night. It was returning to the Northlands from whence it came.

The Dwarves stepped back from the flames and each of them—Crumble, Magpie, Two-Twos, and Flume—were all crying freely, knowing at last that Wump's spirit was gone and he would walk the caves of their ancestors for eternity.

\* \* \*

Not long after, the Dwarves returned to the leeward cave and stoked a smaller fire, bringing the flames and heat up. They had brought all kinds of provisions with them, and as dawn approached in the horizon, the group had a grand feast of meats, cheese, thick seeded bread,



garnet-colored wine, and roasted root vegetables. They spoke little, but shared their food generously with the Halflings until all were sated and drowsy.

The troupe slept peacefully, the dead having risen and the living too weary to move any further that night.

## A Robbery

“There you are, Winderiver! I’ve been looking for you all day!” exclaimed Hiram Bindlestiff, his face red and stormy. “What kind of operation are you running here? Imagine, a village with a sheriff who hides all day!”

Wearily looking up from the desk in the gaol, “Mr. Bindlestiff, your insults won’t win you favor here. I’ve only just returned from a mission to the Great Wood. I’ve traveled many miles, and I’m *very* tired.”

“That’s none of my concern, Winderiver. What is important is the fact that my office was burgled! Your so-called Pie Thief has returned.”

Dorro stood up quickly. “He did? What did the villain get?”

“My important papers, for one thing!” barked Bindlestiff. “These are confidential documents, Winderiver, and if I don’t get them back, I’ll have the Mayor on your back.”

“Why would he want papers? Until now, the thief has only taken material goods: clothing, money, tools ... pies!”

“That’s for you to figure out, *Sheriff*,” he added snidely. “If you catch him, I’ll ask the Mayor for the maximum penalty. A good public hanging is what I’d like to see! And there’s a reward, too—ten gold pieces for whoever returns my stolen papers. Make sure that gets around the village.”

At that, Hiram Bindlestiff stormed out of the gaol, something Dorro mildly appreciated. He loathed that pompous windbag, but still he had a duty to perform, exhausted as he was. The bookmaster took a long draught of water from a ewer on the table and went back to check on Sheriff Forgo. The lawman had lost quite a bit of weight, but Dorro noted he was resting comfortably, as if having an afternoon nap. He honestly thought Forgo looked a little better, and prayed it was true.

\* \* \*

Dorro’s first stop was the smeltery, where he flagged down Fibbhook, the bullish foreman who had tossed the angry bookmaster out on his rear end not a week earlier. He still had not forgiven the thuggish overseer for manhandling him, but he had a job to do and accordingly asked to see the crime scene.

“Come back for more?” snorted the big Halfling with a nasty smile, but he became serious when informed of the nature of Dorro’s visit. “Happened upstairs in the boss’ office. Your Pie Thief broke in last night sometime and walked off with the contents of his safe, easy as ... *pie*. If I’d a been here, I woulda grabbed the rat and snapped his neck. No rat like a dead rat, I always say.”

“Charming,” murmured the bookmaster. “So he crept up these stairs, jiggered the door lock, and cracked that safe in the dark. It would be easier, of course, if you told me what was in the safe—there might be clues there.”

“I can’t tell because I don’t know,” growled Fibbhook. “Mr. Bindlestiff keeps his personal business affairs to himself. I’m his foreman. My job is to make sure the workers are working, and if not, to get rid of them and get new ones. And if it takes a nasty poke in the ribs to make someone work faster, I’m not above that either. I have many skills that the boss finds useful.”

Thinking Fibbhook a big, dumb animal, Dorro decided to move on and see if there were any thoughts in his head: “Who do you think the Pie Thief is?”

“I don’t know who your silly village thief is, but I knows who pinched the boss’ papers. It was that Dwarf boy and those two pesky kids—the girl and *your* nephew!”

“Now see here, sir! My Wyll is not a thief!” snapped Dorro.

“Oh yeah? Then why did I catch them sneaking around here not three days ago?” said Fibbhook with a growing smile as he realized Dorro didn’t know a thing about it. “Oh, the lad didn’t tell you, that’s it. Well he did, and I done caught him, that bratty yellow-haired girl, and the Dwarf chap Orli, right where you’re standing.”

Dorro’s mind was racing. *Wyll, you fool, why didn’t you tell me? And what made you do such a thing?* But he already knew—Cheeryup. Dorro loved the girl dearly, but knew that her combination of brains, ambition, and energy made her take risks, as he’d learned in the past few months. And sweet, guileless Wyll Underfoot would follow her anywhere. He was mad for her, even if he didn’t know it.

“What did you do to them—you didn’t get violent, did you? Remember, I’m the sheriff now!”

“Calm yourself. I didn’t do a thing. I just told them to get lost. That Dwarf said something about giving them a tour, but now I see it was just a ruse. I should have stayed around to catch the little rats in the act.”

“Let me be off and question the Dwarves. It may be that we can close this unfortunate chapter quickly.” Dorro wanted to get to the Dwarves before anyone else could. That way, he could manage the whole blasted matter, and better still—keep Wyll and Cheeryup out of it!

\* \* \*

Scant minutes later, Dorro found himself deep in the smeltery, in a hot, steamy area where several vats of hot liquid metal were simmering over hot coals. One wrong step and Dorro might find himself in the vat—at least, he mused, it would be a quick death.

He tread through the steam carefully until he found his quarry, the Dwarves, who were near the back of this particular cavern, huddled in a group and talking quietly. Presumably they were still grieving for the loss of Wump. How they were awake and working, Dorro did not know, as he was worn and could have slept right there on the floor. He coughed to get their attention.

“Ah, friend Dorro,” said Crumble warily. He knew the bookmaster was not here on a social call. “What can we do for you?”

Dorro relayed the details of the theft, as told to him by Bindlestiff and Fibbhook. Finally, he delivered the coup de grâce—Fibbhook’s accusation against Orli and the children. At first, Crumble said nothing. His face was grim and set like stone, as were those of his brothers. The boy merely looked away.

“As much as I’d like to bury my fists into the face of Mr. Fibbhook, we are Dwarves of honor and do not lie,” said the head Dwarf. “It is true that my Orli and your younglings were found in Mr. Bindlestiff’s office. When we found them, we were angry, and we may have scared your young friends, Mr. Dorro, but rest assured, we never harmed them. Orli, however, was punished in the way of our folk, and trust me, it was not pleasant.”

The younger Dwarf still did not make eye contact, staring off into the depths of the caverns. Still, he was listening to every word. And he was not surprised when Crumble asked the next question: “Boy, did you take the papers? We’ve already caught you there once. Did you shame us again by stealing from the boss on the very night we were off burying your Uncle Wump?”

Orli said nothing, but slowly stood and looked at his father. “I did not steal any papers.”

“Why did we catch you there before?”

“Because Cheeryup wanted evidence that the smeltery was poisoning this village. *I—*”

Crumble interrupted, “She charmed you with her Halfling ways, didn’t she? *Didn’t she!*”

Dorro knew that, like Wyll, poor Orli had feelings for the girl. It was there on his face.

Crumble continued, “I don’t like what you’ve become, my son. Since we’ve come to Thimble Down, you’ve lost your Dwarfish honor. Now you want to steal things that proved that what we do—our very work!—is bad. And all for the affections of a little girl. And a Halfling, no less! You’ve brought shame on us, Orli, all of us.”

“I didn’t steal anything, though I tried once,” cried the boy. “My tools aren’t even sophisticated enough to crack that safe.”

“Whether you *did* or *did not* is not relevant anymore,” said Crumble, his voice cracking with sadness. “It’s that you tried to in the first place, all in the name of putting your own feelings ahead of the needs of your own family. And it’s clear that we must leave this village, Dorro. My

son has done enough damage and needs to return north to relearn what it means to be a Dwarf. He has apparently forgotten.”

Dorro merely nodded and left. He didn't really think Orli stole the papers, but he would interrogate Wyll and Cheeryup. Like Crumble, he was embarrassed by the actions of his young friends and would tell them so. In his heart, he knew he was also to blame.

*I'm too soft on Wyll, he chided himself. And I give Cheeryup too much leeway. I'm supposed to be the grownup here, but all too often, I'm just as foolish and immature as they are. Or worse!*

## Supper's Ready

Dorro returned to the Perch, tired and exasperated. He'd been gone for over a day and needed a bath, food, and a full night's sleep—in that exact order. The bookmaster stoked up the fire under his oven, and after checking his larder, put a few chicken pies in the oven, hoping that Wyll would be home for dinner soon. Perhaps Cheeryup would appear, too, which would make his job easier.

Dorro followed with a hot bath, in which he promptly fell asleep. A half an hour later, he roused himself from the tub, dressed in his night robe and went out to finish dinner. By this time, the pies were bubbling along nicely. He complemented the main course with a loaf of rye bread, fresh butter, and a jar of Summer blueberries for dessert. He'd top them off with a few spoonfuls of fresh cream and perhaps a sprig or two of mint.

As if on cue, the door to the burrow opened, and in strode Wyll and Cheeryup. "There you scamps are! I hope you're staying for dinner, young lady," chastised Dorro with mock gravity. They nodded yes, so he promptly sent them to the privy to wash up for supper. Eventually, they were all seated at the kitchen table and devouring the chicken pies crafted by the inestimable, if sometimes cantankerous Mrs. Fowl down the lane. They chatted about the Dwarves, the health of Mrs. Tunbridge (not good), and the state of Thimble Down (even *worse*).

Dorro waited until they were on their blueberries to bring up the incident at Mr. Bindlestiff's office. Wyll and Cheeryup froze, but slowly took stock of their actions. Wyll explained their motley plan to find incriminating documents, while Cheeryup bravely took responsibility for the maneuver in the first place.

"I'm glad you realize you did wrong, children," began Dorro, "Yet I'm disappointed. I admit, I'm not the best role model in the village, but this was your most foolish prank yet. If Fibbhook had discovered you in the office instead of Crumble, you might not be here right now. He would have been well within his rights to have you tossed in gaol. Even as Sheriff, I would have no authority to stop him. You broke our laws!"

"But Mr. Dorro, we meant well," said Cheeryup meekly.

"But nothing, young lady. And you, most of all, using your feminine charms to get poor Orli to do your bidding. This must stop right now!"

Laying down his spoon, Dorro continued: "Wyll, you're my nephew—I'd have thought you would have learned by now what is lawful and which is not. Certainly, we've pushed the limits

before, you and I, but this is nothing but theft. My nephew, a common thief! I'm ashamed of you, though it truly pains me to say that."

"Wyll tried to talk us out of it, Mr. Dorro!" plead Cheeryup. "He really did."

"That may be so, but still, a thief in the family. What would your good mother say?"

"*I am not a thief!*" screamed Wyll, standing up and his face red. "Stop calling me that!"

"How you dare speak to me like that, boy?" Dorro was shocked. "I give you a good home and you go off and burgle the neighbors. And now *this!*"

At that, the tousled-hair boy kicked his chair back until it slammed back onto the floor. "In that case, I shall live somewhere else, Uncle Dorro!"

Wyll Underfoot ran from the burrow, awash in anger and bewilderment, knowing not at all what he was going to do next.

\* \* \*

At almost the precise same moment, Orli the Dwarf had a very similar argument with his father. Crumble accused him of being a thief and liar, a notion that drove Orli into a rage. Like Wyll, he lashed back at his father and stormed from the Dwarves' dank burrow, just looking for fresh air and an escape from his family.

It was only too ironic when the two boys ran into each other—quite literally—in one of Thimble Down's quieter lanes.

"*Ow!*"

"*Hey, watch it!*"

"Orli?"

"Wyll? What are you doing here?"

"I ran away from home," snarled the Halfling boy. "My dear uncle thinks I'm an embarrassment to his snooty ancestors!"

"Me, too!" said Orli. "My pa wants me to go back to the Northern Kingdom and learn how to be a respectable Dwarf again. Phooey!"

"So what are you going to do?"

"Run away," uttered Orli with complete solemnity. "I shall never see my family again."

"Same here—I'm running away" declared Wyll. "Hey, let's run away together! There are caves by the river that are snug, and we can hunt and fish. And before we go, we can go to the library and get heavy jackets, boots, fishing rods, and blankets to keep us warm. Uncle Dorro keeps extras in a closet there."

"But isn't that stealing?" wondered Orli aloud.

“Both Uncle Dorro and your Pa already think we’re thieves,” said Wyll. “So let’s prove ’em right! We’ll go live by the river as outlaws, and steal and plunder as we please!”

“Yeah!” glowed the Dwarf boy. “Since they say we’re rotten, let’s *be* rotten!”

At that, Wyll Underfoot and Orli the Dwarf shook hands and sped off into the cold October night, the thrill of the unknown driving their every step.



## Battle Dwarves

Dorro knocked on the door of the Tunbridge burrow the next morning. It was crisply cold, and there was even a little frost on the burrow's nameplate, which read Little Stitch—a small joke about Mrs. Tunbridge's position as the village seamstress. The door finally creaked open, and the bookmaster was welcomed inside.

"How is she?" he inquired hopefully, but not expecting much good news.

"The same." Cheeryup looked mournful. "The Bluebells were here not twenty minutes ago and tended mother, but she hasn't changed. Mrs. Bluebell particularly noted that her breathing was steady—weak, but the same as yesterday. I suppose that it good news."

Dorro observed the emotion she was holding back. "I'll take that bit of cheer with me today. Forgo isn't better either, but I've heard that Belinda Weakes has died of the Grippe. You probably don't remember her, but she worked as a cheesemonger until around when you were born. A nice lady who smelled of Stilton, even long after she left the cheese shop."

Dorro regretted delivering that news as he noticed more tears welling up.

"Did Wyll come home last night?"

"Ermmm, no, but I didn't expect him to."

"You were rather hard on him, Mr. Dorro," said Cheeryup. "It really was my fault—I made us do it, not Wyll or Orli. Truly, Mr. Dorro."

"I know I was hard on him, but he'll be a better Halfling for it. My father was hard on me, and you know, I ran away once or twice me'self! Does a boy good to have a bit of a ramble."

"I hope you're right," worried the yellow-haired lass. "Wyll has a hard head and might take it further. He might not come back!"

"Give him a day or two shivering and starvin' in the woods; he'll be back at the Perch before you can say, 'Bowl of hot pepperpot!'"

Dorro laughed weakly and bid Cheeryup goodbye. He hoped he was right and the lad would return. He knew he'd been harsh with Wyll and regretted it, but there was nothing to be done at the moment.

Dorro proceeded towards the center of the village, first to check in at the library where he hoped Bedminster Shoe would be deftly running things as usual. Thence he'd finish his jaunt at the gaol, where he'd inquire as to the condition of Sheriff Forgo and—*finally!*—get some work done on Wump's case. A little quiet time was all he needed.

“Sheriff! Sheriff!” It was Deputy Pinkle, running down the lane as quickly as possible. “*There* be trouble at the gaol, sir. Come quick!”

“What is it, Gadget?” Dorro tried to ask, but the boy had already shot back in the other direction. The bookmaster merely rolled his eyes and kept moving apace, realizing that his quiet morning was already history. Upon entering the small, round building, he was assailed immediately.

“Sheriff, thank goodness you’re here!” A very small Halfling ran up to him and gave him a panicky hug. “I was attacked! By Dwarves!”

“Calm yourself, Minty, and tell me the whole story. Please! Now let’s put the tea on and have a reasoned talk.” The gaol had a small iron stove that sat on four legs and served both to warm the building and allow Sheriff Forgo to heat up his lunch, as needed. Fortunately, Gadget had lit a new fire an hour or two earlier, and the tea kettle began to whistle in no time. “Let’s have the whole story now.”

Minty Pinter was a small, wrinkly Thimble Downer and made his living as a traveling tinker, driving his rickety cart between villages. He sold all sorts of pots ‘n’ pans, tools, and in fact anything for the home and beyond. He was also a wizard at fixing things, which helped put a few more pennies in his pocket. Minty wasn’t wealthy, but well liked, and folks liked to keep him busy and happy.

“So I was traveling down the road, going between Upper-Down and West Upper-Down, when all of sudden some queer folk stepped out from under the tree line and stopped my wagon. They weren’t Halflings—more like them Dwarves who been workin’ at the smeltery. But these ones were fiercer looking and made me get down from my cart.”

“I says, ‘*Who be you to make me stop my wagon?*’ cried the little Halfling. “At which point the leader shoved me to the ground and started all sorts of nasty questions. ‘Do know Wump?’ or ‘Did you know who killed the Dwarf’, and even ‘*Mebbe you did it yerself!*’ I was scared for me life, I wuz!”

“Then what happened?”

“What happened? I’ll tells ya wot! The bleeding band of Dwarves rifled through me cart, took what they wanted—a few pots *and* my pony Timothy—and lit me wagon on fire! Burned it to the ground with oil and ruined all my remaining pots, skillets, tools, and wire. All smelted on the spot!”

“*Why?*” gagged Dorro, so agitated that he spilled some hot tea on his lap. “Ouch!”

“The head Dwarf—a truly odd looking thing—stuck his face into mine and said, ‘Tell your folk that the Battle Dwarves are here and we’re looking for the killer of Mr. Wump. And when we find ’im, we’re gonna do exactly what we did to your wagon. Understand, little flea?’”

“I was fuming mad, but not about to take a swing at a northland Dwarf. So here’s I am and I ain’t happy about it. Who’s gonna pay me back for my wagon and for Timothy, I ask you?”

“I’ll talk to the Mayor about it, Minty—I’m sorry for your loss, truly,” lamented Dorro. “But tell me, where are these Dwarves headed?”

“Where they headed?” Minty laughed out loud. “Why *here*, Mr. Dorro—they’re coming right here! And now they’re yer problem!”

The little tinker threw back his head and kept laughing until he was hoarse.

\* \* \*

Faintly, Dorro heard a sound, but it was growing louder by the second. He rushed out of the gaol and saw a crowd moving down the High Street in Thimble Down; actually, they were running and screaming, not to put too fine a point on it. He thought of doing the same, but remembered he was Sheriff Pro Tempore and decided at least to make a good show of it.

*“They’re coming, Sheriff, they’re coming to kill us all”* yelled young Tom Talbo.

*“I saw ’em with my own eyes,”* yelled Mrs. Poddle. “There was blood drippin’ from their teeth!”

*“And there’s about two hunner’d of ’em,”* screamed Rory MacInturff, the tanner.

This actually made Dorro feel better because he knew his fellow Thimble Downers and how prone they were to exaggeration. More likely the truth was far less threatening, but he was anxious anyway. By now, roughly one hundred Halflings surrounded the gaol, all talking, jabbering, and raising a ruckus. There was another round of tremulous agitation, and the mob parted, allowing Crumble and his Dwarves through. They too looked rather tense.

“Ahoy there, Sheriff Dorro,” said Crumble with some caution in his voice. “So I see you’ve heard the news about our, errmm, brethren who are about to visit.”

“Is it true? Are these Battle Dwarves here to find Wump’s killer?” asked Dorro, hoping it was all a big misunderstanding.

“In a roundabout way, ummm, *yes.*”

“What does that mean, Crumble?”

“What it means, Mr. Dorro,” said Two-Toes, filling in for his brother, “... is that these are combat-hardened Battle Dwarves who spend most of their lives fighting goblins on the frontier and keeping the Dwarf kingdom safe. They are brilliant warriors—cunning, heartless, and prone to kill first and ask questions later. With that in mind, sir, I’d say you have a very big problem.”

Dorro just gulped and looked about helplessly. He was a librarian, not a fighter. If only Sheriff Forgo were here. Dorro felt like crying, but instead was shocked to find all the Halflings around him cheering and clapping.

*What have I done? he wondered. I guess these folks do respect me! My, maybe I can take on these Battle Dwarves! Yes I can, yes I ....*

Suddenly, the Thimble Downers all surged towards him, arms outstretched to hug him and lift him on their shoulders proudly, a symbol of the indomitable Halfling. But instead, they ran right past him. Perplexed, Dorro stood frozen for a second and slowly turned around.

Behind him, in the doorway of the gaol, stood a scraggly, scruffy fellow scratching his overgrown beard and rubbing his belly.

“Say, what does a guy have to do to get something to eat ‘round here? I’m could eat a whole herd o’ sheep!”

At this, the crowd exploded into more yet cheering and crying.

Sheriff Forgo was back.

## Aramina

Dorro at least had the presence of mind to call for Nurse Pym. He called out to Gadget Pinkle, and the red-haired boy was off like a shot. Someone had fetched Sheriff Forgo a chair so he could sit in the sun. Another sprinted to the Bumbling Badger and returned with a well-cooked lamb leg, some crusty bread, and a small tankard of ale.

The lawman's eyes bulged when he saw the basket of food, though it was at that precise moment that Nurse Pym showed up. "Hold on now, Forgo. Don't you dare take a bite of that lamb!"

"*Wha?...*" Forgo was crestfallen. "I haven't eaten for weeks. Look at me—I'm as skinny as Bedminster Shoe!"

The crowd laughed as Pym checked Forgo's eyes and tongue and listened to his chest. "Well, I'll be darned; your lungs are as empty as your head. I can't hear any sign of the Grippe." Another cheer from the Thimble Downers.

"Fine, eat your meal, but *slowly*. You don't want to lose your lunch as soon as you down it, if you get my meaning."

Rubbing his hands together gleefully, Forgo grabbed the basket while still chomping on the lamb bone. "Slow down, Forgo! Oh, I give up—I have real patients to deal with."

"Thank you, Jessie," squeaked the Sheriff, drawing an evil glare from the healer (who hated being called by her given name), but hurrahs from the crowd. "*Long live Nurse Pym! Long live Nurse Pym!*" they cried. And truly, Pym was one of the hardest working folks in all Thimble Down.

"Now Winderiver, what are you doing here, addressing the crowd?" continued Forgo between bites. "Don't tell me—"

"Don't you mock me, Sheriff! I've been working my bottom off as your temporary replacement and am knackered through and through," snarled the bookmaster. "However, I'd be more than delighted to return the post to you. This occupation is thankless!"

Choosing diplomacy over an easy laugh, Forgo quietly thanked Dorro for covering his job for him and said he might need to stay on a few days more until he got his strength back. A few Thimble Downers even clapped for Dorro, which diffused the situation and gave the sensitive bookmaster a little feeling of warmth from his fellow villagers.

“So what’s the story with these Dwarves?” grumbled Forgo, as he moved on to the crusty bread and ale.

“You know as much as I do,” said Dorro, “and in fact, now we’ll learn together.”

Again the crowd parted and, indeed, a gang of Dwarves stomped right up to the gaol where Dorro, Forgo, and the other Northlanders were standing. One of the fiercest Battle Dwarves emerged from the back of the pack and spoke: “We have come for vengeance, little Halflings. One of our own is dead because of you and I want his head brought to me. And if you can’t provide that, we shall find the villain for ourselves and cut his tongue, boil his feet, and remove his toes and fingers one by one with a dull knife. At that point, we may let him live or simply remove his head with my axe. Now—where is he?”

*“Hello, sister.”*

The fierce Dwarf turned its head and opened its mouth, yet no sound came out.

Crumble kept speaking instead: “Sheriff and Mr. Dorro ... may I introduce the one and only Malachite Molly, one of the most lethal Dwarves in all the Northland. She has slain hundreds of invading goblins and trolls and, along with her fighters, kept us safe for decades. Yet you should also know her other name. This here is my former sister-in-law, Aramina. That is, Mrs. Aramina Wump.”

Dorro’s face fell into a dumb stare.

*“Mrs. Wump?”*

## The Chamber

Dorro stared at the stout, filthy warrior. (Indeed, he originally thought it to be a male, though to be sure, instead of a full beard, there were only a few scraggly whiskers on her chin.) He turned to Crumble: “But you said Wump was unattached.”

“You may address *me*, Halfling,” said Aramina brusquely. “Wumpie was my first husband, but we were too different to make it last. He was a gem-lover, a rock digger, a cave dweller. Me, I longed for the outdoors and a life of adventure on the frontier. Hunting goblins is what I was made for. Poor Wumpie—he just wanted to count his gold ingots and dig and dig and dig ...”

*Wumpie?* thought Dorro.

“How long has it been, Aramina?” asked Crumble.

“Oh, I left Wumpie nigh on twenty years ago. You ain’t changed much yourself in that time, Crumble.” Upon scanning the others, “And look at you, Flume, Two-Toes, and Magpie—you’re all fatter and much grayer, but really so much the same. We had such fun back then. Are there any others?”

“My son, Orli, is around somewhere, though I haven’t seen him today. He’s peeved at me for a family matter.”

“A son? Why Crumble, you romantic devil. Where’s his mother? She must have been a beauty!” exclaimed Aramina.

“Ah, she was. But we lost my Clodagh many years back.” Crumble looked wistful and sad. “It was a goblin attack while we were traveling between caverns—they got us in the open. Only half made it home. Orli never really knew her.”

“If I’d have been there, none of them goblins would have returned home with their heads attached to their necks!” Aramina’s face clouded over. “You have my deepest regrets, brother. And even though Wump could not live with a warrior-wife, I still regard you buffoons as my own kin.”

“And we feel the same, sister. But if you’ve come to Thimble Down to find Wump’s killer, you’ll have a devil of a time. This here is Mr. Dorro, who’s leading the investigation—he’ll tell you plain as day we have no suspects.”

“That would be correct, Mrs. Wump, if I may call you that.” Dorro was excellent at playing the diplomat. “We found your late husband with many broken bones, but no leads. It could be anyone.”

“We have our own ways, Master Halfling, and will conduct ourselves as we see fit. We are Battle Dwarves and answer to no one.”

“Now hold on, Missy—I’m Sheriff Forgo, and this is *my* town. No one goes about here with axes and swords unless I say so!”

“So, we have a Halfling with a spine, do we?” Aramina Wump laughed. “And a cute one at that. Look at that nice belly, though you need a little fattening up. If you could grow your beard out, Sheriff, you might pass for a Dwarf.”

Ignoring her, Forgo went on, “I will allow you to stay in our village, but there shall be no violence or intimidation. If I hear of anything, I’ll toss you out of Thimble Down myself!”

Aramina winked at Forgo and cooed, “I’d like to see ya try, handsome. But believe me, I will find me husband’s killer. And if I can’t do it with these fine fellows,” she said, gesturing to her troop of warriors, “I will summon the rest of my battalion and we’ll burn this rat’s nest to the ground. We were down in your southlands anyway, tracking a band of marauding goblins, so the rest of our comrades aren’t far away. And if comes to a show of force, I might keep you as my battle prize.”

She gave the lawman a downright scandalous smile, scratched her hairy chin, and walked off into the heart of the village, looking for food and drink. Crumble and his brothers followed, leaving behind the newly revived Sheriff Forgo, Dorro, and a crowd of awed villagers.

“Okay, Winderiver, why don’t you help me hobble back into the gaol and you can start filling me in on everything I missed. Seems like it’s going to be a lot!”

Dorro just rolled his eyes and held out an arm for the still-weak Forgo to grab.

\* \* \*

So far, Wyll and Orli had made a good start of it. The night before, the runaways raided the library’s storage shed and came up with heavy blankets, some tools and fishing gear, and enough food to get them started. As planned, in cover of darkness they worked their way towards the river and spent part of the night huddled under low-swaying boughs of pine.

Though Wyll had some experience in outdoors survival, he wasn’t very good at it, as he recalled during the long sojourn from his late mother’s caravan to Thimble Down. He’d nearly starved to death more than once.

Orli, on the other hand, was a seasoned hunter—he’d been on many journeys with his father and uncles, living off the land, learning to build shelter, and finding food. To get going he next morning, the pair made a fresh start of it, devouring some jars of pickles and beets, and a loaf of mildly stale bread.



“I can bring us some trout for lunch I think, despite the cold,” said Wyll. “The water is cold, and the fish have gone deep, but I know where they’re hiding. It’s all a matter of going really slow with the bait and dragging it along the bottom of the river. I’ll give the line a few teases, and that should do the trick.”

“If you say so.” Orli looked amused. “I know nothing of your river-angling arts. If we fish at all, it’s in a subterranean lake, and our prey are hungry and willing. For my part, I’ll explore the shoreline for shelter and gather us nuts, roots, and snails—they can be rather tasty when you cook ’em. I’ve got my bow, too, so... *Wait!*”

Out of the corner of his eye, Orli espied something moving. Slowly he grinned. “I’ll be back later, Wyll. I think we shall be adding some fresh coneys to our supper as well. Happy hunting!”

\* \* \*

Many hours later, the boys were in bliss. They were sitting in front of a fire, enjoying fresh trout that Wyll brought in, as well as a brace of rabbits, which Orli had cooked into a stew with various roots and herbs, and a few of the leftover beets from the morning. Orli also made a miraculous discovery—while walking along the shore of the River Thimble, he noted a weird wall of brush. He pulled the branches away and found a cave that was dry and warm; it must have been some lucky fisherman’s hideout during Summer storms.

“Orli, we can live here like kings all Winter! I can ice-fish and gather roots, while you hunt. And they’ll be no grownups around to tell us what to do.”

“Bless that thought, Wyll. I’m sick of fathers and uncles bossing me around. I’m my own Dwarf now and answer to no one. I only miss ...”

“Who?”

“Me mum. I lost her when I was but a pup. But in my heart, I still miss her. She wouldn’t treat me like a dog.”

“Same here. My mother died not quite a year ago. She was an actor and very beautiful. Uncle Dorro is nice to me most of the time, but he gets cross sometimes and makes me do chores. And he’s got a horrible temper.” But Wyll chuckled. “Then again, so do I. Must get it from the old goat!”

The lads laughed at that, but both reflected on the fact that even though their guardians were tough, they also supported them and made their lives easier. But they couldn’t say that out loud yet. After a spell, they decided to go explore the cave further, just in case a boar or some foxes lived in there. They made torches, doused them in musk oil they’d taken from the library, and began creeping back into the blackness.

“A bit gloomy back here, eh?” Orli nodded in agreement.

“Not much further, I think, Wyll—it’s tapering off to the end, but ... hold on a bit.” Orli veered off to the right, holding his flaming brand high. “Look, there’s a separate chamber back here. I almost missed it. I think we’ll have to squeeze through this fissure.”

The boys dropped to their knees and began wiggling through the small crack in the wall. Wyll shot through, but the beefier Dwarf boy struggled for a few moments. Finally, he got in and found his torch. “Do you see anything?”

“Orli, you ain’t gonna believe this, but ...”

The Dwarf held up his torch and gasped. Within this chamber—measuring roughly twenty by twenty feet—they beheld every manner of object: plates and dishes, tools, piles of clothing, coins strewn everywhere, and just about every kind of household object you can imagine. It was only when Wyll noted a stack of shallow tin plates that he understood where he was.

“Look! These are tin pie pans. *Pie pans!* Orli, I think we’ve found the lair of the Pie Thief.”

The boys just looked at each other and smiled broadly at their coup.

## Malachite Molly

At the next meeting of the mayoral candidates, the looming subject wasn't one of industry against the natural world. No, it was about Dwarves, in particular, the squadron of Northlanders that had taken up residence in Thimble Down. Standing at the podium in front of Bindlestiff's Smelting Works, a lonesome-looking Farmer Edythe was trying to connect with this crowd of tough, dirty workers.

"The Mayor wants to paint me as someone who hates jobs and prefers to skip around the forest writing poems all day," belted Edythe, trying to reach the folks in the back. "Granted, that holds some appeal for me ... *but* as your mayor, I want business growth combined with a sustainable approach to our lands and waters. Surely, you can see the sense in that."

*"What about them Dwarves?"* screamed out an unknown worker in the crowd.

*"How can we work if they cuts our hands off?"* yelled another.

*"I bet they'll murder us in our sleep!"* contended a third.

Growing frustrated, Edythe let it rip, "Oh please—they aren't going to do anything of the kind, you nitwits! They're just looking for the one that done in their pal, Wump. Find the rascal, and I'm sure you'll get a reward."

*"Yeah, like a quick knife in the back!"*

The Thimble Downers all began laughing at one of their fellow's quip.

Knowing this wasn't going well, Edythe tried a different tact. "You hear the Mayor say I'm against business and jobs, but I'm married to one of the village's leading merchants. The crowd looked foggy for a second until the candidate reminded them, "Mr. Mungo, owner of the Hanging Stoat, you chowderheads! If that ain't business, what is?"

The crowd cheered for Mungo, if only for the reason that their simple brains quickly equated Mungo with food and beer, which made them happy and want to shout "Hurrah!"

"Over the years, Mungo has provided jobs in Thimble Down, not just at the tavern, but for the deliverymen and the growers and the furniture makers—especially when you silly buffoons have a brawl and break all his chairs!" Another big round of cheering and laughing. "So when you folks think about fair labor, I want you to think about me 'n' Mungo ... and beer. Speaking of which, all beers and ales are fifty percent off. Starting now!"

Even though it was only two in the afternoon, more than a few Halflings cheered and summarily high-tailed it over to the Hanging Stoat, reducing the crowd for the Mayor. It was a

brilliant strategy, which the Mayor and Osgood Thrip had to grudgingly admire. At last, the Mayor mounted the wagon and stood behind the podium.

“That was a very good speech, Edythe,” said the thin, heavily mutton-chopped politician. “Too bad most of it was lies!” The crowd started hooting and shouting, some for, others against.

“No disrespect, but calling Mr. Mungo a business leader is like calling Minty Pinter a clean, sober gentleman!” There were big laughs, except from little Minty, who shook his fist at the Mayor and stuck out his tongue. And he wasn’t done yet. “It’s like saying Mr. Timmo talks too much! [*More laughs*] It’s like saying that Dorro Fox Winderiver is not a prickly, fussy, elitist snob!” [*Huge guffaws and jeers*].

“But friends,” continued the slippery Mayor, “I want to talk to you today about safety. We have some ill-tempered guests in our town, and believe you me, we’re watching them closely. If any one of these so-called Battle Dwarves makes a wrong move, Sheriff Forgo will clap ’em in irons and haul them to the gaol on my orders. More than that, I’m sure you’re as pleased as I am that Forgo is healthy and hale again!”

Here, the crowd went wild, just as the Mayor had hoped.

“We will take a firm hand with these ‘guests,’ and if they don’t do things our way, we’ll boot ’em out on their tailbones!” Of course, the Mayor had no intention of doing that, and in the back of his mind already knew that the Dwarves could raze Thimble Down to the earth in seconds. But he wasn’t going to say that—he was running for office and would say just about anything and everything to get himself elected. Facts were not an issue.

Out in the crowd, Edythe knew she’d lost this round in the campaign, yet resolved to come back and whomp the Mayor at the next speech. But she didn’t have much time left, and more important, was well aware that the Halfling was a terrible mayor, but a skilled political opponent.

\* \* \*

“Sir, will you kindly put me friend Burko down! *Sirs!*”

Mr. Mungo was beside himself. A gaggle of Dwarves had entered the Hanging Stoat not fifteen minutes earlier and had gone from table to table demanding to know who had killed Wump. So far, they had punched three Halflings in the nose; opened a window and bodily thrown Farmer Duck outside; and were presently holding Burko Soames, the miller, by his ankles while waving a sharp dagger in his face.

“I don’t know nuttin’, Mr. Dwarf!”

That only made things worse, when said Dwarf informed all that *he* was in fact a *she*. “My name is Malachite Molly and this is my battalion of goblin slayers! And you rabble will tell us who killed my Wumpie or we’ll gut ya all!”

“Madam, please put poor ol’ Burko down!” urged Mungo. “Mr. Soames is a quiet gentlemen who grinds flour in Thimble Down and only comes in here for a wee tippie now and again.”

Aramina dropped Burko on his bum and crowed, “Yes, that’s what we need—some stout rope to tie some folks up and squeeze ’em till they tell us the truth. Now, you fat, lazy barkeep, get us some of your best ale. Here’s a coin for yer troubles.”

In the air she flipped something, which Mungo snatched—he knew it wasn’t a coin, but his experience told him that it was gold, and by the weight of it, a very solid bit at that. “Oh indeed, please have a seat, and we’ll bring you some drink and pork chops on the double. Here, Dimple, snap lively!” He motioned for his assistant, the burly boy named Dimple Hognoddle, to start fetching food and drink for the Dwarves.

Presently, Crumble, Magpie, Two-Toes, and Flume joined them at the table, and it was a merry Dwarf gathering. Still, Crumble cautioned his former sister-in-law, “Aramina, dear, I do think you’ll get more cooperation out of these creatures if you don’t beat them or hang ’em by their ankles. They’re not like goblins—you can reason with them. Believe it or not, they do possess a basic amount of intelligence. On par with a woodchuck or well-trained house cat.” (One would have hoped that Crumble was jesting, but he was not.)

“I know only one way to interrogate, and that’s by the tip of my blade,” spat the she-Dwarf. “No one kills my kin and lives to tell about it.”

“We will find the culprit and extract proper ... *ah* ... restitution from him.” Crumble smiled in a way that meant something far darker. “But really, what’s with this Malachite Molly nonsense? You’re our Aramina—such a pretty name.”

“Thank you, Crumble—you always were a sweetie. But honestly, do you think I can ride into battle with that name? Do you think my banshees want to call out, ‘Beware you goblins! Beware of Aramina!’ or worse, ‘Look out ... here comes Mrs. Wump!’ *No, no, no*, we can’t have that. I needed a good fightin’ name, and that was a good one. Me grandmum used to call me Molly back when I lived in the mountains, and Malachite is one of me favorite stones. Young Wumpie gave me a necklace of the green stones once, and it touched me heart.”

“*I see.*”

“Rest assured, Crumble, there’s not a goblin or troll in the Northland for whom the name Malachite Molly doesn’t put the fear of death in ’em. They well know about the savage beauty with the double-edged battle axe. A bit of a legend, I am,” boasted Aramina, looking at her fingernails and feigning modesty, albeit poorly.

“I wish my Orli was here to meet you,” added the Dwarf. “He’s off on a ramble at the moment.”

“I bet you gave him a good hidin’—that’s what usually sends ’em packin’ for a few days.”

“Yer quite right, Aramina. He got a tannin’ a few days ago, and we exchanged words again yesterday. I figure he’s fit to be tied by now. The lad has a temper like ... *like Wump!*”

“Oh be still, my beating heart! Orli sounds like a lovely boy, especially if he’s grumpy like Wump. I did always find that trait rather alluring, don’t you know.” Aramina leered again, like a fox sneaking into a chicken coop.

The door of the Hanging Stoat banged open, and in strode Sheriff Forgo and Mr. Dorro. They walked right up to the Dwarves.

“Now, didn’t I tell you not to make trouble?” Forgo was angry and had his hand on his cudgel. He knew this gang of Dwarves could rip him limb from limb, but he wasn’t going to show them any signs of fear or weaknesses. In his mind, you only fight strength with strength. “Now, you leave these folks alone. You wanna talk to them, fine. But you can’t toss them out the window. Understand?”

Talking a slurp of her frothy beer, Aramina said, “I don’t usually apologize, Sheriff. In my line of work, it’s just easier to hack someone’s head off. But seeing as we’re guests in yer village—and on the counsel of my former brother-in-law—we will be more pleasant from now on.” Another big gulp. “I am sorry.” [*Burp!*]

“There we be, all friends again!” laughed Crumble. All the Dwarves now began knocking back their tankards and diving into the plates of pork chops, brown beans, and kale that Dimple had finally served up. Once again, Dorro noticed them passing a little vial and putting a few drops of belladonna into their drinks to kick it up a notch in strength.

“Say, Crumble, have you seen Orli about?” It was Dorro, finally speaking up. “My Wyll hasn’t been home since last night, and frankly, he’s rather cross with me. I don’t expect he’s off with Orli somewhere in the woods, do you?”

The Dwarf frowned and crossed his arms. “Actually, it makes perfect sense. If yer lad is angry with you and mine with me, they must have left together. That’s what a Dwarf would do.” Around the table of chewing, burping, and snorting Dwarves, they all nodded in agreement. “I’m afraid they ran away. Wouldn’t be the first time for young Orli.”

“Oh dear—nor the first time for Wyll. It’s a bit of a habit, actually. That boy is so headstrong, just like his dear, departed mother.”

“That further binds the boys together,” added Aramina. “They’re growing boys, surrounded by males, and without the balancing strength of a mother. That makes ’em surly and more prone to strike out on their own.”

“If Orli has done this before, Crumble, how long ’til he comes back?”

“Usually a month or two. Once for six months. You never really know, but he’ll turn up, trust me.”

These words crushed poor Dorro, who already regretted many of the things he'd said to his nephew. If only he knew that Wyll was a mere mile or two away, hiding in a cave on the River Thimble, he'd feel much better. Instead, Dorro felt nothing but cold guilt for being a poor guardian.

"Come, Mr. Dorro, all will be fine," reckoned Crumble, twiddling his thumbs. "The boys will either come home for their respective punishments or they'll go away and make their own lives. Either way, we'll see the measure of the grownups they will be come. Running away from home is a character-building exercise."

Again the Dwarves all let fly various snorts, farts, burps, and nods of agreement, but poor Dorro, in comparison, was simply miserable.

## Wanted

“What’s this? *What’s this I hear?*” An indignant Hiram Bindlestiff half dragged the Mayor to the table where Dorro and Crumble were sitting and demanded answers. “Did you just say that your lad Wyll has fled with the Dwarf boy?”

“So? What it’s to you, Bindlestiff?” snorted Dorro, pulling himself up to his full height of five solid feet tall and looking down his nose at the insufferable pair.

“Why it’s *everything*, Winderiver.” The smelting mogul was positively gleeful. “See Mayor—I told you!”

The Mayor shrugged. Dorro still didn’t see what Bindlestiff was prattling on about. “*What is everything?*”

“Just *this*: my man Fibbhook caught those boys at the smeltery, along with that bratty girl they follow like puppies. They were sneaking around the stairs by my office just a few days ago. At night!”

“They were merely getting a tour from Orli.”

“Oh really?” crowed Bindlestiff. “Well, one of your Dwarf friends was here at the Stoat the other night and let slip to some of my workers that they had caught the younglings *that very same night*, just after they broke into my office. Do you deny it?”

Crumble stared at his brothers—he knew one of them had too much ale and blabbed, but there was nothing to be done. The die was cast, yet he said nothing in their defense.

“Your silence is as good as proof, Dwarf!” triumphed Bindlestiff. “Ah look, there’s Sheriff Forgo. *Forgo!* Over here, man!”

The Sheriff slowly ambled up, already knowing that this wasn’t a good scene. “What can I do for you gentlemen?”

“Just this, lawman. We have proof that the Dwarf boy Orli and Winderiver’s lad broke into my office. And my office was subsequently burgled, and valuable papers stolen from my vault.”

“Well, it’s not exactly *proof*,” drawled Forgo slowly.

“It’s probable cause! That’s all I need” roared Bindlestiff. “Mayor, do something!”

“I’m afraid he’s right, Sheriff. As Mayor and chief magistrate of Thimble Down, it’s my official duty to instruct you to arrest those boys on sight.”

“And that bratty girl!” chided the fuming smelter.

“Yes, I’m afraid Miss Cheeryup Tunbridge must also be brought in for questioning, Sheriff.”



“She’s but a wee girl, Mayor,” pleaded Dorro, though to no avail. He looked to Forgo as if this were some sort of cruel joke, but saw the grave look on his friend’s face. “Please, Mr. Bindlestiff, these are just children!”

“They are thieves and scofflaws. I expect to see wanted posters up around Thimble Down by daybreak, Forgo, and that little witch in your gaol. Are we in accord, Mayor?”

“Make it so, Sheriff. This is out of my hands.”

About the table were a quite a collection of sad, miserable faces—Dwarf and Halfling alike. Except for one who was grinning quietly to himself.

Little, however, did the gloating Bindlestiff know how lucky he was. Were it not for the presence of the Sheriff, several folks, including a handful of Northern battle-Dwarves, would have leapt up and thrashed him within an inch of his life. It would be doubtful he would have smiled after that—nor been able to for several months.

\* \* \*

Orli and Wyll crept through the village in the moonless night, making their way towards Cheeryup’s burrow. It wasn’t late, but neither wanted to be spied—they were enjoying their status as dangerous runaways far too much. They tapped on the Tunbridge’s door, but no one answered.

“That’s a bit odd. At this time of night, Cheery would be home tending her mother,” mused Wyll. “I hope everything is okay with the old girl—she makes the best muffins in Thimble Down.”

“All is *not* well, Master Wyll,” said a creaky little voice in the darkness, causing Wyll and Orli to leap a foot in the air. “’Tis only me, lads. Just poor Dalbo.”

“You scared the tar out of us, Mr. Dalbo!” said Wyll, clutching his chest. “What happened?”

“*Erm*, yon friend Cheeryup is, sad to say, a guest in Sheriff Forgo’s gaol.”

“*Wha..?*” screamed the boy as quietly as possible.

“’Tis true. She was detained for stealing the contents of Mr. Bindlestiff’s safe. And I fear there’s a warrant for the arrest of ye boys as well.”

Orli leapt in, “We never stole anything!”

“But rumor says you were caught trying to break in,” continued Dalbo Dall. “The general thinking is that ye went back a second time and were successful.”

“But Mr. Dalbo—this was all your idea! You told us to do it!” cried Wyll.

“I did suggest going to Bindlestiff’s office, and truly I carry some guilt about that fact. I never should have interfered.” The village wanderer looked sullen in the dim, reflected light of the

evening. “Nor did I foresee the Sheriff hauling the poor girl to gaol and her all ballin’ and cryin’. Maybe I should go back to me woods for a while and stop being such a nosey busybody.”

“Mr. Dalbo, you’re up to your neck in this! And where’s Mrs. Tunbridge?”

“Ach, she’s still in the hands of the Grippe, so Nurse Pym moved her to an infirmary she’s set up. There are now twenty Thimble Downers in the same sad state. Now, I’ll just be moseying along ...”

“No you won’t—grab him, Orli” The giant Dwarf boy clamped his meaty hands on Dalbo’s shoulders. “We have a mission first.”

“And what be that, young Master Wyll? *Oooch*, yer squeezing me shoulders too hard!”

“You’re coming with us to crack Cheeryup out of gaol. Right now!” The look on Wyll’s face was grim and set.

“Oh poor Dalbo! Why do I always get myself into these messes,” moaned the tiny vagabond as Wyll and Orli lead him down the lane in the darkness, their hands firmly clamped on each arm.

There was going to be a gaolbreak!

## The Fugitives

Sheriff Forgo's snoring could have woken the dead.

Wyll, Orli, and Dalbo were crouching outside a dimly lit window by the gaol, discussing ways to break in and purloin Cheeryup, who was stewing in a back cell.

"This is gonna be easy!" laughed Wyll. "Ol' Forgo is right unconscious and ain't gonna wake 'til morning. I've been in his gaol before, and it's a lark to break free."

"If you say so, Wyll. I've never done this before."

The Dwarf boy was nervous, but Wyll's carefree demeanor proved reassuring.

"In that case, you won't be needing little Dalbo." The wanderer stood and made to leave before Wyll and Orli grabbed his filthy jacket and pulled him down again. "*Oooch!* I ain't made of stone, you know! Dalbos can break if you mishandle 'em!"

"You got us into this mess, Dalbo, and you'll be the one to fix it!" snarled the normally placid Wyll.

"Meaning what, young sir?" demanded the tiny Halfling.

"Meaning that you'll sneak in there with us to get our Cheeryup out! You get the key from Forgo's belt and meet me in the back. Understand?"

"I'm no thief, Master Wyll!"

"You're a troublemaker, Dalbo, that's what you are. You will do as I say, or I will tell everyone in the village that you've given up the drink and don't need their extra pennies anymore. Then you'll have to get a job like everyone else!"

"Why, *yer* a nasty boy, Wyll Underfoot! Crafty, too, just like yer uncle," fumed Dalbo Dall. "But I appreciate your wily nature—ye be a sneaky fox like Dorro, and that's an admirable trait when yer in a pinch. So I'll tell you what; I'll pinch thems bleedin' keys, but then I'll be off like a shot. What ye do after that is no o' my business! Ol' Dalbo is a wily fox, too, and before you know it, I'll vanish into the woods. Deal?"

Wyll extended his hand in the near-darkness.

"*Deal.*"

\* \* \*

Their first stumbling block was the door to the gaol. Forgo had locked it before falling asleep, which was unusual for him; normally the gaol was open all day and night. For a moment, Wyll was afraid that the Sheriff had been expecting a breakout, but shook that idea away. Fortunately, he knew a fine lock picker, and that person was crouching next to him.

“Orli, didja bring that tool with you?”

Wyll could see Orli smiling in the dark, as he fished something out of his pocket. He quietly attacked the lock, twisting and jabbing the long, thin tool into the slot.

*Click. Clack. Click-clack!*

Orli quickly held his finger to his lips and squeezed on the knob. Gently the door swung inwards by a few inches. Happily, they still heard Sheriff Forgo sawing away in his sleep. Wyll cocked his head at Dalbo and disappeared into the pitch-black interior; the wanderer reluctantly followed while Orli stood watch outside.

Inside, everything moved like clockwork. Dalbo stole through the darkness and gently lifted the keys off Sheriff Forgo’s belt. Indeed, the vagabond was so light and soft on his toes that he moved without making a sound; for a second, Wyll wondered if he were the Pie Thief. No question, if it wasn’t for the drink and laziness, Dalbo would have been a formidable criminal, he figured.

Moments later, the diminutive being crept into the hall leading to cells in the back and handed the keys to Wyll, holding them tightly so they didn’t tinkle and make noise. “Good lad,” was all that Dalbo whispered before he turned on a penny and disappeared back out the front door.

True to his word, Dalbo Dall was gone, slipping down the lane. To a casual bystander, this shadow would appear no more than a cat going for a midnight ramble. Within minutes, Dalbo was off into the Great Wood where he planned to stay until things cooled down in the village.

Back in the gaol, Wyll continued with his plan. He snuck further into the building, listening with each step. He heard light breathing in the back and instantly knew that Cheeryup was asleep. This tousle-headed boy was also light on his feet, nimbly dodging a bench and a tray of dirty dinner plates on the floor—the remains of his friend’s supper.

He deftly unlocked her cell and moved to her bedside as softly as possible. “Cheery!” he whispered in the dark. “Cheery, it’s me, Wyll!”

In a heartbeat, Wyll saw her eyes reflecting in the dark.

“Took you long enough! Is Orli here, too?”

“That’s gratitude for ya,” said Wyll, knowing how sharp Cheeryup Tunbridge’s tongue could be. “Yes, he’s outside on guard.”

“Do you have a plan at least?”

“Of course, we do! We’re runaway adventurers, Orli ‘n’ me. A-course we have a plan!” snarked Wyll, not sure if he really did have a plan or not. “But we have to move.”

“One more thing, Wyll Underfoot!” the girl snapped.

“*What?* We don’t have much time ...” Wyll felt Cheeryup give him a big, wet kiss on the cheek and an even bigger squeeze.

“Thank you, Wyll. You are my *best* friend, you know.” Wyll was glad she couldn’t see him blushing in the dark. “Okay, let’s go.”

The pair turned to leave the cell when a match ignited in the adjoining cell. Wyll and Cheeryup watched the match move in the air and touch the wick of a candle. A hand lifted the candlestick in the air as if by ghostly magic and came towards them. The younglings clasped hands in fear as the flame moved closer and closer, another hand pushing the cell door open and floating towards theirs.

Finally, the light illuminated a face in the dark, the one they’d completely forgotten about in the adventures. A sound cut through the shadows, the leery voice of a man-child who’d been suddenly awakened and sounded grumpy: “What the heck are you two doing here?”

In the same breath, Wyll and Cheeryup both gasped, “*Gadget Pinkle!*”

In all his haste, Wyll had forgotten about the deputy. The jig was up.

## Snatched

“What the heck are you doing here?” Gadget was miffed at being awakened by a noisy gaolbreak. “Good gravy, it must be past midnight.”

“Ummm ... we’re visiting the prisoner?” said Wyll, clearly short on ideas.

“Inside the cell? With the Sheriff’s stolen keys in your hands?” Perhaps not the smartest deputy in the world, Gadget was finally catching on. “You’re trying to bust yer chum out, ain’t ya?”

Wyll and Cheeryup looked awkwardly at each other. It was the latter who spoke first: “You’re right, Gadget. Wyll can’t stand having me incarcerated, so he came to free me. It’s the truth, I swear!”

“And I bet the Dwarf boy is outside standing guard. *I*’s right, ain’t I?”

“You are, Gadget,” said Wyll sadly. “I ’spose you’re going to lock us all up now.”

“It would make my life easier t’were I did,” mused the razor-thin deputy, rising from his bunk. “And ol’ Forgo would think his Gadget a top-notch lawman, maybe as good as his esteemed Bosco. I hear about that bloke every day, I do.”

“Well, Bosco was one of a kind,” noted the girl. “You have big shoes to fill, Gadget, but you’ll get there in time. I know you will.”

“That’s alright, Miss, but I’ll make my own pair of shoes. I don’t wanna be Bosco, Part Two anyway. I’m Gadget, Part One, if you catch my meaning.”

“I think we do,” nodded Wyll. “Do you want me to get Orli back here and you can lock us all up together? I promise not to make a run for it, not with Cheery still here. I’ll take my lumps this time.”

“No *you won’t*, young man.” Gadget sounded serious, as if he were going to lose his temper.

“Beg pardon?” Wyll and Cheeryup were both confused.

“Get going, you silly geese! And be quick about it or the Sheriff will wake up.”

“You mean you’re letting us go, Gadget?” The younglings were flummoxed.

“Of course, you ninnies,” laughed Deputy Pinkle, folding his arms and relaxing. “I know you didn’t steal anything from that nasty ol’ Bindlestiff. I ain’t as dumb as I look, and further, I know that three kids couldn’t burglar ol’ Bindler right under his big, fat nose. Even if you did, there are guards on duty at all times in the smeltery—they’d have stopped you for sure. Nah, I think it were an inside job, like. Maybe that rotter Fibbhook.”

“*Why would Fibbhook steal the papers?*” wondered Cheeryup, but suddenly they all noticed something else—Sheriff Forgo had stopped snoring.

“*Gadget!* Who in St. Borgo’s name are you talking to back there?” It was a sleepy, groggy Sheriff, howling from the front office.

“No one, Sheriff, just prattling on to myself,” lied Gadget. “I like to pretend I’m an actor onstage—right now, I’m a Battle Dwarf about to fight a pack o’ goblins!”

“Good grief. Just watch the prisoner and keep yer trap shut,” grumbled Forgo. “I bet those boys are miles away by now, but just in case, keep your eyes peeled.” They heard the Sheriff flop back on his cot and roll to his other side. A few loud snores and grunts followed.

“Look, little Miss, you and yer pals should skedaddle before Forgo comes back here himself. Pop out the back door and get your Dwarf friend. *Skooch!*”

“Thanks mate—we owe ya one!” was all Wyll said as he grabbed Cheeryup’s hand and dragged her from the cell. Within seconds they were out the door, had found Orli, and were bolting back towards the river, running and laughing in the darkness.

Meanwhile, Gadget Pinkle waited in the dark until he heard Sheriff Forgo’s snoring settle to a steady rhythm. “Ach, he probably won’t even remember this in the morning,” mused a satisfied Gadget. “But just in case, I need to prepare my alibi.”

At that, the deputy picked up a ceramic mug and cracked it soundly over his own noggin. Mission accomplished, the red-headed deputy slumped back down on the bunk, blissfully unconscious for the rest of the night.

\* \* \*

“Where are we going, boys?” Cheeryup was pleased to be out of gaol, but less sanguine about heading off into the woods in the dark.

“*Oooo*, we have something special to show you!” crowed Wyll.

“Maybe you do, Wyll Underfoot, but you have some apologies to make first!” The girl was mad, even in the dark.

“For what?”

“For running off and leaving me alone, you nincompoop,” raged Cheeryup. “I had no idea where you and Orli went off to, but you left me to fend for my mother, not to mention Mr. Dorro, who looks like he’s about to cry whenever I see him.”

“Good!” snapped the sandy haired boy. “That’s what he gets for calling me a thief and a liar.”

“I’ll grant you that Mr. Dorro was a little harsh on you that evening, but you need a little more backbone,” she ribbed. “Stop being so sensitive! Wyll, I’m sorry you lost your mother and I

know Mr. Dorro can be difficult at times—if not exasperating—but he means well and provides for you very nicely. For pity’s sake, you live in the nicest burrow in Thimble Down!”

“Yeah, I guess that’s true,” moped the boy.

“That’s because it *is* true, Wyll Underfoot,” said Cheeryup, who always called her friend by his full name when she irked with him. “And don’t think I’m not ticked at you too, Orli!”

The hulking Dwarf lad averted his eyes from Cheeryup’s fiery gaze. “Now, tell me about your discovery.”

“We’re almost here, so we’ll just show it to you.” The trio stumbled down the embankment to the edge of the River Thimble and kept jogging northward at a steady pace.

“Here!” shouted Wyll as he and Orli began removing brush. They found a few cinders still hot and quickly relit their brands. The boys headed deeper into the cave, and Cheeryup followed, ducking into the fissure after them.

“*Oh my ...*” For the first time in about an hour, the girl had run out of things to say.

“You know what this is, right?” asked Wyll. “Orli found it when he was rooting around in the cave.” The Dwarf boy grinned with pride.

“It’s the Pie Thief’s cache, isn’t it?” said Cheeryup meekly. “This is a major breakthrough, boys. Look—there’s Mrs. Fowl’s pie tins, Dowdy Cray’s wagon axle, and even the dress my mum sewed!”

“He was a busy one, weren’t he?” added Orli. “This is my Uncle Wump’s drinking flask and Uncle Two-Toes’ pocket knife!”

“What are we going to do?” chimed in Wyll.

“We could do two things.” Cheeryup put her hand to her chin and looked serious. “Either we can stake out the cave and try to catch the Pie Thief ourselves, or we can go tell the Sheriff and have him do the dirty work.”

“But what if ol’ Bindlestiff’s papers are here. Shouldn’t we snatch those for ourselves and go show ’em to Uncle Dorro?”

“That’s a longshot, Wyll. We don’t know if the Pie Thief actually stole them and if he—or she—did, it may take days to find it in all this mess.”

*Crash!*

The children froze in place as they heard a thundering noise in the front of the cave. Then shouts—they knew they were no longer alone. “Get them ruddy kids!” bellowed a hoarse, echoey voice, followed by thundering footsteps that reverberated off the hard stone walls. “They’re in this bleedin’ cave somewhere; check every nook ’n’ cranny.”

Wyll, Cheeryup and Orli began looking for an escape route, but seeing nothing, Wyll stepped up to the girl and whispered in her ears: “Hide!”



Cheeryup shook her head no, but his eyes blazed with violent intensity, so she dashed to a corner and covered herself with some of the Pie Thief's stolen clothing and concealed herself deep under the pile.

A greasy head poked through the chasm opening. "In here, boss! We got 'em!" A moment later, several other Halflings scrambled through the hole, including one they recognized: Fibbhook, the evil foreman at Bindlestiff's Smelting Works.

"Ain't this a purty picture—two rotten kids and their treasure, all neat in a bundle. Good work tracking 'em, boys. These rats are the Pie Thieves, and now we can bring 'em back to Sheriff Forgo for their crimes. But first we'll have a look around and see if that bratty girl is here. And we can grab a few treasures for ourselves, too. Find that lass!"

The tough workers from the smeltery fanned out and started poking through the stolen goods. "She's not here!" yelled Wyll, "Cheeryup bolted when she saw the cave—said she weren't going into any dirty hole in the wall. Plus she had no idea Orli and I are the Pie Thieves." For his part, Orli said nothing and just looked at his feet in shame. "How did you find us anyway?" wondered Wyll.

"Oh, my spies have been following you rats for days," snarled Fibbhook. "We knew you had run away from yer precious Uncle Dorro, but hoped you would lead us to the location of Mr. Bindlestiff's stolen papers. Rest assured, we'll turn this cave upside down to find 'em. Now you two sit on the ground and shut yer gobs. When we're ready to go, we'll tie you and march you back to the gaol. Sheriff Tubby-Guts will be more than pleased to see you and hold you lot over for trial. And Mr. Bindlestiff will give us each a raise for bringing you in."

An hour later, Fibbhook and his henchmen had ransacked the stolen treasure and picked out a few easily sellable items each. They failed to find the missing papers, nor did they discover Cheeryup, who had burrowed even deeper into the pile. The gang finally grabbed the boys and hauled them off into the night and ultimately to the Thimble Down gaol. Finally, they'd adjourn to the Hanging Stoat for some beers and chops to celebrate.

\* \* \*

After a quarter hour, a pile of clothing stirred in the rear of the darkened cave, seemingly of its own volition. A small girl emerged and began to make her way out of the chasm. There was more—under that pile of clothes she had found a canvas satchel containing a sheaf of pages. It was too dark to know exactly what they contained, but Cheeryup had a hunch; she was fairly certain she clasped Mr. Bindlestiff's stolen documents to her chest as she began making her way home.

In the pocket of her dress was yet another clue, this one a bit more mysterious. In time, however, she felt it might help lead her to the real Pie Thief.

## Cheeryup Alone

“There you go, Sheriff—lock, stock, and barrel!” Hiram Bindlestiff was strutting around the gaol like a peacock, preening for the Mayor, Osgood Thrip, Crumble, Aramina, and Mr. Dorro. “You have the thieves, the evidence, and the location of their secluded hideout. These two rascals have been ravaging Thimble Down, and now deserve nothing less than exile. Or a good, old-fashioned hanging!”

“Have you gone mad, Bindlestiff? They’re just children!” roared Dorro, his mind reeling with the implications. “We don’t hang criminals in Thimble Down anyway.”

“I think exile sounds more than fair,” noted Thrip. “It’s better than chopping their fingers off; why, that was how we treated thieves back in my day. Mayor, it’s your duty as chief magistrate—”

“Hold on, you’re not chopping my Wyll’s fingers off, nor are you exiling him!” snarled the bookmaster. “You have not conducted a proper trial, and secondly, you found him in the place where the Pie Thief kept his loot. You didn’t catch him or Orli in the act of theft.”

“And secondly,” piped up Aramina, “If either of you harm me nephew, I will take my dirk and filet you like a fresh trout. Belly first!”

That effectively shut Bindlestiff and Thrip up, as the Sheriff held up a hand.

“Folks, let’s all calm down. No one is cutting anything off, and believe it or not, we do have a due process of law in this village. A complaint has been lodged against these two boys; now, the magistrate—our Mayor—has to decide if he wants to build a case for trial. That will take at least a month. For now, the boys will stay here for a day or two and thence be eligible for bail. Is that clear?”

“*Phooey!* I wanted to gut these two blithering idiots and make ’em cry,” moaned Aramina in genuine disappointment.

“Can I see my boy?” begged Crumble, followed by Dorro, who desperately wanted to see Wyll.

“Fraid not, gentlemen,” warned Forgo. “These lads need to be questioned first, and that will take at least a day. I will be done with them by this time tomorrow, but rest assured, I will take good care of them.”

That answer didn't seem to appease anyone except the Mayor, who realized that Forgo had saved his neck yet again and thought it might be time to give the lawman a meager raise in gratitude. If he won the election, of course.

As the mob departed, Dorro was still incredulous. "I can't believe Wyll is the Pie Thief, Forgo. It's ridiculous."

"I know that, and *you* know that, Winderiver, but they were caught in the villain's lair. I assume they were discovered as they were running away. That's a hard-headed boy you have there."

"He's much like his mother in that way—and perhaps me as well," said Dorro sheepishly. "No one could tell Siobhán what to do, and it's the same with Wyll. When faced with problems, his solution is often the same as hers—to simply run away. Dashed fools!"

"Give me a day to sort them out, by which time you can have yer lil' rascal back. And be kind this time! Maybe he won't run off." That last remark stung, but that's how Forgo had intended it. It was time for Dorro to stop whipping the boy into a rabid lather. "Now, do you know where the girl is?"

"Cheeryup? No sign of her either. I'm going to her burrow to find any signs of her, but she may still be in the forest. Wyll is very good at hiding her and surely wouldn't tell me where she is. They're quite crafty, those two."

"Well, I need some lunch, so let's meet up later at the Stoat to compare notes. Six o'clock ... and don't be late!"

\* \* \*

*Go away!* Cheeryup yelped in her head, while a frustrated Dorro knocked on the front door of the darkened Tunbridge burrow. *As much as I'd like to let you in, Mr. Dorro, I cannot trust you at the moment. Not while Wyll is in gaol and there are so many loose ends!*

The girl was huddled in the back room of her mother's burrow, where she'd been hiding since the wee hours of the night. The past hours were a blur, especially the part about being rescued from gaol by Wyll and Orli, an act—shockingly—abetted by deputy Gadget Pinkle. She was dragged off to the river cave, whereupon the boys brought her to the Pie Thief's lair. If that wasn't staggering enough, the subsequent invasion of the cave by Fibbhook and his cronies was the capper.

*No, the capper was when they took Wyll and Orli and threw them in gaol. They had the nerve to call the boys the Pie Thieves, as if they comprised some sort of joint criminal enterprise. Pure nonsense! Fibbhook will pay for this, I swear!* Cheeryup was incensed by the actions against her friends and swore revenge. *Now, I just need Mr. Dorro to go away. I can't speak to him now.*

Fortunately, the bookmaster took the cue and wandered off. He'd even tried the door, but Cheeryup had soundly locked herself in the night before. She had some food, and intentionally left the curtains pulled tight and had lit a small fire in the far-back bedroom where no one would see smoke rising from its chimney.

To all outside appearances, the Tunbridge burrow was cold and empty, the mother lying unconscious in Nurse Pym's infirmary and the ne'er-do-well daughter off on some lark. But inside the lodging lurked the brilliant mind of young Cheeryup Tunbridge, and for the foreseeable future, she planned on using it as her secret headquarters. The thought mildly thrilled her.

Working quickly in the back room, Cheeryup cleared off a table and dropped the satchel containing the papers she had found the night before. Before beginning, she dashed off to the kitchen to find some sustenance and located a wedge of cheddar cheese and freshly picked apples in the larder. That and a tin cup of water would suffice for the moment.

She opened the fabric bag and pulled out the papers within. It took Cheeryup only a few seconds to realize she'd hit upon a pot of gold. While the words on these parchment pages didn't mean anything to her, the ink drawings and diagrams clearly indicated something about the black stones and how to burn them in a furnace or stove.

More disturbing were a few pages in the back containing crude pictograms, these ones of Halflings, Men, and other creatures, but all of them sick and dying. The images were horrific and sad, with ailing folk emitting smoke from their lungs, lying on streets in agony, or twisted up in spasms of intense pain in bed. Cheeryup knew these pages contained proof that the black stones used at Bindlestiff's Smelting Works were causing the Grippe and all its ensuing sickness and death.

The girl wanted to rush to Mr. Dorro and tell him all about it, but she feared his temper and didn't know if he'd cast her off to gaol as well. She put her hands in her pocket and felt something strange, but knew what it was instantly. Cheeryup pulled a clump of hair from the pocket and examined it.

There was something about the lock of hair that bothered her, but she could not put her finger on it. At that moment, Cheeryup made a decision. She left the hair clump on the table, but stashed the satchel of papers under her mother's mattress where no one would find it. She slipped to the closet, put a heavy shawl around her head, and snuck out a side window.

Cheeryup had someone she needed to speak with.

## The Thief's Mistake

"Oy, Dimple! Over here!"

It was late afternoon, and a bedraggled Sheriff Forgo sat across the table from the equally worn Dorro Fox Winderiver. A moment later, Dimple Hognoddle lumbered over from the bar.

In the months since he'd been fired by the Thrip family and taken on at the Hanging Stroat, the boy had matured greatly. First, he was just washing crockery and sweeping floors, but now had moved on to taking orders and pulling pints on occasion, as well as some basic bookkeeping after hours.

"Gimme a big black-and-tan; Winderiver will have a small honeygrass whiskey. And bring us some bread and cheese, too." Dimple toddled off to the bar. "He's doing well here, I've heard. You should be pleased."

"I know Wyll and Cheeryup did everything they could to get him a job here—they may have washed a few dishes themselves to grease Mungo up!" Dorro laughed, but missed his young friends and frowned. He and Forgo each pulled out their pipes, tamped down the Old Nob tobacco, and lit them. In moments, they were each floating in a sea of fragrant smoke—not the acidic effluence of the smeltery, but the sweet, tangy aroma of nicely aged leaf.

"So where are we, Sheriff? Is this case making any sense to you? *Ah*, thank you, Dimple." The serving boy suddenly arrived with the drinks and food, and Dorro slipped a coin into his hand as he departed.

"I was unconscious for half of it, so I'm making up for lost time now. All I know is that we have no idea who killed Wump; a squad of Battle Dwarves are hanging around the village; and there are two lads in the gaol who some claim are, jointly, the Pie Thief. And if those boys are the thieves, I'm Osgood Thrip!"

Dorro smirked, but knew it was all true. "So what did you find out from the lads this afternoon? Anything of use?"

"Not much. Just that they are innocent and stumbled onto the stolen goods, which is pretty much what I thought anyway. To the cave I also sent Gadget, Farmer Duck, and about half a dozen other Thimble Downers I can trust. They will retrieve everything and bring it back to the gaol. But that doesn't tell us who the thief was nor anything else of value. Wyll even said if I let them go, they'd go get the answer, but that's all they told me. I think they're planning something anyway, but that's just my instinct. What's the matter?"

“Sheriff, do you have anyone guarding Wyll and Orli at the moment?”

“I sent Gadget to the cave and locked them boys in myself,” said Forgo with confidence.

Dorro buried his face in his hands and shook his head. Red faced, he spoke quietly. “I could kick myself. Why was I such a fool? I should have spoken to Wyll today—he’s still mad at me, and knowing him, won’t deign to spend any more time in your gaol cell, Forgo. No offense, but you could clean every once in a while for your guests!”

“They’re prisoners! I don’t clean for them lowlives!” Forgo bellowed.

“Those lowlives are Wyll and his friend!” countered Dorro. “And that boy is the nephew of some Battle Dwarves who aren’t too fond of you anyway.”

“What’s your point?”

“My point is that your gaol isn’t the most pleasant place to reside, especially for my hard-headed nephew. So what do you think he’s going to do, my dear Sheriff?”

The candle in Forgo’s head flickered to life. “*Oh*. They’re going to break out again, aren’t they.”

“My guess is that they’ve already done so and are now making their way into the Great Wood. Moreover, when Aramina—that is, Malachite Molly—discovers her favorite nephew Orli has flown the coop, she may have a few choice words to share with you. Do you understand now?”

Sheriff Forgo stared into his beer for a second and chugged it down in a few gulps. He stood, grabbed some bread and cheese, and threw a few coins on the table. “I may have bungled this one, Winderiver.”

Forgo rarely apologized, and this was one of those rare occasions. “Sheriff, I’d say *we* bungled it, just as we have every step of this case. It’s time for us to get serious and start putting the pieces together.”

“And how do we do that?”

Dorro knocked back his honeygrass whiskey and tapped his chin with his free hand.

“We find Cheeryup!”

\* \* \*

“Hello? Hello, Mr. Timmo?”

Cheeryup Tunbridge removed her hood as she entered the Timmo & Sons metalsmith shop. Of course, that was the sign created by Mr. Timmo’s father, Old Timmo. He died years ago, and his other son left the village to find his fortune elsewhere. So, despite the swinging sign outside, the shop had been inhabited solely by the current Timmo, a gifted artisan. Dorro also bought all his fishing lures from the fellow.

“Who’s there?” A thin, slightly stooped figure emerged from the back room and scanned the dusty shop. By the way he was wiping his mouth, Cheeryup assumed that she had interrupted his luncheon.

“Sorry to intrude, Mr. Timmo. It’s me, Cheeryup.”

“Why so it is. Welcome my dear—I don’t see you here very often.” Timmo was pleased at the interruption. “And how’s your mother doing? I’m very concerned.”

“Aye, she has the Grippe quite badly. I visit her in Pym’s new infirmary every day, but she just sleeps and sleeps; I sometimes wonder if she’ll ever come out of it.”

“So who’s taking care of you while she’s unwell?”

“Ummm, Mr. Dorro has taken me under his wing,” lied the child. “I’m doing well.”

Timmo moved a little closer and pushed his wire glasses further up his nose so he could get a good look at her. “Come sit here, child. Let us talk.”

The girl did as he bade, but with a hint of trepidation. In some ways, the quiet Halfling intimidated her, perhaps for what he didn’t say as much as for what he did. But Cheeryup could sense his active mind, probing the words that came from her mouth. She’d have to be careful.

“So you say Dorro is taking care of you. That’s well and good. Of course he would. Now, what can I do for you?”

“I found something, and I don’t know what to do with it.”

“I see. I gather it’s an object of some importance. But why come to me and not Mr. Dorro? Did you have a ... *falling out*?” Timmo, as usual, was dead on point.

“Not exactly, but my friend Wyll Underfoot did, and that’s where my doubt arose. I don’t know who to talk to.”

“I have heard something about Wyll and his Dwarf friend running into some mischief. And knowing Dorro, he lashed the boy with his oft all-too-sharp tongue. Let me guess—your Wyll has run off or is sitting in Forgo’s gaol at the moment. I say, it’s right of Dorro to take a firm hand with the lad, but sometimes he takes it too far. Or more likely, perhaps he and Wyll are too much alike and share a common stubbornness.”

“I might agree with you, sir.”

“Why, thank you,” said Timmo with a wink. He knew how bright this young lady was and knew himself he had to tread carefully or he’d spook her off. “So what is this object you speak of? Come now, child—I won’t run and tell Mr. Dorro.”

“I have found some important papers.”

“Ah, I have heard that the lair of the Pie Thief had been found by Fibbhook, up in a cave by the river. But they didn’t find *you*. How clever! However did you do it?” Timmo was enthralled by this young adventuress, but kept his face as bland and neutral as possible.



"I hid under some old moldy clothing in the cave and waited until Fibbhook's thugs had cleared out. Then I went—"

"*Home.* Let us clear the air, young Miss Tunbridge. You are not staying with Mr. Dorro; you are, in fact, hiding in your own family burrow."

"How did you know?" Cheeryup stood and prepared to flee. "I must go!"

"Sit, child—I told you before that I wouldn't run and squeal to Dorro. Please trust me in this small matter." The yellow-haired girl stared at him for a second and took her seat. "Now, these documents. They're Bindlestiff's, aren't they?"

She nodded and a tear ran down her cheek. It was followed by several more until Cheeryup could no longer hold back the torrent and let them fall like rain. Timmo supplied her with a handkerchief and waited patiently. Finally, he spoke:

"Do they incriminate Bindlestiff as much as I'd expect they would?"

"I believe they do, Mr. Timmo," Cheeryup said boldly, finally wiping away the last of her tears. "It's in another language—Dwarfish perhaps—but the drawings and pictograms are evidence enough that the black stones they burn at the smeltery cause an illness. I assume this is the Grippe."

"It's very dangerous that you have these pages in your possession. Although you are loathe to do it, you should tell Mr. Dorro. Even though he acts rashly sometimes, he would have the presence of mind to know how important these parchment pages are. Do you have them with you?"

"No, I hid them in my mother's burrow before I came here."

"Oh dear. *Oh dear!*" Timmo's face grew pale. "I suggest we make haste back to your burrow right now. Quick child, wrap that shawl around your face, and let's fly!"

\* \* \*

Not five minutes later, the two stood inside the Tunbridge home, surveying the wreckage left by the thief. Chairs were knocked over and drawers spilled open. Again, tears of sorrow ran down Cheeryup's cheeks, while Mr. Timmo merely shook his head. "He got them, didn't he?"

"Yes," sobbed the girl. "The papers were hidden under my mother's mattress, and he found them. And now the evidence is gone!"

"Is there anything else missing?"

Cheeryup looked thoughtful for a minute and lit up. "Why ... yes! He took a jumble of hair I found in the cave and had left on this table. And look—he left us something in return."

“Why, are those pie crumbs?” Timmo was bewildered. “I could see Fibbhook or another of his henchmen stealing those papers—they could bankrupt poor old Bindlestiff. But why did the Pie Thief break in and take them back? Does he plan to blackmail Bindlestiff?”

Timmo was just as shocked when Cheeryup laughed and threw her head back triumphantly. “I don’t know why he took them, but I know exactly *who* he is. You fool, Mr. Pie Thief! It was a mistake to take your lock of hair back!”

Cheeryup laughed again and was beaming with excitement. “Don’t worry, Mr. Timmo—I can take care of it from here!”

And Timmo smiled, nodding in agreement, for he knew she absolutely would.

## Northward

“So how are we gonna break out of here? We don’t have the key anymore.”

Orli was exasperated and tired.

“I broke out of there once before, and it was a piece of, dare I say, *pie*,” said Wyll. “I just kicked the old rotted bars out. But Ol’ Forgo has replaced ’em, he has.”

Orli leapt up on the cot and began shaking the bars. “Looks like they still have some play in them, Wyll. Tell me again how you did it—you just hung from the rafters and kept kicking.”

“Yep, but I ain’t strong enough knock out these bars—the frame is fresh wood and mortar.”

“Maybe you can’t,” smiled Orli, “But I bet I can. Move over!”

In a second, the stout boy was up on the cot and swinging from the joists, repeatedly kicking the window and its frame with his powerful Dwarf legs. It was brutish work, but each kick seemed to loosen the bars a little more.

Wyll began egging his friend on: “Orli—think about your Uncle Wump getting killed.”

With that, he kicked the bars twice as hard. “Now think about Fibbhook catching us in smeltery.

*Wham!* Another powerhouse kick.

“Think about Wump’s whip coming down on your back. Think about how much it stung from each lash.

“*Rrrrrrrar!*” Now Orli yelled aloud and drew back as far as he could from his hanging position. He delivered a massive kick to the bars, shattering the frame and sending the bars flying out onto the ground.

Wyll clapped him on the back. “Now, let me not make the same mistake twice. When I broke out of here, I forgot to take any food or blankets—let’s remedy that and grab these quilts. And we’ll find some food on our way out of the village. That will keep us living like kings for a few days.”

“But Wyll, where are we going? We can’t go back to the cave,” said Orli as he was gathering up bedding for the journey.

“I say we go north—let’s go to your homeland and try our fortunes there. The Northern Kingdom!”

To Orli, this sounded like an absolutely brilliant idea. “I’d dearly love to go home. My Pa will be angry, but he’s often peeved with me. I’ll just tell my many relatives we got separated here in

the south. I will have to explain why I have a Halfling with me, but we'll cross that cavern later. We can also talk to the Seer."

"Who's that?"

"She's the wisest Dwarf of all, one who knows all and sees all. The Seer will know what causes your Grippe. You could find the cure and return to Thimble Down a hero."

Wyll shook his friend's hand eagerly. At that, the two boys bounded out of the shattered window frame, and carrying a few quilts, sped northward towards the Great Wood and beyond. Orli was excited to be going home and Wyll Underfoot felt he was about to go on the adventure of a lifetime.

In a heartbeat, they were gone.

\* \* \*

Dorro and Forgo were conferring in front of the gaol the next morning, both feeling sheepish over the boys' escape. "It was so obvious," groaned the Sheriff. "Why didn't I think it was coming? Anyway, I have yet another window to replace."

"And once again, I shall bear the burden of cost," said Dorro. "It won't be the first, nor the last time, I'm afraid."

"There you two are!" Both Halflings turned around to see Aramina Wump—aka, Malachite Molly—and a few of her Battle Dwarves stomping down the lane. Crumble was there, too, already looking apologetic for her behavior.

"Sheriff! Where's my husband's killer? I want answers!" Aramina was in a snit.

"We're doing everything in our power, Mrs. Wump," tried Forgo, but the Dwarf cut him off.

"I don't want excuses—I want his head or his feet or whatever part of him you catch. Even better if the weasel's alive, then I can take care of him myself."

"That's not allowed in Thimble Down—I'm the law here and I will see that justice is made."

"We'll see about that, Sheriff. If I catch 'im, I'll deal with him the Dwarf way!" For effect, she pulled a large dagger out of her belt and grinned.

Crumble jumped in, "She will, you know. Aramina doesn't give a hoot for Halfling laws; she lives and fights on the frontiers with her own rules, so I would suggest you find the murderer soon or she will find him for you. And I might have to help her—he was my brother after all."

Crumble gave Dorro an imploring look, as if trying to get him to urge Forgo along faster. They both knew the sooner they found the murderer, the less chance blood would again flow in Thimble Down.

## Back to the Library

Dorro was sitting at his desk in the mostly empty library going over accounts, when the door opened and a small hooded figure entered.

The bookmaster checked his pocket watch as if he'd been counting the minutes. "I've been waiting for you, young lady."

"Oh drat! How did you know, Mr. Dorro?" Cheeryup doffed her hood and frowned. "I was so hoping to outwit you for once."

"I'm sorry, my dear, but I was watching your burrow last night and wondering where that bit of smoke from the back chimney was coming from," said Dorro grinning. "Of course, I knew it was you—and delightedly so. Of course, you're a wanted outlaw who should be in gaol, so you must still be careful. If anyone pops in here, dive behind the desk."

"Mr. Dorro, I've made everything a hash, haven't I? The boys are gone, and we haven't made any progress solving the mystery of the Grippe."

"You're not the only one. I don't remember as perplexing a case as this, and beyond the sick and ailing, the Dwarves are getting anxious. They want someone to atone for Wump's murder."

"I have a confession to make, too."

Dorro cocked an eyebrow.

"I found Bindlestiff's papers in the Pie Thief's cave."

"That's wonderful!," said Dorro.

"But *wait*—the thief came and stole them out of my burrow, so now they're lost again."

"Drat! Could you make anything out on them?"

"Only that they were in a Dwarf tongue and contained pictures of death and disease from smoke. Now that rotten thief has them in his possession again."

"I must admit that I don't have the foggiest who it is, this mystical Pie Thief," wondered Dorro. "He's tricked us all."

"Not all of us. I know who it is, Mr. Dorro, and *no*, I'm not going to tell you. I'm going to catch him myself!"

"You might get hurt! Are you sure?"

"The rotter broke into my burrow and upset the place. I will have my little revenge. Then you can have him." Dorro could hardly believe these words were coming from a slight twelve-year-old girl with flaxen hair, but there it was.

“Only because it’s *you*, Cheeryup, would I allow you to continue with this adventure. I shall pursue Wump’s killer and the mystery behind the Grippe. Perhaps our trails will eventually merge. Now here, I made you a basket of food this morning—take it—and I’ll drop more off tomorrow. And stay in contact with me. We need to solve our cases and get the boys home.”

Cheeryup gave the bookmaster a quick hug, grabbed the basket, and dashed out of the library with her hood up, while Dorro resumed his work. A few minutes later, Bedminster Shoe entered. “Ah Mr. Dorro, I hope all is well with you. Say—”

“I know what you’re going to ask, Mr. Shoe, and the answer is of course, yes. You may interview me once the investigation is over!” Dorro pretended to fuss over Bedminster Shoe’s insistence that he document each case, but deep down found it deeply flattering. The village scribe had long threatened to publish these works, and secretly, Dorro hoped he someday would. “Actually, Bedminster, you may have a role to play in this mystery—an important one, too.”

The scribe brightened immeasurably. “Oh, Mr. Dorro, I’d be only too honored.”

“Patience, Bedminster, patience. But when I do come seek you, make sure to have your quill and ink at the ready. Speed will be of the essence.”

The scribe nodded, starry eyed, at the prospect of actually participating in an adventure, as his rather mundane life was largely taken up with drawing up contracts, deeds, wills, and other legal documents for his fellow villagers. It didn’t pay much, but that was his gift, owing to his superior handwriting and lettering skills.

Mr. Shoe scuttled off to file some books, pleased as punch, while Dorro resumed pondering his many, many conundrums.

\* \* \*

Well after the sun had set, Cheeryup stole out of her burrow, well-disguised and carrying a satchel. She snuck around the various lanes and alleys of Thimble Down, headed toward her target, a spot in Fell’s Corner. It took her about ten minutes, dodging drunken villagers, stray cats, and a barking dog or two, until she finally reached her destination. The Ghost’s Walk.

The girl knew this spot had once lured the Pie Thief, and she was hoping it would work again. Quickly, she laid out several towels full of blueberry muffins—her mother’s legendary recipe. If this didn’t bring the scoundrel, nothing would, she figured. She scattered the muffins on various windowsills and ledges. Some would be lost to cats and dogs, but one would snag the thief.

Yet instead of staying and waiting for her quarry to arrive, Cheeryup merely left her prizes and disappeared back to her home. As she knew, the villain would soon become apparent enough and then, *revenge*.

## Wolf Pack

“This is the best time of my life!”

Wyll Underfoot had stripped down and jumped into a creek, exhilarated by the pleasure of its cold running current.

His friend Orli laughed, “You do seem to like our Northern way of life. Maybe you are part Dwarf after all!”

The bigger boy leapt into the brisk water, and the youths spent the better part of the late afternoon splashing, washing, and jumping in and out of the chilly stream. For the past several days, Wyll and Orli had trekked ever northwards, surviving on Orli’s expert outdoor skills and Wyll’s none-too-shabby cooking abilities, something he’d quietly picked up from Dorro, though he’d never admit it. He’d been watching his uncle expertly cooking meats, stews, and vegetables, and was surprised how many of those techniques translated to the outdoor campfire.

“I’m getting famished, Orli. I don’t think there’s much rabbit left from lunch?”

“I should take my bow and get busy, since we’ve surely scared all the fish from this creek—and probably the next one, too!” T

Their travels had been blessed with excellent weather and no signs of robbers or goblins. By and large, they hunted all day, tracking game to keep their strength up as they moved northward. Orli was also able to find edible roots and berries to give them sustenance along the way. Wyll was learning a lot from his Dwarf comrade and was more than glad that they’d left the confines of Thimble Down. He regretted leaving on such bad terms with Uncle Dorro. Maybe he’d return some day and put things right, plus he missed Cheeryup—Wyll hoped she’d escaped from Fibbhook in the cave. Knowing her, she did so with ease.

The pair dressed and headed back onto the trail, looking both for supper and a place to camp for the night. They strapped blankets on their backs, as well as basic cooking gear. Both had knives and Orli carried a mighty ash bow and quiver of arrows he’d taken from his father’s burrow back in Thimble Down. Wyll also carried a small fishing rod and lots of extra line and hooks that he’d swiped from the library.

“*There!*” Orli whispered loudly. Just over the rise, a small doe was grazing in the earth-colored gorse and bracken, attentive to the slightest changes in sound and scent that would signal danger. Luckily for the boys, they were downwind of the gentle creature as they crept closer. As Wyll noticed, Dwarves were almost as quiet as Halflings, despite their size. Orli waved him to

hold back as he crept closer to the crest of the hill. He deftly took an arrow and fitted it to his bow, still in the lee of the hillock. He slowly rose on his knees until he could get a clear shot at the animal. Again, fortune was with them, as the doe was faced in the other direction. Wyll watched Orli's determined face. As the boy had told him, they were taught to bring down game in one shot, for two reasons. One to make the animal suffer as little as possible, and two, to make sure they ate. In his world, there was almost no excuse for a missed shot.

*Twang!*

Orli's bow popped, and the arrow disappeared. The Dwarf rose and turned to Wyll, a faint smile on his lips.

"Let us eat, friend."

\* \* \*

An hour later, Wyll was busily cooking venison stew for their supper. Orli had cleaned and dressed the doe and handed the haunches and flank meat to his friend to cook near a stream. With a few herbs he recognized and root vegetables they'd found over the past day, Wyll was creating a gently bubbling feast, while he laid the rest of the doe's flesh on surrounding hot rocks to cook and dry; this, he'd store for them to eat over the next day or two. Theirs was a journey of both walking and constantly looking for their next meal—both were crucial to reaching their goal.

"This is fine food, Wyll. Where did you learn to cook so well?"

"I don't know; I suppose just from watching Uncle Dorro," said the sandy-haired boy with pride. "He loves to eat—actually, he loves anything to do with food—so it's fun to watch him in his kitchen. Dorro doesn't think about what he's doing or use any recipes; he just knows what flavors go together."

"Any band of Dwarf hunters would be proud to have you in their ranks," continued Orli. "We can cook, but not like this. You picked herbs from the ground, and they gave birth to such wondrous flavors. That's like magic to us."

"It's not hard; you just have to know what you're picking. That's thyme and sage in this stew, along with those tuber roots you found—they're like little turnips when you cook 'em."

"We should sleep soon." Orli was looking at the setting sky intently. "Tomorrow, the landscape will become considerably rockier and harder to traverse. There may be rain, too; we've been lucky so far. Is there enough venison to last us for two days? There won't be any fires or fresh meat if it showers upon us."

"It will be close, but we should make it."

"Fine. Let's clean up and rest," said Orli. "I want to move on from these grounds. We're far too exposed for my liking—that is another trick my father taught me."



\* \* \*

“Wyll, arise!”

“*Wha—?*”

“Wake yourself, tom-noddy! We’re being stalked!”

Wyll sat up and saw Orli crouched in a fighting position by the last embers of the fire. “Who is it?”

“I was a fool! We slew the deer and left his remains in the field. Its scent brought others.”

“Others?” asked Wyll quietly.

A single howl pierced the night, sending a shiver down Wyll’s spine. “*Black wolves,*” said Orli without a trace of emotion. “We’re surrounded.”

As if on cue, the boys became aware of the glint of yellow eyes surrounding their camp, as well as the sounds of soft growling.

“Gather up all your bags and pull your knife, Wyll. I’ll build the fire up as much as possible.”

“Why don’t we run for it, Orli? Maybe we can outpace them.”

The Dwarf boy laughed. “If you were the fastest pony, you might have a chance, but a Dwarf and a Halfling against a pack of black wolves would be run down quickly. Our end would not be good. Our best bet is to use fire to ward them off and hope they retreat at dawn, which isn’t far off. Either way, our odds aren’t good.”

Orli quickly set about gathering all the nearby sticks and branches, as did a terrified Wyll. The Dwarf even lit bits of grass, anything to intimidate the wolves. But they did not seem much deterred, inching ever closer.

“We’re going to die, aren’t we?” Wyll was accepting the fact that they were severely outnumbered and underarmed. A shadow loomed out of the darkness, and a big, coal-colored wolf moved closer—he was clearly testing them. It growled a few times, drawing the boys’ attention. It was only at the last second that Orli realized the trick.

“Wyll, look out!” As the big wolf crept closer, two smaller members of the pack snuck up behind them and charged.

Wyll spun around to find one of the creatures springing towards him. The force of its body knocked him down, and its sharp paws dug into his shoulders. With bright yellow teeth, the wolf bit into his shoulder and shook its head violently, tearing muscle. It yelped as Orli drove his big knife into its side and the monster ran off, but the other wolf grabbed Wyll’s ankle and began dragging him away as if a small rabbit.

“*No, you shall not take my friend!*” screamed Orli, as he slashed at the wolf, wounding its neck. It too drew off, but the big black wolf saw its chance and leapt onto the Dwarf boy’s back, knocking him forward onto his knees. It too bit deep, but mostly got a mouthful of his backpack.

Now the rest of the wolf pack pressed in, savaging both boys. Orli spun to face the big wolf and was feebly trying to stab it when a mighty axe sailed through the air and cleaved the beast's ribcage. It howled, ran a few yards, and fell down dead.

To their bewilderment, a rain of black arrows filled the air, impaling wolves left and right, as they screeched and yelped. Orli looked to find Wyll, only to see his unconscious, bloodied body on the ground a few feet away. He crawled over to his friend and did his best to use his own body as a shield, in case a stray arrow flew too close. Around the pair, wolves screamed in death, as more shafts, axes, and hatchets rained death upon the pack.

The last thing Orli saw, as the gray vestiges of dawn were beginning to dance over the horizon, was a pair of thick leather boots approaching him in the faint light.

He blacked out and remembered no more.

## Run to Earth

It was a pleasant-enough morning, Gadget figured. Could be worse. Could be *raining*. Or cold and miserable.

Instead, the sun was peeking out from the clouds, and there was a mild temperature, at least for a deputy's patrol of the village. Gadget Pinkle did this every day, walking a beat around the lanes of Thimble Down under Sheriff Forgo's instructions.

"You do this, boy, and you'll be a seasoned lawman in no time, just like the great Deputy Bosco," he'd say in his deep, gravelly voice.

The red-haired lad frowned. *Honestly, I'm sick of Deputy Bosco*, thought Gadget. *He was a nice feller, but he's a saint in Forgo's eyes and Forgo never stops prattlin' on about him. I'll never be good enough.*

Aside from having to live up to that impossible standard, Gadget rather enjoyed being a deputy. The hours were easy, and the duties none too onerous, 'cept every once in a while when the Sheriff blew his lid.

*But it's better than lifting heavy barrels or driving a wagon*, he figured, plus it put few a few pennies in his pocket every week. Gadget was a creature of simple pleasures.

Suddenly, he heard sounds emanating from his lower stomach.

*Thwarrnnngg! Burrrraappph!*

They were not good sounds—almost like a musician tuning the lowest string of a bass fiddle. A sharp pain shot through his stomach, and he almost doubled over.

"*Ooooch!*" was all he could muster to say.

When the pain subsided, he looked up and spied an empty bench under a nearby maple tree whose leaves were golden and ready to fall. Gadget moved as quickly as he could to get to the bench, just in a case he had to lie down.

*Brannggwwwhhherrrr!*

Another spasm lurched through his gut as he reached the bench and sat down hard. Beads of cold sweat broke out on his forehead, and he felt faint. The deputy suddenly feared that he had the Grippe.

"Don't worry, Gadget. It will pass soon enough."

The young lawman whipped his head to the left, only to observe the curious vision of Miss Cheeryup Tunbridge sitting on the other end of the bench. She hadn't been there a second ago.

“*Whorcher say?*” Gadget grabbed his abdomen again, wincing in pain.

“I said it won’t last long, Gadget. It never does.”

“What doesn’t last long?” The young man still didn’t understand why this girl was sitting next to him with a strange smile on her face. As if she was enjoying his pain.

“Getting poisoned by appleseed oil. It should stop in just a few minutes.”

“And why, young lady—*owwww!* [grabbing his gut again]—would I have appleseed oil poisoning? And pray tell, just what is appleseed oil?”

Gadget was annoyed by now. How dare this bratty child talk to him in his hour of agony and taunt him with riddles. And he let her and her ruddy friends break out of gaol a few days ago, too—how’s *that* for thanks! Maybe it’s time to run this Tunbridge brat back into the clinker, he thought.

“Appleseed oil is the oil made from apple seeds, silly,” laughed Cheeryup in a superior tone. “It has many mechanical uses, of course, but my mother uses it on her sewing apparatus to keep the gears lubricated. It’s completely natural and lethal only in large doses, so don’t worry. You’re only slightly poisoned.”

By this time, Gadget Pinkle’s jaw was hanging loose, and his gaze fixed on the strange girl. But he noticed that the pains were indeed subsiding. “How do you know I was poisoned with this appleseed oil?”

“Because I poisoned you. Last night. Isn’t this too much fun?”

By now, Cheeryup, was tittering, while the deputy felt he was in the presence of evil itself, instead of a tiny, twelve-year-old girl.

“You ... *What?*”

“You heard me, Gadget. I poisoned you and I couldn’t be more delighted. You see, my mother taught me all about appleseed oil when I was young and told me never to put it to my lips—it was strictly for her sewing uses. Still, if I ever did, she said, and it was only a teaspoon or less, I shouldn’t worry, as I’d just get a terrible stomachache and it would go away. But if I drank, say, the whole bottle, I’d be a goner because it has a terrible poison in it. Fortunately for you, you’ve only had a teaspoon or two.”

“Why are you trying to kill me?”

Moving closer to him on the bench, Cheeryup smiled and said, “I’m not trying to kill you, you goose. I’m trying to run you to ground. Because I know what a rotten, stinking rat you are.”

“I am not a rat! I’m a deputy!” Gadget felt downright insulted. His pride was wounded.

She reached up and put a kindly hand on his shoulder. “I know you’re a deputy, dear Gadget, and I respect that.”

Gently, Cheeryup reached up, grabbed his left ear, and gave it a hellacious twist.

“*Ow-ow-ow! Worcher do that for?*” screamed the young man, writhing on the bench and drawing the attention of passersby.

Drawing her face near and whispering, “Because, dear Gadget, *you’re* the Pie Thief. I know because I put appleseed oil in my blueberry muffins last night and left them all at the Ghost’s Walk. And I hid across the way, that is, until I saw a tall, skinny boy like you come out of the alley, grab a tray of muffins, and verily skip down the Ghost’s Walk with the prize in his hand. In a nip, I gathered up all the other muffins I had hidden and threw them down the well. My only other task after that was to wait until this morning and look for someone who had a terrible stomachache. And that would be *you*.”

Cheeryup let go of Gadget’s ear and stood back smugly.

“Fine, I ate the muffins, but that doesn’t prove nuffin’! I was out for a walk last night, saw the goodies, and scarfed a few down. Big deal? Don’t mean I’m no Pie Thief.” Gadget beamed back at her proudly. “Now, young lady, I’m taking you down to the gaol where you belong.”

“Oh dear,” said Cheeryup, beginning to tear up. “Now I have to go back to that awful gaol and tell Sheriff Forgo all about how you broke into my burrow and stole back Mr. Bindlestiff’s papers. Well, if we must ...”

“Hold on there!” barked Gadget. “You think you’re so clever. How do you know it was me?”

“Because you left pie crumbs everywhere. Is that your calling card? And you also took a lock of hair I’d found in the cave.”

“So?”

“Because it was bright red hair, Gadget—the same color as yours!”

The deputy looked concerned for a minute, but rebounded quickly. “Oh, that could-a been *anyone’s* hair.”

Seeing that her superior logic wasn’t getting her anywhere, Cheeryup Tunbridge took a different course. “Fine, you win, Gadget. Let me congratulate you before you take me to gaol.”

She held out her hand, which the deputy graciously took in his own and shook. That, of course, was his mistake. For no sooner had Gadget Pinkle shaken her hand than she’d twisted his arm behind his back and shoved him face-first onto the bench—*hard*.

Just as fast, Cheeryup climbed up on his back and carefully nestled her right knee in his spine, pressing down for maximum effect. The pain was so bad that Gadget couldn’t even make a sound—his face was contorted in a silent scream of agony.

“I’ve had it with you, Gadget. Are you, or are you not, the Pie Thief?”

“No!” he gasped, but that only made Cheeryup knee him harder in the back. “*Yes, yes, yes!* I am!”

“And did you have a tangle in your hair and cut it out with a knife, leaving it carelessly in the cave?”

The poor deputy could only nod by this point, tears streaming down his cheek.

“Yes!”

She eased up her knee and let Gadget lie there panting heavily for a minute. “This is what we’re going to do, Gadget, unless you want me to hurt you again. First, you’re going to give me Mr. Bindlestiff’s papers. You’re going to go back to the gaol and keep your mouth shut. And last, your thieving days are over. By the way, why *did* you do it?”

Slowly sitting up, Gadget looked at her like a sad puppy. “Because I was bored,” he sobbed. “Thimble Down is such a slow, quiet little town and I needed something to do. I didn’t even care about the stuff I took. It was just jolly fun taking things and getting away with it—it’s the only real talent I have. I’d have given it all back eventually, I promise!”

Cheeryup looked at him sternly. “You know, I believe you, Gadget. But you will turn to good now and stop your thieving. If you start using your talents to curb crime in the village, you’ll be as good as Bosco any day. If not better!”

“You think so?” Gadget brightened. “You think I can be as good a deputy as Mr. Bosco. You mean it?”

“I do. Now, where’s the papers? We have a deal, remember.”

Gadget Pinkle froze for a few seconds, as if making a decision.

“*Come! Follow me!*”

## Band of Dwarves

Wyll drifted in and out of consciousness for what seemed like days. Maybe it was.

Occasionally, he felt the sensation of rough hands pulling him up and pouring a savory broth down his throat, but he barely remembered it. Then came the chills and fever, and the feeling of being laden with dozens of blankets or animal pelts. There were glimpses of strange faces, sounds, and smells, all interlaced with long periods of groggy sleep. He knew he was not outdoors, but that's about it.

"Oy Wyll! Wake up! Come on, sleepyhead. I'm getting bored of your company, mate."

Wyll opened his eyes and looked around. He had no idea where he was; his eyes moved around the space—a cave, perhaps—and fixed on his friend Orli.

"There you are! 'Bout time! You've been napping and lollygagging all week."

"Umm, sorry," Wyll croaked. In a second, Orli brought an animal skin to his lips and let him sip some cool water. It felt good. "Where am I?"

"We, young Wyll, are in the company of some very excellent Dwarves, the same fellows who saved our lives," noted Orli. "If it weren't for these blokes, we'd be wolf food."

"Really?"

"Yessir. And believe me, it was close. If these goblin fighters hadn't found us, we wouldn't be talking. But as it was, there's one less pack of black wolves roaming about. One of 'em had a nice bit of your shoulder for a snack, while another chewed up your leg. But you'll survive."

Wyll knew something was wrong with his left shoulder, and this explained it. "Now who's this yer talkin' to, Orli?" A gruff figure came up behind him. "Ah, the little Halfling pup. He looks better."

"Thanks to you, Tarquin, he seems fit for the walk home."

"Oh, he won't be walking. We have a pony for him, but we do have to get moving. The cold weather is coming fast, and we want to get home to our families for a while. At least until we must hunt the *orkus* again."

The Dwarf stomped off, and Wyll noticed a general bustle in the air; these Dwarves were indeed preparing for departure.

"Are we going with them, Orli?"

“Most certainly, Wyll. Our luck couldn’t be better—this band is coming off a long patrol of our borders and is headed back to the kingdom, same as us. We will have safe envoy to my home.”

“And then what?”

“That I don’t know, but in the meantime, eat some of this broth and try to stretch yer limbs. We shall be departing in an hour.”

\* \* \*

It wasn’t long until Wyll Underfoot found himself sitting on the back of a shaggy brown-and-white pony, swaddled in blankets and moving with a convoy of fifty rugged-looking Dwarves, males and females alike. It was raining steadily, but the fresh air felt good to Wyll after many days lying in a musky cave, and he was hopeful about the journey north. He desperately craved a bath, but didn’t think it was polite to ask; he doubted Dwarves bathed much anyway.

Every few hours, the convoy would stop and take a break. Orli would help Wyll down from the pony, but owing to his bitten-up leg he couldn’t hobble very far. Tarquin checked his wounds and spread a foul-smelling paste on them. When Wyll scrunched up his nose the first time, the healer said, “Horrible smelling, yes, but this balm has saved your life. Trust me.” After that, Wyll kept his expressions to himself; he didn’t want to seem ungrateful.

The landscape grew progressively rockier as the band wended its way further north. The grassy planes gave way to boulder-laden fields with heathers and brackens providing the only bits of greenery. Maybe a stunted tree every once in a while, but a far cry from the lush trees of the Great Wood. And there was a steely wind that cut across everything, making the environment harsh and forbidding.

Yet Wyll couldn’t deny the stark beauty of the land and the dramatic row of hills and mountains slowly rising to greet them. They were foreboding, yet drew him onwards all the same. This was the Northern Kingdom of the Dwarves.

“Orli, when will we get to your home?”

“In two days, I reckon. We must cross this rocky terrain and keep ever-climbing. This will bring us to Gildenhall, the majestic caverns of my kind. You will be dazzled by their beauty.”

“Will we be able to ask about the black stones there?” Wyll still hadn’t forgotten about Thimble Down and its problems. “They might be able to tell us about the Grippe.”

“We’ll ask for an audience with the Seer. She’s wise and knows all things, but is also crafty in her ways. We will need to be careful; only a fool approaches the Seer unprepared for her mischief.”



Wyll didn't ask more after that and slowly dozed off. He awoke to shouts several hours later. Rough hands dragged him off the pony and behind a big boulder; Orli showed up a second later.

"Goblins. Lots of 'em. Apparently the buggers have been following us for a while and just launched an ambush. Don't move—I'll be back soon!"

Wyll didn't need to be told twice. He'd known how terrifying goblins were and was in no hurry to get into a tangle with that kind, much less an army of them. All around him black arrows pinged off the rocks while—along with screams and yells—he heard the sounds of metal hitting metal. He'd never been in a battle before, and it terrified him—it suddenly occurred to Wyll that he could die at any moment.

As if to prove that point, he spied a goblin standing on a boulder not thirty feet from him, its black, beady eyes locked on his own. Like a specter out of a nightmare, the *orkus* crept towards him, avoiding Dwarf arrows and moving like a cat. Twenty feet, fifteen feet, ten feet, the beast came straight for Wyll, yet all he could do was lie there, unarmed and paralyzed with fear. Up close, the goblin was hideous to behold, a black, warty creature with rippling muscles head to toe and a deadly curved sword. Its teeth were yellow and black, pulled back in some sort of horrible smile as it prepared to slay him.

"Arrrhhhhh!"

A blurry figure jumped between him and the goblin, and began chopping away at the foe. The *orkus* laughed in its terrible way and slashed at the Dwarf, connecting with arm tissue, but the fighter kicked at the monster and knocked it off balance, causing it to fall to one knee.

Sensing the opportunity, the Dwarf slashed hard on its sword arm and severed it completely. The goblin instantly produced a smaller knife from its other belt with the other hand and stabbed the Dwarf, planting it in his hip. The figure screamed in pain, but it only made him angrier and he executed a long, lateral arc with his sword. It caught the goblin on its neck and deftly separated head from body. The *orkus'* body collapsed in a heap.

The fighter spun around to see if his charge was hurt. "Wyll, are you okay?"

"Orli, that was you? You saved me." Wyll had never been so grateful in his life.

"Never mind that now. There are many goblins—too many—and we must make a run for it. Can you stand?"

"I'll have to." Wyll stood feebly and grabbed onto Orli's arm. He saw that the Dwarf was also injured, but it didn't seem to stop him. "Let's go!"

Together, Orli and Wyll hopped from rock to rock as the Dwarf fighters began to evacuate. Clearly, the goblins had been planning this ambush for some time and caught the Dwarf brigade unawares. There were dead bodies on the ground, Wyll noted, and they weren't all *orkus*.

They pushed towards higher ground, with goblins trailing them and arrows flying incessantly. As they went, more Dwarves fell behind, either injured or to fight to the death and buy their comrades time.

Wyll and Orli struggled onwards and upwards until a stray arrow caught Wyll in the leg, the same one mangled by the wolves. He fell, dragging his friend with him into the cracks between several huge boulders. They clung to each other, knowing that death would soon follow. But instead they heard music—or more exactly, the clarion call of a horn. No, many horns, blowing above them in the high rocks.

Within moments, a torrent of bodies washed over their rocky crevasse, leaping from rock to boulder and boulder to stone, shooting arrows and hacking *orkus* heads and limbs from bodies, and crying triumphantly.

“Dwarves!” shouted Orli, knowing that reinforcements from the Northern Kingdom had arrived. “We are saved!”

He grabbed Wyll and dragged him up the rocks with incredible strength, until they had the vantage point to see the battle. From all above them, hundreds of fighters rained down the stony slope, killing any and all goblins where they stood. No quarter was given, even for those *orkus* foolish enough to attempt surrender. The Dwarves did not take prisoners of their kind.

Within the hour, the battle was over and the body count grim. A dozen Dwarves had died, though it was matched by nearly two hundred goblins. As they would later find out, this had been one of the biggest goblin attacks in years, a coldly planned massacre, intended to drive the Northlanders back to their rocky lairs and leave the north open for the *orkus* to plunder.

Around them, the fighters were discussing this massive goblin aggression and its ramifications upon their folk, but also binding up the wounded and preparing to ride home. A guard of some hundred Dwarves were also sent on patrol, in case more beasts were on the move.

As Wyll and Orli soon learned, these were troubling times in the North.

## The Oilcloth

Dorro was laying out a few items for dinner when he heard an expected knock on the door. He rushed over and unlatched it, opening it just enough for a small figure to slip into the Perch's foyer.

"Right on time! You weren't seen, were you, Cheeryup?"

"I think not—I'm getting pretty good at moving about in the dark. What's for supper? I'm famished!"

"Come this way, my dear." Dorro toddled into his kitchen, making sure his window curtains were pulled tight and got to work. He'd found some nice trout fillets at the fishmonger's and was preparing to sauté them with shallots, butterbeans, and diced turnips. As he cooked, Dorro made small talk. "So how was your day? Did you find the Pie Thief?"

"Yes."

Dorro stopped on a heartbeat. "Don't jest with me, young lady! I nearly had a heart attack."

"But I'm not jesting, Mr. Dorro. I caught him, lock, stock, and barrel."

Eyes bulging out of his head, the bookmaster croaked, "*Well?* Who is it?"

"Gadget Pinkle."

"My former deputy? That tall, skinny bumpkin? He couldn't steal a cookie dangling in front of him. You must be mistaken." Cheeryup's silence and small grin told him otherwise. "*Fine*—out with it. How did that gangly, clumsy boy become the most notorious thief in Thimble Down history?"

With that, the girl regaled him with her tale, how she tracked the Pie Thief and caught him that very morning on a bench in the village. By the time she'd finished, Dorro served up the fish onto some brown ceramic plates and set them on the table, along with mugs of cider. He held his cup in the air, laughing joyously: "A toast, to Cheeryup Tunbridge, the best detective in all Thimble Down!"

Cheeryup blushed, but accepted the flattery graciously. "Thank you, kind sir."

"What is Gadget going to do, now that his career of evil has been curtailed by a little blonde-haired girl?"

"I think he wants to focus on his work for the Sheriff—he has anxiety about the memory of Bosco. Apparently Forgo won't let it go."

"I can see that, poor lad. What did he say about Bindlestiff's missing papers?"

“I have them.”

“*What?* Cheeryup, dear, you have to stop frightening me like that. You have them?”

“Yep.” She was smiling ear to ear now. “He led me towards the Meeting Tree, and then to that luv’ly old willow not fifty paces away. Gadget had hidden the packet in an oilcloth that he stuck in one of the cracks. It was about twenty feet off the ground, but if you saw the way that boy can climb, you’d understand—he moves like a squirrel.”

“*And?*” sputtered Dorro.

“And I shall fetch it for you, but don’t expect miracles. It’s in Dwarfish, an ancient form I’d guess.” She skipped over to her cape and pulled out the wrapped oilcloth. Cheeryup plopped it on the table and unwrapped its contents. Both thrilled and amazed at her accomplishment, Dorro pored over the pages intently.

“This is far beyond me. I think it’s time for us to chat with our old friend, Crumble.”

\* \* \*

Shortly after, the pair sat in the guest-burrow inhabited by the Dwarves.

Around the table were Crumble, Flume, Two-Toes, Magpie, and Wump’s former wife, the Battle Dwarf, Aramina. The rest of her fighters were encamped in the woods, though not far from the Hanging Stoat, whose delights they had discovered. Mungo, too, was delighted to discover their gold nuggets, which amply covered the many beers and chops he sent their way. After a week or two, the Dwarves had become regulars and even accepted by the Halflings of Thimble Down—they were just patrons like anyone else, there to have a drink and supper at the end of a hard day.

“So, what can we do for you, Mr. Dorro?”

The bookmaster had been wise enough to arrive with a two tankards of hard cider, which he knew would not go unappreciated by the Dwarves. They passed around cups and poured the strange drink and warily tasted it. Deciding that cider spirits passed muster, they passed the same small vial of belladonna and sprinkled a few drops to each vessel in order to spike it up to Dwarf strength.

“I’d like to show you these documents, Crumble. And by doing so, I hope we can keep this confidential—what I’m about to reveal is quite dangerous, and indeed I could go to gaol by simply possessing them.”

“You can count on us, Mr. Dorro. And Aramina, too!” The she-Dwarf merely smiled and burped loudly, which was as good as a solemn handshake to a Dwarf. “Now let’s have a look.”

Dorro laid the rolled oilcloth on the table and undid the string holding it together. By the way the Dwarves gasped and whispered to each other, he knew he’d hit the mother lode.

“As you can guess, these are pages stolen from Mr. Bindlestiff’s safe, though I can’t tell you where I got them. As for the words on the page, I don’t speak common Dwarfish, and this is perhaps older than that,” stated the bookmaster. “Might you have any ideas, Crumble?”

“Well, errmmm, this is kinda complex, Mr. Dorro.” The Dwarf scratched his chin and wiggled his eyebrows enough to indicate he had no idea what they contained. “Y’see, we’re not educated Dwarves. We’re what you might call diggers—not that this is a bad thing, but we don’t have much book learnin’.”

His brothers, Two-Toes, Flume, and Magpie, all nodded in agreement, while Aramina helped herself to more cider and belladonna drops.

“So you can’t read this script?”

“Oh no, I don’t think you’ll find any Dwarf in all the Northern Kingdom who could read this, though the pictograms are pretty interestin’. They certainly tell a tale about the black stones, they do. And not a good one.”

“But it’s not proof until we understand the words, is it?” Dorro looked dejected.

“At least, I can read one thing—this note scribbled in the corner here,” continued Crumble. “Why that’s plain enough. It says, ‘This is a gift to the College of St. Borgo from the library of Gildenhall.’”

“College of St. Borgo? Why that’s our esteemed university, though located many miles from here. Where is Gildenhall?”

“Why sir, that is the city from whence we come—it is the heart of the Northern Kingdom of Dwarves. Apparently, one of our Dwarf teachers felt it was of some importance to bequeath these documents to your place of Halfling learning.”

“How did they get into Mr. Bindlestiff’s hands?”

The Dwarves all chuckled. “P’raps the way all the things do—he stole ’em! Him or that Fibbhook fellow. Either way, it must be important. What are you going to do now?”

Dorro was lost in thought for a moment. “Crumble, these pages may hold the secret to the Grippe, what causes it, and how to cure the illness. The pictures tell us only half the story—we need answers. What if I proposed to you a journey?”

“I dunno if Mr. Bindlestiff would let us off work like that.”

“I’d only need you, Crumble, and Cheeryup.”

“Can I come?” chimed in Aramina. “You might need some muscle to keep you safe, and I wouldn’t want anything to happen to poor Crumbly.”

“That we might, Mrs. Wump. I might take you up on that.” Dorro’s eyes were on fire. “I propose a journey to the burg of St. Borgo and a visit to its esteemed edifice of education. We will find one of the great minds there and ask him to interpret this for us. And we will return to

Thimble Down with the answers to crack open this morass and put the Grippe out of our lives for good! I shall pay you for your time, Crumble, and you Aramina.”

“All the better!” laughed the Dwarf. “Brothers, hold the fort for us and tell ol’ Fibbhook that I’m home with a tummy ache for a week or three.”

“I propose a toast!” Dorro grabbed his own tankard of cider and held it aloft. “Tomorrow morning, the four of us shall set forth to the distant burg of St. Borgo, there to find answers, explanations, and illumination. And the rest of you shall, most gratefully, keep our secret. Here’s to our conspiracy!”

At that, they all clanked tankards and drank deeply, aside from Cheeryup, who didn’t like spirits and preferred to keep her wits about her. Still, she was excited by this expedition—if only Wyll were here she could rub it in his face.

*He’s not the only one who could run off on a grand adventure!* she thought jealously.

As for Dorro, he had only one other mission to accomplish before they set off in the morning.

“Cheeryup, let me walk you home, but stay in the shadows so no one sees you. And before we get there, I do have to make one important stop. A crucial one.”

The girl nodded in agreement, and they set off from the Dwarves’ burrow, excited for the next day’s sojourn and the unknown events that lay ahead.

## **Gildenhall**

The next few hours were a blur for Wyll.

As quickly as the battle had ended, he'd been loaded onto another pony and carried up the rocky scree with all haste. There were other ponies and donkeys carrying wounded Dwarves, several in grave condition.

Strangely, while the terrain was going up, they were headed on a path that led deep into the heart of the mountains. It was a forbidding road, but the Dwarves knew the trail well.

The caravan passed several sets of sentries, heavily armed Dwarf fighters who showed no expression upon their faces. Here and there Wyll noticed marks of ornament—sections of rock that had been carved by Dwarves, such as over an archway or marking an entrance. They were going deeper into the mountain, and the natural light was fading away.

Soon they were completely underground, as the road wended forward and began to level off. More Dwarves could be seen on the periphery, and there was commotion as they rushed the caravan to spirit away the wounded. Hands grabbed Wyll roughly and he was borne off into the caverns and rooms of this strange place. He looked around for Orli, but could not find him in the fray.

Wyll's destination was a catacomb of small chambers, each containing a few beds where the injured were lain. The level of activity was intense as Dwarves swarmed over the patients, pulling off torn, damaged clothing and armor and examining wounds up close.

Another set of Dwarves arrived to clean the minor cuts or sew up sword gashes and arrow holes. Some patients required stitching to repair internal organs, whereas others expired where they lay, their wounds too traumatic for the Dwarf healers to cure. There was no crying or wailing when a warrior died; his or her body was lifted and moved elsewhere, while more injured were brought in for care.

Fortunately for Wyll, the goblin arrow wound in his leg was not significant, and he was sewn up quickly. More of the smelly balm was applied, and he was given a tincture of herbs and hot water to drink. It made him feel cozy and tired. At last he fell into a dreamless sleep.

When he awoke, Wyll wasn't entirely surprised to see Orli sitting near the edge of his bed, sharpening a knife. "Thanks again, friend," were all the words he could muster.

"There he is—back from the arms of sleep. Are ya feeling better?"

“Yes, but how about you, Orli? You got cut on the arm and stabbed in the hip. Did the healer fix your ills? I wish I had your resilience.”

“My injuries were minor, but I’m glad *yer* well. The healer said you’ll be walking soon. Then we can repair to the home of my cousins and rest there. And discuss visiting the Seer.”

“How are the injured faring?” inquired Wyll, feeling a little guilty, as if he had caused the goblin attack himself.

“Most fighters survived, though we lost our share. The *orkus* have been growing in strength and becoming more brazen in their attacks. This was one of the worst in memory—and we rode straight into it.” Orli said this matter-of-factly, yet the whole city was abuzz with murmurs of the rising goblin threat, as if they were preparing for something ominous.

“Have the goblin attacks just started recently?”

Orli looked at Wyll as if he had three eyes. Then he smirked. “The *orkus* have been assailing us since I was born and probably centuries before that. It’s just the way of things. They want the Northland for their own, while we’ve been here since the Beginning of Time. It’s *ours*.”

Wyll looked puzzled. “They’ve never bothered us in Thimble Down.”

This drew gales of laughter from the Dwarf boy. “We know, Wyll! Why do you think that is? It’s because our best fighters have been protecting the Halflings to the South forever and a day. That is the Dwarves’ role in the nature of things—we are the defenders and protectors of this realm.”

“Why?”

“Why?” Even Orli looked baffled. “Because that’s what Dwarves do! Honestly, Wyll, you are naïve sometimes! You Halflings can barely see past your plates of beef chops and tankards of ale. There’s a big world out there, and it’s full of good and evil. As I understand it, I’ve heard there are other powerful forces in place to protect your lands, but I do not know much about them. What I do know is that we protect the entire Northlands and if we find goblins anywhere, we engage and destroy ‘em. And that means fewer enemies to attack the Halflings lands, and to the South and West, even the lands of Men-folk.”

“I had no idea,” Wyll was befuddled. “We have much to thank you for.”

“Well, not *me*—more like the Dwarves of the Northern Kingdom. Now sleep, my addled friend. When you awake, I’ll take you ‘round my city.”

“Are we in your city yet?” asked Wyll.

Again, Orli grinned. “*Yep*, we are here. This is Gildenhall.”

\* \* \*



The troupe moved northeast in brisk morning air. Dorro hired out two ponies to pull the cart carrying Cheeryup, Crumble, and Aramina. Before departure, the bookmaster had checked his pockets and bags several times to make absolutely sure he hadn't forgotten anything; they also stopped briefly at the burrow of Mr. Bedminster Shoe for a quick errand, but soon they were back on the road.

Within the first hour they had passed through the village of Upper-Down and observed the hillocks of West Upper-Down in the distance to their left; neither of them were of the grand size of Thimble Down, but to Dorro, they were civilized communities and had the basic necessities of life (though he himself would never deign to live there).

A few Halflings were out puttering about in the morning air, raking leaves or drinking tea on their stoops. They waved, but cautiously—they didn't know Dorro or Cheeryup, and wondered what the two strange creatures in the back of his cart were. ("Them's be elves, Madge! I seen 'em with wit me own eyes," hooted Farmer Taggett, as he ran inside to tell his wife. "They don't look like elves," she retorted, scrunching up her face while looking out the dirty window of their burrow. "Silly Madge! Them be short, fat elves—a mighty rare breed!" said Taggett with absolute certitude.)

Soon, the Halfling settlements became far and few, a cluster of burrows here, a small hamlet there. The folk were never prolific breeders, and there were no big Halfling cities. Thimble Down was among the more densely packed towns; elsewhere, their kind was spread across a swath of forest and farmland, mostly in smaller clusters, which is the way they liked it. Just enough to support a pub and a few fellows and gals working in the blacksmith and woodworking trades, and the rest left to farming.

Of course, the troupe's destination—St. Borgo—was the biggest of all Halfling settlements, a university town that made Thimble Down seem like a dingy pony stop. Dorro had never been there, yet as a learned fellow, had dreamed of it his entire life.

During the ride, the bookmaster delighted in calling out the names of trees he identified (*hornbeam! yellowwood! elm!*) and the birds he saw (*thrush! woodpecker! finch!*), ostensibly to educate Cheeryup, but mostly just to amuse himself.

The Dwarves sat in the back of the cart, saying little and bored by the long hours. Aramina sharpened her axe and blades on a soft rock while Crumble smoked his pipe quietly, lost in thought. Cheeryup periodically complained that her backside was sore, but otherwise made a good show of it.

"I say, young lady, do you even know who St. Borgo is named after?"

"Of course, King Borgo, you silly goose," she sneered.

"Yes, but he wasn't *born* a king. Who was Borgo?" triumphed Dorro.

“I don’t really know.” Cheeryup didn’t like it when she didn’t know things and frowned at the bookmaster. “You might as well tell me, since you’re going to anyway.”

“That’s correct, my dear! Borgo was a Halfling peasant boy, oh, seventeen-hundred years ago, but he was the one that rose up against the cruel overseers and freed our folk. You always know Borgo’s birthday by our current year—it’s 1721 A.B., which means ‘after Borgo.’ His birth, that is.”

“Hmmm—I get it. Who were the cruel overseers, Mr. Dorro?”

“Best we can tell, they were a tribe of foul, violent Men who discovered the Halflings living very primitively up this way. Back then, our folk were very simple farmers, gatherers, and hunters, living off the land and not organized into much beyond muddy hamlets. Thus the Men rode herd over us and made our breed into veritable slaves, growing crops for them and serving their masters.”

“How horrible? What did Borgo do?” asked Cheeryup, growing more interested.

“Why, he was tired of being beaten and threatened every day and decided to rally other Halflings to his cause. Of course, poor Borgo was beaten and imprisoned more than once, but he always escaped, and in a pivotal moment, defeated one of the Men in combat. This was crucial, as it proved that the overseers weren’t indestructible and mere Halflings could stand up to them. When the Men counterattacked a few weeks later, they couldn’t find our kin. No, Borgo had taught them to use our natural strengths to fight back—stealth, intellect, intuition!”

“What did they do?” The girl was bouncing off her seat by now.

“Why they hid in secret burrows during the day, where the Men couldn’t find them. Then Borgo and his Halfling army—probably not more than a hundred farmers—would attack them at night or early morning, when the masters were groggy with drink. Borgo also invented new weapons; these were insidious projectiles that pierced or blinded the Men and drove them crazy. The Halflings also fouled their drinking water and dispersed their cattle and livestock. And yet, when they returned to crush the little folk, they found that we had all gone underground as if we’d never been there. Hungry, injured, and driven mad, the overseers finally abandoned our land and returned to the South never to return.”

“Hooray!” screamed Cheeryup.

“There’s more to it than that, of course—there was one terrible battle in which many Halflings died—but more or less, that’s the story,” crowed Dorro, who by now was terribly animated himself. “Thereafter, Borgo commanded all the Halflings come together and swear themselves to be one people. And that decree began the ancient settlement that became the burg of St. Borgo today.”

“The boy was made its first King and, since then, we Halflings have lived in this part of the world, more or less in peace and tranquility. It reminds us, young lady, that we may be small, but we are ever mighty! Since then, no foe has ever dared challenge Halflings on their own land.”

In the back of the cart, Crumble and Aramina clapped their hands in appreciation, though exchanging glances as if they knew more to the story. Yet for the moment, they let Dorro revel in the glory of Halfling history and Cheeryup in tales of heroism and danger.

## Caverns of Wonder

“Everyone, this is my friend Wyll Underfoot.”

Using a single crutch, Wyll hobbled into what appeared to be a series of rooms that were beautifully hewn from rock and softly illuminated by an unknown source. The Dwarves had mastered the art of finding and deflecting light underground, as Orli had told him, much of it coming from blazing crystals deep in the earth.

The rooms were warm, too— another Dwarf innovation—this time from subterranean heat vents and water flumes. Despite being perhaps a mile under the mountain, Wyll found the surroundings very comfortable and livable—no wonder Orli missed it so much.

The Dwarves rose to greet Wyll, and many of them bowed deeply. They had never seen a Halfling before and weren’t sure if they spoke the Common Tongue or had any intellect at all.

“Good morning and thank you for welcoming me into your home,” said Wyll as graciously as possible.

“And we welcome you, Wyll of the Halflings,” replied a female whom Orli identified as his Aunt Rosamunda, Magpie’s wife. “We know you have journeyed far and been injured, so please sit and share our food.”

As they sat and fed him some savory meats, breads, and sauces, the Dwarves also peppered Wyll with questions about his folk and the village of Thimble Down. They were most interested in the concept of burrows and asked him what it’s like to live in a mud hill.

“Actually, they’re quite comfortable—there are proper floors, walls, and ceilings, as well as windows and fixtures,” noted Wyll. “My Uncle Dorro’s burrow is the nicest in the entire village and has running water.”

Aunt Rosamunda laughed haughtily.

“We’ve had running water for centuries, as well as light and heat. Your kind is younger than ours, so we must accommodate the quaint advances of your people.”

“Actually, Auntie, all us guest workers live in a burrow and it’s grown upon us,” added Orli. “Granted, it’s not as magnificent as our caverns, but we like it.”

Rosamunda was not impressed and hid it poorly, so the Dwarf boy took advantage of the moment to extricate Wyll from his relatives and continue their tour.

He showed his Thimble Down friend the grand assembly halls, with stairways cut right out of rock face. There were structures within the caverns—some of them quite impressive—for either

use by families, workers, or ceremonies. Families seemed to have all dug out their own spaces, usually just tunneling into a sheer rock face and burrowing out the requisite number of rooms.

As for labor, there were endless tasks for the Dwarf folk, from digging and excavating (their specialty) to cooking and sewing, and protecting and serving the wider community.

“Of course, I’m savin’ the best for last—the great caverns where gems, metals, and precious rocks are harvested.”

Carefully, Orli brought Wyll to a ledge overlooking a vast column of space, maybe a quarter mile wide and a full mile up and down. It was the biggest space the Halfling boy had ever seen, and as Orli explained, it had been hewn from solid rock over several centuries by powerful hands and tools.

“This, Wyll, is the secret of the Dwarves’ vast wealth. Every one of our colonies is built around a mine of some sort, whether gold and silver, diamonds, rubies, or various metals and ores. Even the black stones that fuel ol’ Bindlestiff’s forges are a kind of wealth to us—a burnable rock used in trade and commerce.”

“Where do you grow your food, then, or keep your livestock?” Wyll couldn’t see how this lifestyle sustained itself.

“We have a vast network o’ traders who fan out across the many lands and bring us food and goods we can’t produce here,. There are some Dwarf farmers, but ain’t many. We have more herders that keep goats and sheep on mountainsides, and give us fresh meat, milk, and wool.”

“How many Dwarves live here?”

“In Gildenhall? Oh, I dunno—ten thousand or more. The city is vast and stretches for many miles in any direction. You could live here and never see sunlight, which is fine by us. See down here? Down there, deep in the shaft, is where the miners toil, bringing up our wealth day after day. Sometimes they’re asked to slow down, so as not deplete our resources. If you look just over there ...”

Wyll leaned over to see where Orli was pointing, but overcorrected on his crutch and, in a heartbeat, fell. One second he was talking to his friend, and then next he was clinging to the edge of a precipice for his life.

*“Wyll! Hold on!”*

The Thimble Downer had fallen about ten feet and was holding onto a rock face and scabbling to find a foothold. Orli reached as far as he could, but was still some distance away. If Wyll let go, he would drop for several minutes and there would be no saving him. The Dwarf boy looked around frantically and saw his salvation—the crutch!

“Grab this, Wyll!” He lowered the crutch slowly and upside down so Wyll could grab the broad end. “Reach for it!” The boy reached out his hand and got a quick grip, but then lost a few more inches with his other hand and instinctively grabbed the rock face again.

“I can’t hold on, Orli! I’m going to fall!”

“Try again—this time concentrate. *You must*, Wyll!”

Orli was trying to give his friend confidence, but time was trickling away.

Wyll reached again and missed. On the third try, he grabbed the crutch and held fast.

“Now the other hand, Wyll!”

Orli girded himself for the weight of his friend .

“*No!*” Wyll missed with his other hand, but forced himself to try again. Finally he grabbed the crutch with both hands, hanging in free space. It was all on Orli now.

Fortunately, Dwarves are built differently than Halflings and have a tremendous amount of upper-body strength. Lying flat on the ledge, Orli was able to start lifting the crutch hand over hand, inch by inch, while pinning himself down with his legs.

A few others had seen the commotion and finally rushed over to help. One sat on Orli’s legs, while the other reached over the edge and grabbed the scruff of Wyll’s collar. In a second, the boy was hauled up, and everyone lay breathless on the ground.

Laying in a tangled clump with his friend, Orli looked up and grinned.

“Did you enjoy the tour, mate?”

\* \* \*

In the evening of the second day of travels, the quartet of Dorro, Cheeryup, Crumble, and Aramina were camped by the side of a wide dirt track that curved through the forests and meadows.

According to his map, they were three quarters of the way to St. Borgo and would arrive the next day. It wouldn’t be too soon for him, either, as the concept of sleeping outdoors in tents completely eluded him; he much preferred the creature comforts of the Perch, and sadly, there were no charming inns along the route.

The rest of the troupe, however, was quite merry, sitting in front of a fire and eating fresh rabbit or ducks that Aramina had hunted down for them. Dorro noted how lethal this Malachite Molly was with a bow, axe, or knife; deep down, he was more than pleased she had accompanied them on this journey through the wild. He wasn’t sure Aramina was the best role model for Cheeryup, but then reflected on the child’s own fierce nature and decided they probably weren’t that far apart in the first place. The Battle Dwarf even let Cheeryup help gut and skin their dinners, which Dorro found absolutely repellent, but the girl dove into the task with gusto.

“Mr. Dorro, beggin’ yer pardon, what is your plan when we arrive in St. Borgo?” Crumble was happily munching on a crispy duck leg. “I bet there ain’t many Dwarves there.”

“I would agree, Crumble. I posted a note a few days ago to the Inn of the Yellow Swan and am hoping they have reserved rooms for us. It’s right near the college, so the following morning, we can begin scouring the campus for a scholar.”

“And you think you’ll find one so fast?” croaked Aramina, who was picking her teeth with a rabbit bone. “I can’t imagine there are many experts in Dwarf lore there.”

“I would agree with you, ma’am, but I brought a small bag of coins to help lubricate the process,” said Dorro slyly.

“I’m so excited. I can barely imagine a place where Halflings learn all day long,” chirped Cheeryup. “I wish we had a school in Thimble Down.”

“So do I, young lady,” frowned Dorro. “It’s been weighing on my mind lately. It’s been decades since we had a permanent teacher in the village, and despite the excellence of our library, it doesn’t cover the gaps.”

“I never went to school, young Miss, and I’m smart as a whip,” cackled Aramina. “Y’see, if I have five goblins comin’ at me, and I have only three arrows. Why it just takes a bit of arithmetic to figger out what to do.”

“Pray, illuminate us with your math skills,” snorted Dorro.

“I take one arrow and shoot it through the first goblin’s head, just to spook the rest of ’em. Then I take the second arrow and stabs another beastie with it before shooting it through the third. Then I take my last arrow and either do the same thing or try for a double-header, which is shooting two goblins sandwiched on one arrow. Them’s my favorites!”

Crumble and Cheeryup laughed and clapped, while Dorro restrained himself from being sick, so appalled was he at her barbarism. In the far distance, a pack of wolves howled in the night, causing the bookmaster to squeak and look about him in desperate fear.

“Wolves! We’re about to be attacked!”

This only made his cohorts laugh even harder.

“Don’t worry, Mr. Dorro. With Malachite Molly in your camp, you only have to worry about mosquitos. She can protect you from anything else.”

“Actually, I wish dem wolves would come sniff around closer,” said Aramina seriously. “I need a new jacket, and there’s nothing better than thick wolf fur. Maybe, Mr. Dorro, sir, you’d let me tie you to a tree and smear a little duck blood on your clothes? That would them wolves in a jiffy. It’s all for giggles, of course.”

“No!” huffed Dorro. “I am not going to serve as bait!”

At that he stood up and marched to his tent, which he tied firmly behind him. He pretended not to hear Aramina, Cheeryup, and Crumble howling uproariously behind him.

## Professor Larkspur

“Mr. Dorro, it’s even bigger than Water-Down!”

Cheeryup was electrified as the band drove their cart into the center of St. Borgo, amid the bustle of Halflingdom’s biggest town. As much as they took in the sights, sounds, and smells of this burg, so too did its populace stare back in wonder, notably at the two strange creatures in the wagon—*Dwarves!*

Indeed, upon occasion many St. Borgonians had seen a creature of the race of Men, and its most adventurous had perhaps spied an elf or gnome, but *Dwarves* were as rare as hen’s teeth. The grownups stared, the children pointed, and a few toddlers even burst into tears at the sight of Crumble and Aramina.

Dorro directed Crumble to steer the wagon onto a small side lane and into a livery stable where his ponies and cart would be cared for during their stay. In a trice, they were back on the lanes, with a few boys hired to carry their luggage.

The Inn of the Yellow Swan was nearby, and they were quickly checked in, despite some queer looks from the proprietor. He pulled in close to Dorro and whispered, “A-hem, sir, but errrrm, what are *they?*”

As discretely as possible, the bookmaster replied, “They are *Dwarves*. Fine folk. Very upstanding.”

The proprietor didn’t look convinced, but let them each have a room anyway, as he didn’t have many customers and quietly observed Dorro’s ready bag of coins. In that light, he decided to put up with the *Dwarves* if it meant buying new sheets for those rooms.

It was mid-afternoon, and rather than nap, the troupe decide to explore the university town for a few hours before dinner. Perhaps they’d find a scholar to help them, which would dramatically improve Dorro’s state of mind.

They hired a boy to guide them to the College of St. Borgo and show them the sights. The lad, named Billy, was fascinated by Crumble and Aramina and proud as a peacock to be their official guide to St. Borgo.

“If you look down this lane, ladies and gennle’ mum, you’ll see the original stone gates of the city, dating from 1104 *A.B.* They were strong enough to withstand the Goblin Invasions of 1434 and 1539, respectively. Both times, the strength and might of the Halflings armies prevailed and beat back the enemy.”



At this, Crumble and Aramina tittered, but as Dorro suspected, there may have been a Dwarf hand in these victories that was underreported. Still, he shot them withering looks as if to say he'd brook their nonsense not much longer. Indeed, the two Dwarves were like silly adolescents, snickering behind their backs at many of the Halfling customs, fashions, and sayings. The bookmaster chose to ignore them.

"And here is the Mayor's House, a grand brick structure built in 1594, *A.B.*," continued Billy, who turned out to be quite a knowledgeable lad.

"As you'll note, there are very few burrows in St. Borgo, unlike the villages of many Halflings in the kingdom. We were primarily a burrowed settlement until a few hundred years ago when the River Lilly overflowed and wiped out most of the city. It was then that the then-mayor, a chap named Lollo, charged the professors to come up with a new plan."

"As a result, they devised a plan to bring in tons of earth and stone, raising the whole city by two feet. They also added a huge swale around its perimeter to prevent any floods. To boot, all buildings and homes must now be freestanding. This gives St. Borgo its unique architectural style, which the swells at the college call the Borgonian Manner. It's all pickles 'n' gravy to me, but that's what they call it."

"Excellent, Billy, you really know your history!" applauded Dorro. "Did you go to school?"

"Yes, indeedy, sir. All younglings in the town must attend school until the age of fourteen, or until they can write, keep a basic ledger, speak like a lord, and understand the basic principles of commerce. Then off they go into the world of business and life; thanks to the college, they have arranged for hundreds of apprenticeships throughout the town and many of them turn into proper livelihoods."

"That's wonderful. And what do you want to do when you grow up, Billy?"

"Why, I'm going to be the Mayor!" crowed the boy, much to Dorro's delight. At that, Billy directed the troupe to the college campus and bade his farewell. The bookmaster gave him an extra coin for his pluck and wished him well.

A few moments later the foursome had entered the gates to the College of St. Borgo and took in its grand, beautiful buildings, courtyard, and trees. It was like its own private city, a quiet sanctuary from the fervor of St. Borgo proper.

"It's absolutely beautiful," said Dorro. "Have you ever seen anything so splendid?"

"Beggin' your pardon, sir, but Aramina and I have a question." Crumble suddenly looked quite serious.

"Of course, Crumble—anything!"

The Dwarf looked at his feet pensively and then at Aramina, who urged him onward. "It's just this, Mr. Dorro. We come all this way to have those pages deciphered and learn more about the

black stones and their properties. And that's all well and good. But what about Wump? My brother is still dead."

"And my ex-husband!" chimed in the Battle Dwarf. "I once loved that old goat!"

"Precisely, Mr. Dorro, meaning I hope we don't get too side-tracked by your research. I do hope we find a way to cure your folk of the Grippe, but Aramina and I, well, we want—"

"Revenge!" snarled the she-fighter. "I want to find the scum-weasel that offed my Wumpie and I'm going to flay the bugger alive."

"That is, after my brothers and I stomp the ever-breathing life out o' him," said Crumble matter-of-factly.

"I want to cut his toes off!" Aramina nodded in agreement. "And pull off his fingernails, too!"

Dorro looked taken aback at first, but then came to his senses.

"Yes, of course. I'm sorry to have been swept away by the college and the journey and my own dreams. But listen: the secret of your black stones, I'm convinced, is related to the death of Wump. I know it in my bones! I don't have any proof yet, but there's something connecting the two. I beg your patience for just a little longer until we can translate the page and understand its contents."

That seemed to satisfy the two Dwarves. They didn't say anything, but both nodded, having said their piece. Dorro led the others through the campus, periodically asking passersby for directions and if they knew anyone with a specialty in Dwarfish language and lore.

Despite the stares and gawking, they were eventually directed to a mossy stone building with round windows and a sense of distinguished grandeur about it. A porter on the first floor pointed them up three flights of cut-stone stairs and down a long hallway. At the end of it, panting from exertion, Dorro knocked.

"Yes, come in!" said a wizened old voice. "But you know, my office hours aren't until next Tuesday—it says so in your syllabus."

"Excuse me," coughed Dorro awkwardly. "I'm sorry to bother you, but—"

"Visitors! Well, come in, come in. Let me take a look at you—*Sweet King Borgo!*"

The ancient Halfling almost collapsed back in his chair at the sight of Crumble and Aramina. "We're sorry to upset you."

"Upset me? No, I'm delighted! I'm Professor Taddeus Larkspur [*gasp!*] and this is the Department of Ancient Dwarfish. You two are Halflings, but *dear sir, dear lady*—real Dwarves in my very office. What a treat! Please stay for some tea."

The group sat around an old dusty table while the scholar rang for the porter via a system of pulleys and bells. Dorro sized up the old Halfling, who was every ounce the picture of academia. He wore a long black robe that was well patched and none-too-clean, while his face was

profusely wrinkled. A pair of reading glasses teetered on the end of a longish nose, and his hair was graying and rather thin on top. His eyes were black and set closely together.

“What, pray tell, can I do for you fine folks? I’m just so tickled that you visited me. *Ankh snorf barrach sharg?*”

“And *feargot shahl boorook* to you, sir,” giggled Crumble. “For you folks, the professor and I just exchanged basic pleasantries and salutations. Honestly, my granddad spoke the ancient tongue, but I know only a few phrases. We modern Dwarves mostly speak in the Common Tongue.”

“That’s a shame—I can speak it fluently,” boasted the professor, “But alas, I have no one to converse with.”

“Don’t you have students?” inquired Dorro.

“I’m afraid not. Honestly, no one visits me much anymore, and I haven’t had students for years. I conduct my research on Dwarf lore and culture, quietly and very much alone. It is my life’s work, but the fools here at the College of St. Borgo have chosen to ignore my gifts. But please, you haven’t told me your story. I’m so eager to know! And *ah*, there’s our tea!”

The ancient porter brought in a cart and laid out a simple tea with sandwiches. It was meager fare, but plenty under the circumstances. Both Crumble and Aramina sniffed the tea and food and scrunched up their noses unhappily—both would have preferred frothy tankards of ale.

“I am Dorro Fox Winderiver, the bookmaster from the village of Thimble Down. This is my young friend Cheeryup Tunbridge and our companions, Mr. Crumble and Mrs. Aramina Wump, known to her comrades as Malachite Molly. The former is an artisan in the craft of smeltery, while Mrs. Wump hunts goblins and protects our borders. We are very grateful to her.”

Professor Larkspur’s mouth hung open speechless, but illuminated with joy. “That’s marvelous! Do you really hunt goblins, Mrs. Wump?”

“Oh yessir,” said Aramina proudly. “I’m particularly gifted with axe throwing and have nine hundred and forty-nine kills to my name. I’m sure it’s much higher than that, but them’s the officially counted ones.”

Then as politely as possible, she sipped her tea, pinky extended.

“Our Aramina is being modest,” cooed Crumble. “She’s deadly with any weapon—axe, mace, hammer, sword, bow. Why, she could impale an *orkus* through its brain cavity with just an ordinary kitchen spoon.”

At that, the two Dwarves croaked merrily, joined by Professor Larkspur who found the pair charming.

“As I was saying, Professor, we are here to seek your help,” said Dorro, trying to keep the conversation on track. “We have a situation in Thimble Down that requires the assistance of

someone who can read Ancient Dwarfish. There is currently a plague festering our village—the Grippe—and we aren't sure if it is related to the Dwarfish activities in our smeltery.”

“What can I do? I am a busy Halfling after all, and my work is of the paramount importance.” Professor Larkspur suddenly looked peevish.

Reaching into his bag, Dorro pulled for the documents. “We were wondering, Professor, if you might be able to help translate these pages. They are in an older form of Dwarfish that my friends don't understand. We were hoping you would examine them—and I would pay you for your time!”

“Let me see!” Professor Larkspur verily grabbed the pages from Dorro's hand. “Where did you get these? My word, I've never seen writing and drawing of this caliber before.”

“They seem to have been a gift to the College from the Dwarfs of Gildenhall. But they were stolen years ago.”

“Which is why I've never seen them! If this is authentic, it could take years to unravel.”

“We don't have years, sir. Please—time is of the essence. Halflings are dying from the disease that torments our village—as we speak.”

Professor Larkspur's eyes blazed across the ancient pages. “This could be the crowning moment of my career. But as for you, Mr. Durbo—”

“Dorro, actually.”

“Yes, Mr. Dorro. I can translate this fairly easily, yet you would need to leave them with me, at least until tomorrow morning. I promise to guard them with my life! I shall need a fee of ten silver pieces, too—for my consulting time, of course.”

“Agreed! We shall meet you here tomorrow morning. And you will have a translation for us?”

Professor Larkspur looked the bookmaster right in the eyes and reached out his hand.

“From one scholar to another, I swear to you that I will. Even if it takes all night, you will have it, sir. As soon as you finish your breakfast, come to me in all haste!”

## Confession

“Did you hear the news, Minty?”

“What, Dowdy?”

“It’s the Grippe—t’was started in the new Hanging Stoat. Mungo used bad, rotten wood for the construction, and it was infested with disease. Think about it: the Grippe started not long after the Stoat was rebuilt!”

Dowdy Cray, the wagon builder, had been telling Thimble Downers all morning about this latest theory, embellishing it more and more each time.

“It gets worse, Minty. Farmer Edythe knows about it and covered up the bad news with her campaign for Mayor!”

“No! That’s slander, Dowdy!” Minty was turning red under the collar. “Edythe and Mungo are friends of mine—and yours, too. I will naught ha’ ye libeling their good names!”

“Fine, think what you want, ya fool,” hooted Dowdy. “But think about the timing. I swear it’s in the rotten wood!”

In a huff, the wagonsmith stomped off down the street, leaving the tiny tinker by his cart full of wares. As he readied for departure, Minty heard more Halflings whispering about this rumor, impugning Edythe as running a dirty campaign for Mayor. He’d finally had enough and walked right over to the gaol to let Sheriff Forgo know. Yet as he got closer, he was sure the lawman already knew, as there were Edythe and Mungo giving him an earful.

“I’m sorry, Edythe, but that’s not illegal!”

“Spreading lies is not illegal?” Edythe was boiling mad. “We have it on good authority that Osgood Thrip, on behalf of the Mayor, has been buying drinks throughout the village and spreading this spurious rumor to anyone who’ll listen. And people are listening—I’ve been accused of being everything from a liar to a witch this morning!”

“That’s politics, darling, and I ain’t got nothing to do with that.” Forgo put his hands on his hips in exasperation. “If someone is breakin’ the law, you let me know, but lying is perfectly legal. Bring it up with Osgood or the Mayor, not me. Now if you’ll excuse me . . .”

Farmer Edythe and Mr. Mungo hurried off in a snit, knowing this was a big blow to her election chances. “That was a close one, Forgo.” It was Mr. Timmo, who had been quietly listening in.

“Yeah, this place is spinning out of control, and the last thing I need is some of Osgood Thrip’s shenanigans.” The Sheriff was exasperated. “And in the thick of it all, Winderiver decides to go on vacation.”

“Well, I wouldn’t necessarily say that ...”

“What do you know, Timmo? Tell me or I’ll clap ya in irons!”

“He’s in St. Borgo.”

“The capital? What the heck? And lemme guess, what vital piece of information has he withheld from me this time?”

Timmo could tell that Forgo was going to blow his top soon.

“He has the documents—Mr. Bindlestiff’s missing ones. And he’s going to get them translated.”

Flailing his arms and rolling his eyes, Forgo was beside himself.

“Why doesn’t that fool of a Halfling ever tell me anything? Of all the sneaky, backhanded tricks!”

“Sheriff, I think time was of the essence. He left almost immediately upon discovering the pages, which were in Ancient Dwarfish. Dorro has sought out a professor at the College of St. Borgo and promised to return quickly.”

“Do you have any other secrets for me?”

“No. But judging by the face of the young man behind you, I’d say, he does. And with that, I shall bid you farewell.”

Forgo spun around and saw his deputy, Gadget Pinkle, standing awkwardly by the gaol’s doorway.

“Ummm, Sheriff, can we have a word?”

“Don’t tell me yer quittin’ on me, Gadget! I have enough on my mind without having to find a new deputy.” Forgo walked brusquely past the skinny man-boy and into his office. He sat and groaned, knowing this wasn’t good news. “Out with it, Pinkle.”

“I’ve been meaning to talk to you for a while, but here it is—I’m the Pie Thief.”

Forgo bugged his eyes at the red-haired boy for a moment. Then he burst out laughing.

“That’s a good one, Gadget! You had me going there. I was all prepared for bad news, but thank goodness—I needed a giggle.”

But Forgo noticed the boy wasn’t laughing. He just stood there, looking at his feet. “Oh no, please don’t tell me—”

“It started a few months ago, just for a thrill, Sheriff,” began the deputy, speaking slowly. “But I was really good at it; I mean, *really* good. I can steal just about anything, big or small. But I was caught and now chose to confess.”

“*Gub, gub, gub*—you’re serious aren’t you?” Forgo was stupefied. “Who caught you, might I ask? Don’t tell me it was Winderiver!”

“No, it was Miss Tunbridge. She caught me dead to rights.”

“Yes, I know. Of course, she’s Winderiver’s protégé. And I’m sure she told Dorro—another reason for him to get out of town in a hurry.”

“But Miss Tunbridge made me promise to turn over a new leaf, under penalty of, *errmmm*, force.”

“That little slip of a girl threatened you?” Forgo was beginning to enjoy this.

“In fact, sir, she did so and illustrated her threat quite vividly.” Gadget rubbed his sore back as the Sheriff chuckled. “I promise, I was gonna return everything I took. It was just a thrill.”

“Fortunately, Gadget, I have way too many things going on to bother with you. Oh, I’ll punish you eventually, but this village is on the verge of chaos, and I need your help keepin’ it together. In the interim, young man, you will begin returning everything you stole. No, you don’t have to tell anyone, but I want everything back to its original owner, minus anything you ate. And if I hear of anything being stolen in Thimble Down again, I’m coming after you, deputy or not, and am going to toss your rear end in goal. Understand?”

“Yessir. And thank you, sir. And—”

“Gadget, shut up and get the hell out of here! Go return your booty and come find me later. We have work to do.”

“Thank you, Sheriff! You won’t be sorry!”

Gadget beamed with joy and dashed out of the gaol, verily dancing on air.

“No wonder that kid was yawning so much when I hired him,” figured Forgo. “Gadget was up all night stealing the citizens of Thimble Down blind. I shoulda known!”

Speaking of yawning, Sheriff Forgo put his head down on his desk for a quick nap. With all the commotion, he needed as much sleep as he could get.

A few minutes later, he was happily snoring away.

## A Thieving Hand

“Hurry, Cheeryup, we mustn’t be late!”

Double-checking his beloved pocket watch, Dorro was anxious to meet Professor Larkspur. He awoke Cheeryup and the Dwarves at seven o’clock and rushed them through breakfast. The bookmaster wasn’t going to be even one second late for this important appointment.

They reached the moss-covered building on the campus of the College of St. Borgo and pushed opened the door. Dorro was relieved to see the aged porter sitting in his little nook, pouring over ledger accounts and other pages.

“Greetings again.”

“Ah, you are the party from yesterday afternoon. Back so soon?” said the porter in his creaky voice. “How nice.”

“Yes, indeed!” crowed Dorro. “We have an important appointment with Professor Larkspur, and I’m sure he’s eagerly awaiting us.”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“But yes, we are *most* expected.”

Dorro was getting a little irked and held up his silver pocket watch as if it was some kind of proof of their meeting. “We shall show ourselves upstairs if you don’t mind. This is not negotiable, my good man!”

“Oh, I don’t mind if you go upstairs,” laughed the porter. “Go upstairs all you want! But you won’t find Professor Larkspur. Neither today, nor for many months.”

He chuckled again and went back to reviewing his paperwork.

“What do you mean he’s not there? Of course, he’s there! The scholar told us to come back this morning at this precise time.” Dorro was beginning to panic.

“I can’t speak to that, m’lord. But as soon as you left yesterday, Professor Larkspur announced he was going on sabbatical—a long one—and wouldn’t be back until next term. He said he’d just made an important discovery in the realm of Ancient Dwarf culture and would be off until who know’s when. And that’s the truth, sir. If you don’t like that answer, ’tis nothing I can do about it.”

“Beggin’ yer pardon, Mr. Dorro,” added Crumble, “But I think yon Larkspur stole your papers and is gone, hell or high water.”

Dorro was about to burst into tears. “I knew I shouldn’t have left those papers.”



“I say let’s go after ’im,” piped in Aramina. “Oooo, when we catch the old scunner, I’ll fix his wagon. Let’s see how well the thief does his readin’ and researchin’ with just one eyeball! Or maybe I could remove a few of his fingers—hard to turn pages with just a thumb.”

She smiled her crooked smile, revealing a mouth of nasty brown teeth, some of them missing.

“What are we going to do, Mr. Dorro?” cried Cheeryup. “Our journey is in vain! Those pages are lost.”

“This is a tragic blow, I admit,” Dorro frowned, “But all is not lost.” Reaching in his satchel, the bookmaster fished around for a moment and pulled out some pages—they were nearly perfect replicas of the missing pages.

“How did you get those?” the girl exclaimed in wonder.

“I didn’t get to be bookmaster for nothing, my dear. Upon receiving the documents from you, the first thing I did was to hire Mr. Bedminster Shoe to make several precise copies. He’s a marvel! Doesn’t even speak Ancient Dwarfish, but his calligraphy is so fine that he was able to duplicate the nuances of their written language.”

“Thank goodness you made a copy,” Cheeryup added.

“Oh, we made a several copies, the rest of which are safely locked up in the rare book room of the Thimble Down library,” Dorro winked. “But that doesn’t solve our current problem—we’re still many miles from home and have little to show for our journey. The information in these pages is still locked in a mysterious language I can’t decipher, and the one-and-only expert at the College of St. Borgo has taken flight. I’m afraid we must go home in defeat.”

“Beggin’ yer pardon, sir ...”

“Crumble, you don’t have to ‘beg my pardon.’ Just say what you need to, man!”

Dorro was getting exasperated with his Dwarf friend’s endlessly polite nature.

“It’s just that there is an alternative.”

“That’s right, Mr. Dorro, there is a good ‘un!” Aramina was hopping up and down on her toes, excited by the same idea. “It will require a bit of a journey.”

“That it will, but I can guarantee you the pages will get translated.” Crumble was looking at Dorro adamantly.

“Well, out with it!”

“The Seer! The Seer!” Aramina began a joyful little dance. “We can go home!”

“Crumble, please explain.”

“Y’see, sir, we can go north to our city—a magnificent place called Gildenhall—and speak with the Dwarf Seer, a lady of incredible mental facilities and intelligence. She understands the past, prophesies the future, and can change the present. The Seer will read your pages like it was for wee toddlers.”

“How far would this journey be? I’m not sure we’re prepared. And is it dangerous?”

Crumble continued: “I cannot lie to you, friend. It’s a good hundred miles to the Northeast, across the Wastes, and some of it is in open country where goblins and wolves ply their trade. But you have a purse full of coins, I’ve noticed, sir. With that, you could sell your wagon and buy four stout ponies. You two will need some warmer clothing and we’ll need to stock up on food. That said, it will take us four days to reach Gildenhall. And as for the enemy, we have one distinct advantage—Malachite Molly!”

Aramina smiled bashfully and giggled, “Awww, Crumbly, you sure know how to flatter a girl.”

“I’d put Aramina up against fifty goblins, and we’d still come out smelling like roses. We’ll make sure you get back to Thimble Down, too!”

“Well Cheeryup, are you up for more adventuring?” Dorro looked at her earnestly. “This won’t be like a gentle canoe ride on the River Thimble. It will be hard travel through wild lands.”

“We go,” said the girl firmly, “If Wyll can run off on an adventure, so can I!”

\* \* \*

Not six hours later, the foursome was wending their way out of St. Borgo on four gray-and-white ponies. The troupe had packed its belongings and retreated to the livery, where Dorro negotiated the sale of his cart and ponies, and procurement of fresh animals.

Clothes and provisions were hastily bought, and the band launched their journey by mid-afternoon. The skies had turned gray, and a steady rain had begun, causing Dorro to regret his decision, but the die was cast and they were en route to a strange new land. There was no turning back now.

*Shall I ever see my beloved burrow again? he wondered. Shall I ever fish again in the river, or file books away in my library? And what about Wyll? I’ve failed him most of all. Still, we must complete this mission and I must return Cheeryup to her mother safe and sound. I shall never forgive myself if anything happens to her.*

Dorro’s pony snorted loudly, drawing him out of his worried thought. He looked around and saw only a drenched, gray landscape. And far in the distance, he could just make out a thin line of mountains.

*Why, oh why, are we going to the mountains? I could be home at the Perch making a pot of strong black tea and reading a book before the fire. Drat! Curse myself for being such a fool!*

## **An Audience is Granted**

The ride northward was an unpleasant business.

It rained for two straight days, and a bitter wind blew in from the west, making the Halflings freeze in their saddles. Cheeryup didn't complain, but everyone made sure she had the most blankets. Dorro even had trouble even lighting his pipe weed, which made him particularly grumpy—and he made sure everyone knew it.

On the afternoon of the fourth day out of St. Borgo, Aramina hooted excitedly. “Look, Crumbly! There, on that third hill!”

Crumble scanned the horizon and became excited himself.

“I don't know if you can see it, Mr. Dorro, but on that distant hillock is a stone war totem—an ancient ruin that is well known by all Dwarf travelers. It means we are getting close to Gildenhall.”

“How close? I need a bath!” Dorro scowled at his companion, still irritable and cold.

“Oh, about ten miles as the hawk flies. We could either stop for the night or press on.”

“If we keep going, can I get a bath tonight?”

Crumble and Aramina broke out in mirth. “Of course you can, silly Halfling!” croaked Aramina. “Wait until he sees the hot springs of Gildenhall, Crumbly. Yon book master will faint at the sight of our grand baths and grottos.”

“’Tis true! Mr. Dorro might never come out of the water. He'll be a wrinkled prune!”

Dorro brightened immeasurably at the thought of a real soaking. “I promise I won't complain anymore. That, food, and a nice bed and this Halfling will be happy as a fox in a chicken coop.”

The band rode on quietly, following the same strange road that Wyll and Orli had taken a few days earlier. First it rose into the mountains, but then began its descent deep into the heart of stone. Dorro was relieved the Dwarf guards knew Aramina and Crumble as they passed, and entered the city without problem.

It was hours later when they finally entered the halls of Gildenhall, and by then, the city was quiet. Aramina and Crumble had a few matters to attend to, so they found porters to take Dorro and Cheeryup to the baths, and later to carved guest rooms where they'd find beds and food. To the Halflings, the softly glowing Dwarf environs were rather surreal, but they were tired and hungry. Eventually, after their much-needed baths, they were led to their adjoining rooms and slept for the remainder of the night.

\* \* \*

The following morning was quite different.

Dorro and Cheeryup were awakened early by their porters and given a quick breakfast of hardboiled eggs, cheese, and fruit before being led off by porters for a tour. The two Thimble Downers were awed by the immense caverns, arches, and bridges that spanned the inner halls of the city. They asked about the pale blue-and-green lights that illuminated everything underground, but found it difficult to understand the earthly power behind these luminescent rocks. It seemed magic.

Similarly, the entire heating of Gildenhall was controlled from deep within the planet, where miners manipulated hot flumes to allow just the right amount of warmth to pervade the caverns where Dwarves worked and lived. It was an amazing feat of natural engineering.

“Ahoy, Mr. Dorro!” They heard Crumble hollering down a long stone hallway. “Over here!”

Dorro thanked the Dwarf porters and tried to tip them with a few silver pieces, but they snorted at the gesture and departed in friendship. (Dorro had yet to comprehend the immense wealth of Gildenhall. A few silver pieces were nothing for folk who found precious stones and metals under every other rock.)

“There you are, Mr. Dorro and Miss Cheeryup,” said Crumble, jogging up with Aramina and some other Dwarves. “We’ve had a bit of a surprise this morning, and in fact, a good one! You may know these hale young fellows.”

From behind the Dwarf stepped Wyll and Orli. A blur of yellow hair streaked by Dorro as Cheeryup threw her arms around Wyll’s neck and hugged the life out of him. Momentarily shocked, the bookmaster joined the throng and joyously embraced his nephew, while clapping Orli on the back.

“I don’t know what to say!” Dorro was both flustered and thrilled to find the boy. “One part of me wants to scold you, Wyll Underfoot, while the other wants to hold onto you forever.”

“You won’t run off again, Wyll, will you?” begged Cheeryup, tears brimming in her eyes. “Do you know how much I missed you?”

“Errr, I’m sorry,” said Wyll. “I didn’t mean to be a bother.”

“You’re not, boy, and believe me, I know I’m to blame. I’m a bit hard on you, but that’s only because I don’t want to let your dear departed mother down. She wanted you raised right, and indeed sometimes I take it too far.” Dorro looked the youngling straight in the eyes. “I’m sorry, Wyll. Can you forgive a foolish uncle?”

Wyll smiled shyly and embraced the elder Halfling.

“They’re both scamps, I tell ya!” laughed Crumble. “But I knew they’d be alright. Dwarf lads are forever running off into the wild for a lark. I did it half a dozen times and even took a few

whippings from my Pa. But he knew it was good for me, and I think these boys did well—they crossed nearly a hundred miles of open country and survived the worst goblin attack in years.”

“Goblin attack?” shrieked Dorro and Cheeryup in tandem, prompting Orli to relay the story of the battle and Wyll’s injury.

“I thought I noticed you limping, Wyll. I shall never forgive myself. Will it mend?”

Wyll nodded while Orli continued, “Thankfully it weren’t no poisoned goblin arrow. Otherwise, he’d-*a* been a croaker, but he’s dandy now, right mate?”

Dorro thought he would faint upon hearing this, but retained his composure. He also noticed Cheeryup hadn’t let go of Wyll’s hand. She was white as a ghost at the news of the attack.

“Enough of this banter, Mr. Dorro. We got work to do!” chimed in Crumble. “First off, we received an audience with the Seer, which is good. She’s never met Halflings and is intrigued by your kind. Second, there’s word of mysterious goblin movements in the North country, and we have scouts returning today. There might be action sooner than we think.”

“Aye, and a good thing, too,” leered Aramina. “I’m getting a little rusty—it’s time for Malachite Molly to get back on the trail and hunt some goblin necks. I haven’t had a good fight in months!”

For dramatic effect, she pulled a huge knife out of her belt and admired its deadly glimmer in the light.

## The Seer

“Crumble, just who exactly is the Seer?”

Dorro, Wyll, Cheeryup, and the Dwarves were walking down a long, softly lit hallway carved out of solid rock and radiating blue and green hues. They were off to meet this revered Dwarf personage, but for the life of him, Dorro had no idea why.

“The Seer *is* ...” Even Crumble seemed to be at a loss for words. “She is a very ancient one and has always been with us. Even if the Seer’s natural body dies, a new one is appointed and carries the tradition forward.”

“But what does she do?” pressed Dorro.

“*Do?* The Seer guides us and imparts her wisdom unto all. She tells us if it’s right to go to war, or time to bring in harvest food for the Winter. The Seer can tell a Dwarf mother if her child will be a boy or a girl—she’s never wrong—or who our next king should be. She is a fixed star, she is, and we all revolve around her.”

“How old is she?” asked Cheeryup. “More than a hundred years?”

“Hard to know, lassie. I’m one hundred and forty-seven, and she’s been around since ’ere I was born. But make no mistake—the Seer is artful and crafty. She will not give us anything without getting something in return. That is her nature.”

“But I don’t have anything, Crumble.”

Dorro was already nervous, and this only made him more so. “I have money, but that would only make her laugh.” He recalled the reaction he received from the porters.

“She will tell us, but there’s no more time to discuss the matter,” said Crumble with absolute seriousness.

“We are *here*.”

\* \* \*

Upon arriving at outer chambers, the troupe was led through a labyrinthine web of caves, curving tunnels, and chambers that led even deeper into the mountain. Finally, a pair of guards opened copper doors—beautifully ornamented with flowers, vines, and birds, aged to a green patina—and bade the party to enter.

Inside was an enormous chasm, like a great cone extending upwards and downwards in equal vastness. Looking up they could see a dot of the sky in the distance, while below was pure black, yet a pleasing heat wafted upward from its depths. A single path extended into the middle of the space—it was a hewn road of rock about twelve feet wide that led into the dark core of the cavern.

On either side, it fell into an abyss.

“Come, Mr. Dorro, follow us quietly.” Crumble and Aramina led them onto the dim pathway and into the shadow. “Stay close, young ones, as you don’t want to fall. There ain’t no return from that error in judgment.”

They walked on into the gloom—Dorro, Crumble, Aramina, Wyll, Cheeryup, and Orli—moving slowly and carefully and, no doubt, with a bit of fear in their stomachs. Soon, in the mist they approached a glowing orb. As they got closer, they saw it was glowing rock, embedded in the stone platform and radiating light from a source deep within the rock shaft.

Reflected in the light was a throne of marble, a broad bench with cushions. And on it lay a figure resembling nothing more than a bundle of clothes. But as they approached, the bundle stirred, and a white-haired head popped up and eyed them balefully. The Seer pulled herself into a sitting position, and they could see that she was very old and wrinkled and had one eye that appeared milky and blind. But the other eye followed them sharply.

“Oh, Greatest Seer of the Northern Kingdom, please forgive our intrusion into your peace,” began Crumble with the utmost tact. “We have come a hundred miles to ask for your guidance and wisdom.”

The Seer said nothing, but ever-so-slightly nodded, as if to say she accepted his supplication and he could continue.

“Wisest of all Dwarves, I bring you three from the Halfling lands to the South. They have a grave affliction on their village, and the only clue to the mystery is an ancient Dwarf manuscript which none of us can translate. We beg to ask if you can read it for us.”

“Hand it to me,” rasped the Seer.

Her voice was ancient, queer, and disarming. Dorro felt a chill run down his spine as he rifled through his bag for the copy Bedminster had produced and gave it to Crumble. The Seer snatched the pages from the Dwarf’s hand and perused them closely with her one good eye.

Every few seconds she murmured to herself, “*Aye*” or “*Yes!*” with quiet excitement, but said little else to the group.

Finally, she looked up and spoke. “This is strange and terrible. And magical and endearing to me who is very old. Where did you get it?”

Dorro checked with Crumble that it was permitted for him to speak.

“It was brought to our village by a Halfling merchant. He did not give its origins, but said it related to his work smelting metals together in the Dwarfish fashion.”

“Indeed, your Brilliance,” continued Crumble. “My brothers and I work for this merchant, owing to our natural expertise in matters of metal and ore.”

“But where did *you* get the document, Son of Dwarves?” The Seer’s good eye was fixed beadily on Crumble. “And do not lie to me. I have not time for games.”

“It was stolen from the merchant, but I swear, not by myself or my brothers.”

Crumble was sweating—he didn’t want to give the wrong answer.

“No matter, I suppose. But this merchant must have stolen it from this College of St. Borgo. It seems our own master of the archives gave it to the Halfling library for knowledge, so they would understand the power of the black rocks. It’s an ancient manuscript of our kind, and in my opinion, not worthy of the lower Halfling species.”

The Seer looked up, remembering who was present, but chose to ignore her own insult nor did offer any intention of an apology.

“Ah yes, there are members of that particular clan here. Such strange folk! I have never met your kind before. Do you have a name?”

The bookmaster cleared his throat. “I am known as Dorro Fox Winderiver. And these are my two young charges, Wyll Underfoot and Cheeryup Tunbridge.”

The Seer said nothing for a moment, but then began making a horrible wheezing sound, as if having an asthmatic attack. Dorro realized she was laughing at them. The creature even smiled, revealing a toothless mouth of all gums.

“What pretentious names you have, Halfling,” mocked the ancient Dwarf. “But they most amuse me. Very little else does these days, so I am pleased.”

Under normal circumstances, Dorro might have given her a piece of his mind, but instead asked, “Can you tell us what is in this manuscript?”

At once the Seer stopped smirking, and from the corner of his eye, Dorro saw Crumble and Aramina roll their eyes, as if he’d said precisely the wrong thing.

“How dare you, miserable Halfling! *You* do not ask *me* for favors—either I grant them of my own accord or else might have you tossed off this chasm shelf into the darkness below.”

“*I ... I ...* I apologize, your Brightness,” said Dorro, trying to salvage the moment. “But we have traveled many miles and hope that the contents of the document may save our village from destruction. Many lives depend on the words in your hands.”

That seemed to appease the fickle Dwarf priestess. “What do you have for me?”

“I don’t have much—coins of silver, some nuggets of gold,” frowned Dorro. “I can tell you of our Halfling ways, if that interests you at all.”



The Seer's head slowly drooped, and she began to snore, indicating that she had lost interest and the interview was over. Instinctually, Dorro reached to his vest and pulled out his pocket watch to check the time. They'd already been in there close to one hour.

"What is that?" The raspy voice once again filled the chamber. "Give it here! What is that magical device?"

"What, *this*?" Dorro was startled and flustered. "It's just my pocket watch. I use it to tell time."

"Let me see it! Let me see it!"

The Seer's voice rose with tingling excitement.

As much as he was loath to part with it, Dorro unclipped the watch chain from his vest and put it in the Dwarf's bony, wrinkled hand.

"*Ahhhh!*" was all she said as she began flipping it around and examining every nook and crevice on the device. "How does it work, Halfling?"

Stepping closer, Dorro said, "Well, you simply wind it once a day. It was made for me by my dear friend Mr. Timmo, as you can see on the inscription inside the back. One needs to be careful not to *over*-wind it; that could break the delicate gears and mechanisms within. You can open the back and observe the wheels moving."

There was silence, and finally the Seer spoke again in her thin, grating voice.

"It's strange to me that the superior culture and craftsmanship of the Dwarves cannot make anything as delicate as this device. Yet your simple race has not only attempted to create a mechanical timepiece, but also mastered its construction. How can that be? The Halflings are of limited intelligence."

Dorro was about to give the Seer a tongue lashing when Crumble jumped in. "Greatest of All, they are in fact quite bright and lucid. Theirs is a fully functioning society with rules and laws, as well as a mastery of many industrial arts. Granted, they are not Dwarves, but not unintelligent either."

That seemed to satisfy the Seer, though not Dorro, who was very proud of his Halfling nature. He was seething.

"This, I say to you, Halfling. For this timepiece, I shall decipher your cryptic manuscript. It shall serve as my gift."

Dorro couldn't keep quiet. "I'm sorry, oh Brilliant One, but that was given to me by a good friend. I couldn't part with it."

The Seer looked at him with one narrowing eye. "What is this impudence? Crumble, speak to me! Did the Halfling refuse me a gift? Guards! Seize him!"

Suddenly, the two armed Dwarfs charged down the path and stood menacingly on either side of Dorro.

“No, of course not, Greatest and Wisest of All.” Crumble was desperately trying to control the damage. “The Halfling meant that it was a gift to him, and now it’s his honor to give it to you. That *is* what he was saying. Maybe I was overgenerous and his species is of limited intelligence after all.”

“I suppose you are right,” sneered the ancient one. “I may have him tossed into the chasm anyway. That would please me, at least for a few seconds.”

Dorro could stand being called many insults, but stupid wasn’t one of them. Yet Cheeryup grabbed the bookmaster’s sleeve and tugged hard. “Mr. Dorro, you must give it to her,” she whispered violently. “If you don’t, you may die and so might we! And Mr. Timmo can always make you a new pocket watch. Please, Mr. Dorro, listen to reason.”

Dorro looked at Wyll and noticed he was stark white, as were his Dwarf friends. And so he decided this wasn’t the time to whip the famed Winderiver temper into a snit and cooled himself down.

“Hear me, Wisest of All Seers—the timepiece is my humble gift to you.” With great reluctance, he even bowed to the Seer, though groveling was did not come naturally to him.

“Be that as it may, Halfling.” The Seer looked disappointed that she couldn’t have him thrown to his death. “I will enjoy your toy. It is unknown to our world, and I will have our finest craftsmen make me dozens of them.”

Still playing the role, Dorro humbly bowed again.

“As for my end of the bargain,” croaked the Seer, “I must say you have an interesting document here. It’s not from Gildenhall; no, it’s much older than that, from the earliest days of our Dwarf ancestors mining in mountains even further to the North. It concerns the black stones, one of the sources of our fuel, and indeed our power. These rocks burn, as you well know, yet have no impact on the Dwarves.”

“Yet this manuscript speaks of the race of Halflings to the South, as well as foul Men, Elves, and other subspecies. To them, the words on this page speak to a disease of the lungs, an affliction that brings endless sleep that ends in death. It was for this reason that we stopped trade of the black stones with non-Dwarves, for their own good. And moreover, we burn all we find, so it serves us well not to share the precious resource.”

“That is what is ailing the good folks of Thimble Down!” gasped Dorro. “Pray, oh Great One, what is the disease called?”

“It is *Polonium* in our language,” said the Seer absently. “But your type, Halfling, would probably just call it the Grippe. Trust me, it’s quite deadly. The merchant you spoke of earlier—he must have gotten his cache in illicit ways. Nor do I blame you, Crumble; you and your brothers are miners, not traders. But for this wicked fellow to get black stones in the quantity you describe, he must have a secret partner in the North. I shall alert the Dwarf Council. They will

find the source in Gildenhall and deal with that individual severely. I presume he shall lose his head.”

Dorro just gulped at the callous way the Seer described Dwarf justice.

“As for you, Halfling, I’d advise you to return to your village and halt the burning of black stones immediately.” The Seer smiled in her strange, toothless way. “That is, if they’re not all dead by now.”

A commotion broke out at the entrance to the Seer’s chasm, and a solitary guard came running forward.

“Pardon the intrusion, your Supreme Wisdom, but we need Aramina right away. Our scouts have returned and their news is grim. The goblins are near and massing for war!”

“They wouldn’t dare attack Gildenhall,” snarled Aramina. “I’d just like to see ’em try!”

“No, that was just a feint,” cried the guard. “They’re going to the South—they’re going to wipe out the Halflings in the Great Wood. Around a village called Tumble Du mm.”

“*Whew,*” sighed Dorro. “At least it’s not our beloved village.”

Cheeryup again tugged on his sleeve and whispered, “I think that’s what he meant to say. The goblins will be attacking our home—they’re headed for Thimble Down!”

Dorro looked up blankly.

All he could manage to say was, “*Oh, poo.*”

## The Wide Green Open

The troupe bade farewell to the Seer, rushing back over the rocky bridge and into the bustling center of Gildenhall.

There was action aplenty, as Dwarves of all shape, size, age, and gender were girding for battle. Male and female alike were donning leather jerkins and tying back their hair into braids or ponytails to lessen distraction and make their helmets fit better. Chain mail vests came next, followed by swords, axes, and maces. The noise was overwhelming for the quiet Thimble Downers, but they were fascinated by the battle talk all around them.

“Are all the Dwarves going to war?” asked Dorro.

“Hardly, friend,” laughed Aramina, “We’ve been battlin’ goblins, wolves, and trolls long enough to know what deceivers they are. Surely, they’re going south to your lands, but that doesn’t mean they don’t have a reserve force to lay siege to Gildenhall and the other Dwarf cities. Many will stay behind to protect our lands.”

“What should we do?”

“You should prepare, Mr. Dorro. You and *yer* young friends.” Aramina was no longer in a jovial mood. “You’ll all need to fight. Our force will leave in a few hours and race southwards to the Great Wood. With a bit ‘o luck, we will reach Thimble Down before the goblins do.”

“Move along smartly, Mr. Dorro, move along,” crowed Crumble, gesturing for him and his young friends to follow. “We must suit you up and find fast ponies.”

In short order, the Thimble Downers were led to the armory and fitted with small Dwarf jerkins and shirts of mail to protect them from arrows and sword thrusts to the body. Helmets were placed on their heads for added protection, and short chain-mail skirts were fitted around their middles.

Dorro felt a little foolish in all the military gear, but didn’t want to be any more trouble than he’d already been. Thankfully, he reflected, the Seer had not tossed him into the chasm for his insolence.

Next came a magnificent meal, possibly their last for quite a while and for some, their last ever. Crumble, Aramina, and Orli each wolfed down tasty roasted fowl and slow-braised goat, baked potatoes, broiled squash, and beer. The Halflings ate less, but saved some bread in their pockets for later. There would be little time for eating on the way South.

“We’re going to stage a lightning strike, if we can,” spat Aramina between ravenous bites. “We’ll confuse the goblins with a few small squadrons who will act like advance scouts and divert them from the main force. That’s where we’ll be, weaving in and out of valleys and forests for cover, but moving with great speed. If all goes as planned ...”

She took an enormous bite out of a lamb shank.

Crumble picked up the thread, “... *if* all goes as planned, the goblins should think Thimble Down is undefended and be unprepared for a Dwarf army to hit them from the West—fast, deadly, and without mercy.”

“And with Malachite Molly at their head!” howled the Dwarf warrior. “By that time, I’ll be chompin’ on the bit to lop some beans off with me axe and sword. But best you stay more than twenty paces away from me in battle. Sometimes the battle fever takes me into a trance, and I almost lop off a Dwarf’s head or two by accident.”

She smiled sheepishly, like she’d been caught stealing sweets.

“That’s our Molly,” leered Crumble. “No better *orkus* chopper in the Wide Green Open.”

Suddenly, yells and bellowing broke up the conversation. Shouts of “Mount up! We ride for victory! Death to the *orkus*!” rang through the air and the Dwarf soldiers began running this way and that.

In minutes, they were clambering up on ponies and following the warriors upwards through the tunnel.

The Dwarf horde of Gildenhall was riding for battle.

\* \* \*

The troops rode at breakneck speed. The Thimble Downers fell asleep in their saddles, and it was a wonder none fell and were trampled. Fortunately, the deft hands and care of Orli and a few other Dwarves kept them upright, even the younglings who were sound asleep.

During the night, Dorro was jostled awake on one occasion, so much so that he could not fall back to sleep, but was reassured to find Crumble and Aramina riding next to him. He could hear them discussing battle strategies and various throat-cutting and neck-snapping techniques, some of them quite grotesque. The bookmaster coughed a few times to alert them he was awake, spurring a change in conversation.

“How are ye faring, Mr. Dorro?” asked the ever-solicitous Crumble.

“Aside from a sore backside, not awful. Tell me, why would the goblins want to invade the Halfling counties? We can’t be of any strategic importance, nor have we any real wealth. At least none like Gildenhall.”

Aramina growled under her breath, while Crumble replied to the bookmaster's question. "It really has nothing to do with the Halflings, but alas, hurting you would be a disaster for the Dwarves."

"How so? I don't understand."

Crumble looked grim in the starlight, the ponies walking through rocky terrain in the near darkness.

"Ye see, Mr. Dorro, Dwarves—much like Halflings—have a role to play in this world. Despite the undiplomatic words of the Seer, most Dwarves have a higher regard for your species. And precisely for one *verra* good reason—The Great Wood."

"The Great Wood? What does our forest have to do with this war?"

"The Wood, as ye may or may not know, is a very ancient part of our world, existing back through the millennia to the time before either Dwarves or Halflings existed. And for lack o' a better term, those woodlands provide a gentle, balancing power that transcends us all."

"It's true then?" said Dorro. "I've sometimes wondered if there isn't a little magic there."

"A little?" Crumble snorted. "My dear Mr. Dorro, there's more than a little. As I said, the lands yer folk call the Great Wood brings a certain balance to everything, as do our mountains of the North, the great seas of the West, and the dry lands of the South. They all work together to keep everything in harmony. Am I makin' myself clear?"

"I think so—but what about the *orkus*? Why do they want to destroy Thimble Down and the forest?"

"Let me keep going with my tale," replied Crumble, looking up at the stars. "The Halflings, as far as we can tell, were put in the Wide Green Open to serve an important task."

"Us? We're so benign, really," said Dorro. "We just like to eat, drink, smoke, and laugh, as far as I can tell. A bit of light gardening, too."

"'Tis true, but we see so much more. The Halflings are gardeners and woodland lovers, and in their queer way, care for the Great Wood. You are its guardians, though little do ye know it."

"I knew it!" chirped Dorro. "I mean, I didn't literally know, but I've felt it all along. There is a subtle magic in it all—I can feel it every time I step into the forest. But you still haven't gotten to the goblins."

"My, yer an impatient one! But such is the nature of Halflings—you only ever slow down for lunch and to pull on some Old Nob pipeweed. Now, as for the foul beasties of the East, they are attacking your villages for the very reasons I've offered: they want to destroy the Great Wood and the power it keeps on the land. And that, my friend, is why Dwarves and elves inhabit the Wide Green Open, too. We're here to protect the Halflings."

"Are you, indeed?" Dorro could hardly believe what he was hearing.

“We’re all protectors in our way. The Halflings protect a large swath of the Great Wood, really by just being who they are. Gentle, light-hearted folk who love their trees and gardens. That’s an important job right there. But the elves, as you may know, help protect the woods, as well as cover yer Eastern flank from fell beasts.”

“Towards the South, Men-folk offer a line of resistance and also sail the seas to keep marauders away from our world. And to the North, we Dwarves protect the mountains and also keep an eye on our little friends in the Great Wood, while giants keep an eye on the Grey Mountains far to the East, especially those accursed trolls. In its way, we all serve the Wide Green Open, the lands and forests, and everything that lives in it, from snakes and snails to bears and eagles.”

“Giants? Trolls? I thought they were mere fables.” Dorro was incredulous. “So if the goblins can successfully raid Thimble Down, they can cause the Dwarves to fail—and even the Great Wood itself!”

“Aye—it they had their way, they’d ride into yon forests and chop down every tree, except those that provide habitat for the animals they want to eat. The goblins’ world is one of chaos and greed—they care not for growing things, but are intelligent and formidable foes. They care not for the land, nor the world we live in. And that’s why we must fight them tooth ’n’ claw.”

“Yet the black stones from Mr. Bindlestiff’s forge began destroying the Great Wood from within.”

“I do feel horrible about that, Mr. Dorro.” Crumble’s words were grave. “Had we known we were threatening the balance of the Great Wood, we would have never been a part of his smeltery. I feel guilty enough, on top of which, I lost my brother Wump to a heartless killer.”

“You didn’t know what was to happen, Crumble. No one in Thimble Down will blame you, so long as we stop the burning of stones, and spreading polluting gases and disease-spreading vapors.”

“Still, you have my word that we shall never give the black stones to anyone outside our caves again.”

“Crumble look—the sun is coming up.” Dorro was pointing to the horizon excitedly. “Look, right over there!”

“But Mr. Dorro, you’re pointing southward; the sun is in East.”

“*Then ...*”

Crumble stood taller in his saddle and began calling to his comrades.

“Awake! Riders, awake! War and woe are upon us. Ride for Gildenhall! Ride for the Halflings! Ride to victory!”

He bolted away on his pony, dashing towards the glow in the Southern skies.

“Aramina, what’s going on? What is that bright light?”

“Tis not dawn’s light, my Halfling friend. It is *yer* Great Wood.”

The warrior known as Malachite Molly had a look of grim determination on her face.

“Them lousy goblins are burning it, right down to the ground!”



## Goblin Necks

The final few miles were grueling.

As the Dwarves of Gildenhall neared Thimble Down, their vision was filled with the sight of trees burning against the night sky. Ponies were urged on at full speed, while some Dwarf fighters simply dismounted and ran to face their enemy, axes and swords at the ready.

Crumble, Aramina, and Orli had long since sped off on their own, and for a moment Dorro didn't know where he was or what to do. Slowly, he became aware of a few burrows in the darkness and knew he was riding through West Upper-Down, just to the north of his own village.

Despite Crumble's orders that everyone must fight, the Halfling grabbed the reins of Wyll and Cheeryup's ponies and drew them off to the side, letting the other Dwarves pass. He knew an elderly spinster in this tiny hamlet and soon found her door.

"Open, Mrs. Finch, please! It's Dorro Fox Winderiver, the bookmaster of Thimble Down. Please open up!"

His voice was quaking with fear, something he could not conceal.

He hammered on the door a few more times until he saw a wrinkled face at the window and heard bolts unlatching. The door creaked open a few inches. "Is that really you, Mr. Dorro? Thank King Borgo, it t'is! I've ne'er been so afraid in all me life."

"As well you should be, Mrs. Finch. I don't have time to tarry, yet I must ask you a staggering favor. These are my wards, Wyll and Cheeryup. Please, take them into your burrow, fortify your doors and windows, and keep them safe until my return. They are priceless to me, but a great battle has befallen us all, and I fear the next few hours shall be the worst."

"Mr. Dorro, sir, what are those horrible creatures that raced through West Upper-Down a few hours ago? They looked like something out of me worst nightmares as a child."

"They *were*, dear lady—I'm afraid those were goblins." Dorro looked at Mrs. Finch with a combination of fear and sadness as the aged woman recoiled in horror. "Again, I must go, but guard my young ones. And barricade every door and window. It may be your only chance!"

*"Mr. Dorro!"*

Yet even as Mrs. Finch shouted his name, the bookmaster had remounted his pony and bolted into the blackness. He could not bear saying goodbye to his young friends again. Though Dorro was anything but a soldier, this attack on the Great Wood struck him to the core. He knew tonight could be his last night of life, yet Crumble's words still resonated with him.

*I knew it! I knew there was a reason we Halflings cherish the Great Wood,* he thought as his pony cantered forward. *We are its protectors, and although I don't want to die just yet, if that is my mission, I shall fulfill it.*

And with that Dorro pulled a small sword out of his scabbard and kicked the pony in its flanks. Against the flaming forests ahead of him he could already see Dwarves and goblins locked in mortal combat.

*“For Thimble Down!”* he screamed as he leapt from his pony and swung his stout blade at the first goblin that dared step into his path.

\* \* \*

Sheriff Forgo was in the moment.

As soon as an exhausted Dwarf scout had ridden into the village ten hours before, his world had become a blur of action and activity. The scout had warned them that the *orkus* host was headed their way, several thousand soldiers strong and prepared to lay waste to the Halflings villages. On another day, the Sheriff might have laughed it off as a joke, but when Flume, Magpie, and Two-Toes corroborated the rumor, Forgo got to work.

He ordered Gadget Pinkle to run through the village, mobilizing folk to prepare for battle. Many of them also laughed, but word of the goblin army followed just as fast, and soon all of Thimble Down was roused to war.

It was of no surprise that the Mayor fled from the village, but Farmer Edythe came to the gaol and began rallying the troops and heeding the Sheriff's commands. Her brave actions did not go unnoticed by the denizens of Thimble Down.

“How many do we have, Forgo?” cried Edythe, her red hair whipping in the rising wind. Rain would follow shortly, she knew.

“Five hundred at most. If the scout's estimate is accurate, the Dwarves are bringing a thousand of their own, but we'll still only have half of the goblin army. This may be the end of all things, Edythe.”

“Don't give up yet, Forgo! We have spirit on our side. Look, there's Mungo, Mr. Timmo, Farmer Duck, Minty Pinter, Dowdy Cray, Bog the Blacksmith, and Millin and Nutylla Parfinn. *Well, I'll be,* it's Osgood Thrip and his traders. Sure, they're smugglers by day, but I'm glad they're here anyway.”

“And we have all the brawny miners and smelters from Bindlestiff's—look'it, there's Stookey McGee and Mrs. Mick—though perhaps not the man himself. Mark my words, that coward Bindlestiff is hiding somewhere in his forge. The townsfolk will run him out of town, if he survives.”

“At the moment, Edythe, I’m worried if these townsfolk will tomorrow’s sunrise,” smirked Forgo, “We’re going to need everyone’s bravery today.”

In the darkness, lit by torches, he saw the faces of friends and neighbors, mothers and fathers, and many Halflings he’d known his entire life. And Forgo knew some of them wouldn’t be here to see the dawn. He took a deep breath and spoke anyway.

“Folks, in a few minutes, our world and way of life in Thimble Down will change—maybe forever.”

The Sheriff took a big breath and put his hands on his hips, his belly bulging even under a heavy jerkin.

“I won’t mince words. The goblins are coming and they’re comin’ to destroy our way of life. I already smell smoke, so figure the monsters have torched Upper-Down or maybe West Upper-Down. Or p’raps they’re making mischief in the Great Wood. Either way, Thimble Down is next, and it’s up to us to save it.”

“I know there are more of those rotten beasties than Halflings, but we have heart and courage. And we have families and younglings to protect—but we’re all we have left at this point, so it’s up to you. Do you want to die in your burrows and let the *orkus* slaughter your young and your neighbor’s children, too?”

“*No!*” roared the Thimble Downers in return.

“That’s good because we’re gonna need your strength of heart,” said Forgo grimly. “Now here’s the lay of the land: First, we know the bastards are coming in from the North. I’m going to take half of you and create a perimeter just above Fell’s Corner and try to repel the bulk of the enemy there.

“Fortunately, I know a little something about those buggers, and I bet some of ’em are sneaking around our border at this very second and might attack in any direction. So half of you are gonna stay here and patrol the village.”

“And for goodness sake, *look up!* Goblins can climb up and over burrows like spiders, so keep your eyes open in every direction. When you see the rats—and you *will*—holler for backup, and start swinging your sword or axe like you mean business. Their middles are well protected, so chop at their arms, legs, and heads. It’s your best bet. Got it?”

“*Yes!*” screamed the fighters in return.

“Now let’s break into companies and get moving. *Go!*” roared the Sheriff, but out of the corner of his eye, saw Gadget running up the lane in a panic. “What is it, boy?”

“Sheriff, they’re here! They’ve lit half of the Great Wood on fire and are almost in the village. And I heard that all that’s left of Upper-Down is flaming ruins!”

With resignation Sheriff Forgo surveyed the fearful looks among his warriors.

“Saddle up, folks,” he remarked with surprising coolness as he mounted his pony Tom. “It’s time to chop some goblin necks.”

## The Battle of the Burrows

Dorro couldn't believe he was still alive.

In the past minutes, he'd engaged no fewer than ten goblin fighters, and by some miracle, many were dead and he was not. Granted, the bookmaster couldn't take credit for winnowing down so many goblins—he was surrounded by Dwarf fighters, several of whom had assisted mightily. He was astounded with how ferocious both the Dwarves and goblins were, hacking and hewing each other with frightening sword, axe, bow, and mace blows.

It was brutal combat in the cool Autumn air. The ground of the forest had become littered with the dead body parts and ash from the burning trees.

*The trees! There, I can be more useful,* Dorro thought, and he immediately ran towards the flames. While the battle continued around him, he began stamping out flames and kicking dirt into the conflagration to reduce the heat. His jerkin and heavy gloves were helping him ward off the fire, and his efforts were beginning to pay off as a few hot spots began to smolder.

From behind, Dorro felt something painful jab his ribs, knocking the wind out of him for a moment. He turned to find a goblin spear on the ground and its warty owner coming up to finish the job.

"Stay away from my forest, foul beast!" he heard himself say, quite bravely in fact.

"*Ach*, we shall burn all your trees to the ground, puny mouse, and slaughter yer children," the goblin hissed back. "And I shall wear your bones as a luv'ly crown."

Dorro knew something about the genus *orkus* and how intelligent they were—this was just battle talk to intimidate him. However, the goblin didn't know that; to him, Dorro looked like a frail Halfling about to wet himself. The bookmaster played that up as the beast moved within two strides.

"Oh please, Mr. Goblin, don't hurt me! I'm just a wee little fellow and more accustomed to gardening than fighting. You wouldn't attack me, would you, especially considering your powerful arms and weapons?"

The creature stopped short, listening to Dorro's words. "You are one of the smart ones. We were told you miserable Halflings would just run and flee from us, but you are wise to realize our superior potential. We are the masters now. Maybe if I let you live, you will serve me as a slave. Träag will like that!"

Dorro fell to his knees in supplication, weeping and moaning for mercy. Above him, Träag put his hands on his hips and laughed.

“My own little puppy! You will be my pet, and the others in my clan will be jealous, especially my brother Knüt.”

Träag was laughing so hard, in fact, that he didn't see Dorro whip out his sword and swing it in a deadly lateral arc. Nor did he really understand what happened as he began falling to the ground. Had he been paying more attention, he would have realized that the tiny Halfling had neatly severed his leg just below the knee and that he couldn't stand on one leg. It was only a fleet second later that the pair's roles had been reversed—the goblin warrior lying prostrate on the forest floor, while the Halfling stood over him with a bright sword, about to end his life.

“You deserve to die, goblin scum! For what you did to our trees, I should kill you now.” Dorro was breathing hard and felt anger surging through his veins.

“Spare Träag, oh mighty one. I only meant to toy with you; I would have freed you later, I promise!”

“I would kill you, but seeing you up close reminds me of a friend, one of your kind,” said the bookmaster. “He would have spared your life.”

“You, friends with *orkus*? Impossible! An *orkus* who did that would die. Where is he?” screamed Träag, trying to staunch the flow of black blood from his leg stump with his belt.

“Oh, he is far away and safe from you and your clan. I made sure your kind would never harm him.”

“These are lies!” roared Träag. “You are a filthy Halfling after all!”

The one-legged goblin leapt up on his stump and pulled a hidden dagger from his tunic, pulling back to stab his foe in the heart.

Dorro knew the end was coming, but heard a giant *Creak!* behind him. Above them, a badly scorched oak tree broke in half, sending its upper trunk and crown hurtling towards the two. The Thimble Downer leapt out of the way as Träag screamed, yet without a second leg, could not move.

Dorro looked just as the tree toppled to the ground, crushing the goblin to death. The bookmaster was horrified, but felt it was strange justice.

No one messed with a Thimble Downer's forest and lived to tell the tale.

\* \* \*

Sheriff Forgo's plan to create a defensive barrier near Fell's Corner never materialized, for the sole reason that the goblin fighters were already inside the village. The *orkus* had, as Forgo guessed, come over the tops of the burrows and now were everywhere.

There was hand-to-hand fighting in every direction, though as the lawman noted, the Halflings were acquitting themselves well. He saw Farmer Duck decapitate not one, but *four* goblins with one swing of his field scythe, while Nutylla Parfinn bashed a few heads in with an iron skillet from the kitchen of the Bumbling Badger.

Dowdy Cray and Bog the Blacksmith took down more than a few monsters, Dowdy with a wagon axle that he'd fashioned into a spear and Bog with a wooden mallet that he wielded with terrifying accuracy. Together, they slew at least twenty of the enemy.

"Sheriff, help!" Forgo turned to see tiny Minty Pinter riding on the shoulders of a goblin while thrashing him on head with a stick. But it wouldn't be long until poor Minty would be shaken off and killed. A ball of silver flashed by and slammed the goblin between the eyes, rendering him instantly dead. The creature lay on the ground, with Minty pinned under his leg. Someone ran up to free him, as well as retrieve his spiked metal mace. He stood and locked eyes with Forgo, who was shocked to see Silas Fibbhook staring back at him.

"*Well on ya, lad,*" was all Forgo managed to say, as the brawny Fibbhook ran off to engage more goblins with that mighty weapon of his. He had assumed that the smeltery's foreman had run off and hid like 'ol Bindlestiff, but was grateful to see him out there, risking his life for his fellow Halflings. "Maybe that one's not such a rotten egg after all. *Whoa!*"

*Swoosh!*

A blade nearly lopped his own head off that time, but the Sheriff snapped back to reality and took on the goblins who'd jumped onto the lane from a nearby burrow roof. The monsters began taunting him and making crude remarks about his mother. That was all that was necessary to get Forgo fired up and begin slicing the attackers with his own worthy sword.

A few seconds later, the three *orkus* were dead or dying.

"No one says things like that about my Mum!" he roared, already running down the lane to the next skirmish. Forgo knew there were too many goblins for the villagers to fight off, but good news came down the line—there was a fresh Dwarf force attacking from the north. He didn't realize this was Crumble and Aramina's battalion, but he'd take all the help he could get.

The goblins sensed pressure on their rear flank and began fleeing. They were pinched between Forgo's valiant Thimble Down fighters pushing up from the center of the village and the Dwarves bearing down from the West-Upper Down road.

As the Sheriff looked towards the far end of Fell's Corner, he saw the Dwarves break the goblin line, and one fighter in particular whoopin' and hollerin' as he descended on the frantic *orkus* fighters, hewing them left and right. Yet as Forgo soon learned, it wasn't a *he*—it was a *she*.

“Beware, Malachite Molly, ye beasties!” screamed Aramina Wump from the saddle of her war pony, both of them covered in armor and leather. “Fear my sword! Run from my mace because it will be the last thing you’ll ever see, goblin scum!”

With Crumble and Orli trailing her, Aramina was knocking heads off left and right, and the goblins ran in terror from her, breaking out towards the East, where there were woods to hide in. Soon, Dwarf and Halfling forces met at the edge of town, Forgo and the Dwarf she-warrior clasping hands as fellow warriors.

“You are a marvel, Malachite Molly!” gushed the Sheriff. “I’ve never seen anyone fight so well. You must have killed fifty goblins.”

“Seventy-five, at least!” boasted Aramina. “When Molly goes berserk in battle, I can’t control her—she enjoys her work.”

“Have you seen Dorro? He disappeared about a week ago with the girl Cheeryup Tunbridge. As a matter of fact, I haven’t seen Crumble or you around for nearly that long, too.”

Aramina cackled loudly. “Oh, we’ve been on the adventure of a lifetime, but I bet ol’ Dorro would rather tell you of it himself. Last I saw him was in the Great Wood about an hour ago. He was acquittin’ himself well in battle and trying to quell the fires them goblin mischief makers had set. A fearsome look was on his face—that Mr. Dorro loves his trees and flowers!”

“That he does, Aramina—I mean, *Molly*.” Forgo could tell she preferred that name in battle. “I hope he’s still alive. Minty, Dowdy, Bog! Come with me—we need to find the bookmaster.”

At that precise moment, the skies finally opened up, and a thick, chilly rain began to fall on the battlefield. It would make the fighting harder, Forgo knew, but for the burning forest, this was a gift.

If only they could find Dorro and the younglings before trouble found them.



## Counterattack

Dorro could have cried with joy.

His beloved forest was burning around him, yet out of the heavens, heavy rain began to fall and the wicked flames began to hiss and smoke. What could have been a disaster was now merely a few scorched acres of woodlands. Dorro knew the Great Wood would regenerate itself, and in a few years, thriving young trees would populate this blackened patch of earth.

*“Dorro! Dorro!”*

The bookmaster turned his head to see a handful of Halflings running towards him. It was Sheriff Forgo shouting his name, with Dowdy Cray, Bog the Blacksmith, and Minty Pinter behind him. Dorro was even more surprised when the Sheriff gave him a hug and lifted him off the ground.

“I’m glad to see you, Winderiver! I was preparing for the worst,” laughed Forgo, setting the bookmaster down and clapping his mates on the shoulders. “This could have all been entirely much worse. Where are the children?”

“With any luck, they’re still hiding in Mrs. Finch’s burrow in West-Upper Down. I don’t think there’s much fighting there—at least let’s hope not.”

“The goblins have retreated, thanks to your Battle Dwarves and Malachite Molly,” hooted the lawman. “That she-devil has the strength of forty Halflings. Now I’m heading back to secure the village, while you retrieve your wards. By the way, where the heck have you been all week?”

“That’s a tale for another day, Sheriff. Let’s say I’ve seen several wonders of the Northern world.”

“Sheriff! Mr. Dorro!” It was Bog the Blacksmith, calling from across the battlefield. “Come quick!”

In a few moments, the Thimble Downers were standing over the *corpus* of a fallen goblin, this one horribly disfigured, though whether it was caused by battle or nature wasn’t clear. Bog pointed at something on its body.

“What is that hideous ball hanging about its neck? Is it flesh?” Neither Bog nor any of them were sure.

Something was bothering Dorro. “Let me get closer. This doesn’t look right.”

The bookmaster knelt over the bloodied corpse and began poking the fleshy blob with a stick. It was attached with a string thread through its middle. Dorro even found a bit of cloth and wet it

with rainwater, wiping the front of the strange blob. He screamed and stood up, just as Aramina, Crumble, and Orli rode up.

“Dear sweet Borgo!” he gasped. “Do you know what that is?”

“I do, a-course!” giggled Malachite Molly, getting off her battle pony. “That be a Halfling head. I’ve seen a few in my lifetime. This here goblin-feller is wearing it as a battle trophy. Musta killed him not long ago, judging by its just-mildly putrid state.”

Dorro nearly vomited, but held it in.

“You know *who* it is, don’t you?” Aramina and the rest looked at him blankly. “It’s Professor Larkspur from the College of St. Borgo—the cad who stole the Ancient Dwarf documents from us!”

“Why so it is!” crowed Crumble. “Serves that rascal right! I bet he scarpered out of St. Borgo with the papers and ran smack into the goblin host headed our way for battle. Pity the fool. You could say Larkspur’s flight from us was his last ... *lark!*”

Crumble and Aramina erupted into peals of mirth, while Dorro looked away in disgust. They were used to this kind of carnage, while the gentle bookmaster was assuredly not. Instead, he gathered himself together and prepared to go fetch Wyll and Cheeryup. Yet there were more yells from the far side of the pasture instead. It was indistinct at first, but soon a Dwarf scout ran up.

“Woe is upon us!” he bellowed. “The goblins’ retreat was only a feint—they are flooding back toward the village in even greater numbers. We need every Dwarf and Halfling to come fight!”

The group didn’t need to be told twice. They drew their weapons and leapt on tired ponies to carry them back into battle.

\* \* \*

Not twenty minutes later, their world had been turned upside down. Instead of a goblin retreat and victory, the remaining Dwarf and Halfling fighters were pinned down in the village, surrounded on every side by goblins. A second battalion of *orkus* had lain hidden in the forest while the first wave engaged the Dwarves, but upon the deceptive “retreat,” they regrouped and counterattacked in insurmountable numbers.

“Keep your eyes on the roofline!” screamed Forgo in the pounding rain.

With their incredible agility, goblins were able to scale burrows and sneak around their sod-covered tops for surprise attacks from the rear. More than a few Thimble Downers had been taken down by arrows in the back. Then just as fast, the enemy disappeared into the rainy mist. It was an impossible situation, and blood ran down the lanes of Thimble Down as Halflings, goblins, and Dwarves died alike.

It was turning into a nightmare, Forgo knew.

“I hope that Mrs. Finch has the wits to escape and take the children westward,” fretted Dorro. “But I fear just the opposite. She will keep them there until the goblins have conquered us all. Then they will be killed or enslaved. And I don’t know which is worse!”

The bookmaster looked up as Bog the Blacksmith dragged an injured Dowdy Cray away from their skirmish line. Dowdy had a black arrow in his shoulder and was so pale that he didn’t look like he’d make it through another hour.

Forgo’s face was grim, and even the normally gung-ho Dwarves looked morose, Malachite Molly among them. The joy of combat had left her, and her expression said all—this fight was lost. While she and many of her fellow Dwarves could escape, the chances of a full evacuation of the villagers was slim at best. Aramina knew many were about to die.

“Crumbly, why don’t you, Orli, and yer *bruvvers* pike outta here and make for the river? I’ll come find you in a few hours after I collect a few more goblin scalps.”

“Don’t speak false to me, Aramina,” said the Dwarf. “I know you all too well—you will stay here until a bitter goblin arrow takes your last breath.”

“I just don’t want you hurt, Crumbly,” she replied, big salty tears beginning to roll down her cheeks. “Sure, Wump was my husband, but he’s dead and we were never right for each other in the first place. That’s why he left me. But you’re different; you’re special to me. I couldn’t stand it if you got hurt ... or worse!”

Crumble didn’t say anything, but instead pulled Aramina close to him, knowing the end wasn’t far off. Arrows were flying so thickly above them that it was hard to see what was sky and what wasn’t.

Suddenly, they noticed something else. There were arrows and spears flying in the other direction. The fighters realized they were surrounded and this crossfire would ultimately kill them all. Yet new cries arose, and while the Dwarves and Halflings huddled down behind the barricade, big creatures overran their position and leapt straight over the barricade.

A few thought these were mountain trolls coming to finish the job, at least until someone shouted, “It be Men!”

“*Naw*, can’t be!” croaked Aramina, sticking her head up from Crumble’s embrace. “But it is! Them’s Men-folk or my name ain’t Malachite Molly.”

Further down line, yet another surprising word was heard: “Elves!”

Lo and behold, sleek, grey-clad warriors ran past them, firing off arrows by the score and issuing commands in their strange tongue: *Arvath toola cath malka to mere! Parth amen forsooth tarka!*”

Dorro, Forgo, Crumble, and Aramina jumped up with the elves, Men, and the rest of the Dwarf and Halfling fighters to join the battle.

With the brawny males and strapping females in the lead, the Men-Folk began chasing the goblins down the lanes of Thimble Down, while the lithe elves leapt up on the burrow roofs and slew *orkus* hiding there. The carnage was unspeakable.

Thus, the battle turned yet again. The *orkus* were soundly routed, slain at the hands of this strange alliance of Halflings, Men, Dwarves and elves. A few goblins had dashed into the Great Wood, but according to eyewitnesses, didn't make it far.

"You should have seen it!" crowed a Dwarf fighter who dashed in from West-Upper Down. "The very trees of your woodlands joined the battle and crushed the fleeing goblins like bugs. Oak, birch, ash, and maple alike—each one smashing the beasts with their branches before returning upright as if nothing had happened at all. And directing them all was a weird little Halfling. A tiny old one with wrinkly skin and—"

"... *a floppy green hat*," said Dorro, finishing off the sentence. "That would be Dalbo Dall."

"Don't be daft, Winderiver," snarled Forgo. "How could trees squish goblins? And what does Dalbo have to do with it?"

"Remember, Sheriff, we don't know everything about this world of ours," continued the bookmaster, thinking upon the words uttered by Crumble as they rode into battle. "As strange as it sounds, I think this rumor is entirely accurate."

"But what about the elves and Men-folk? Why are they here, and how did they know the goblins were upon us?"

"It's a long story, Forgo, but sometime, ask me about our protectors. And about our role in the Wide Green Open we live in. We Halflings are not quite as alone in the grand scheme of things as we like to think."

The Sheriff merely put his hands on his hips and looked at the bookmaster foggily.

"*Wha—?*"

## Pages of Science

The quiet of the Autumn afternoon fell on Thimble Down, and it couldn't have come soon enough. Most villagers were exhausted from the onslaught, a saga that would go down in Halfling history as the Battle of the Burrows. It would be recounted in local pubs as the greatest moment in Halfling history, save perhaps the legendary Rebellion of Borgo.

Yet, it wasn't all glory and valiant deeds. Many burrows and establishments in Thimble Down had been damaged or destroyed, lanes torn up, windows and wells smashed, and more. Worse, there were the dead.

According to Nurse Pym, fifty good Halflings from the village or thereabouts had been slain, among them Bindlestiff's foreman, Silas Fibbhook, and Poe Stitchwicket the shepherd, both of whom had taken poisoned darts and expired before Pym could get to them.

Many were reeling with the news that their dear friend Farmer Duck had been felled by a goblin's sword. (Despite his surname, he lamentably hadn't done so fast enough.) This was a particularly hard blow for Sheriff Forgo, who had known Duck from his boyhood days.

While tears were shed for the fallen, the living were tasked with removing the corpses of goblins and Dwarves, of which there were too many to count. Forgo estimated that there were well over two thousand dead goblins alone in the entire battle zone, stretching from Thimble Down to West-Upper Down, and many more in the Great Wood strangely crushed to death.

They also learned that the Village of Upper Down proper had been fully razed, though fortuitously, many of its residents had escaped prior to the onslaught.

On the home front, the villagers remarked on acts of bravery, such as Osgood Thrip taking out many of the enemy with a bag of silver coins he swung like a mace. Or Bog the Blacksmith carrying his injured pal Dowdy Cray to safety; the wagon driver had taken a tainted arrow to the shoulder, but would recover.

The Mayor, to no one's surprise, fled into hiding, yet Thimble Downers everywhere were talking about the stout heart of Farmer Edythe and how she hadn't lost her cool during the fight. It wasn't lost on anyone that she stood up for Thimble Down while their sole elected official ran off and left them for dead. If the Mayoral Election had been held that moment, Edythe would have walked off with it, and as it stood, she would be in good standing when the proper contest was held in two weeks. Still cowering in the woods, the Mayor wallowed in his cowardice, knowing that the election was all but over.

Many Thimble Downers were milling about in front of the gaol, looking for loved ones. Among them was a certain bookmaster, who suddenly appeared out of the throng.

“Sheriff, I know we’re all still very much recovering, but I need to convene a meeting as soon as possible.”

“Are you daft, Winderiver?” Forgo looked like he was about to take a swing at the bookmaster. “We have hundreds of bodies to bury and much of the village to rebuild. But of course, when the exalted Dorro Fox Winderiver wants a meeting, he usually gets it, doesn’t he?”

“Actually, yes he *does*, my good Sheriff.” Unlike the lawman, Dorro was mildly amused, but still needed to drive the point home. “Forgo, I have the results of the Seer’s translation. I know what causes the Grippe. We can stop this illness right now!”

Forgo rolled his eyes, but as usual, caved into Dorro’s idea. “Fine! I’ll get Gadget on it. How that boy survived the battle without a scar, I’ll never know. Probably hid in a cider barrel for most it.”

Satisfied, Dorro laid out his requirements for the Sheriff, who simply grunted and groaned with each request.

\* \* \*

“After what poor Thimble Down has been through, much less Upper-Down, I’m delighted to see everyone here.” Dorro was rather good at toasting and enjoyed it. He lifted a glass of honeygrass whiskey in front of the group standing within the gaol and was about to sip when Sheriff Forgo interrupted.

“And don’t forget me ol’ pal Farmer Duck, as good a chum as they come.” Dorro saw that the Sheriff was trying very hard not to choke up. “Back in the ol’ times, me ’n’ Duck skived off many a day of school to go fishing or pretend to fight trolls in the Great Wood. He was my mate until them goblins took him from us and ... *well*, all I wanna say is I ain’t gonna forget Duck, and neither should you!”

“Hear, hear!” shouted Dorro, and they all drank to the farmer’s memory, as well as others they lost that week.

“Nor can we forget Mr. Silas Fibbhook,” squeaked Mr. Bindlestiff, owner of the smeltery and newly returned from hiding. “It’s my understanding that Silas acquitted himself quite well in battle and died bravely. I know you didn’t know him well and that on the exterior, he could be gruff. But Fibbhook was a most excellent foreman and could get any of my workers to go the extra distance, even without a whip. To Silas!”

Another round of sips and gulps went round the room. “But we must get to business,” said the Sheriff gravely, looking at all the guests in the gaol: the just-returned Mayor; Farmer Edythe and

Mungo; Osgood Thrip; Mr. Bindlestiff; Dorro; and the Dwarves—Aramina, Crumble, and his brothers. “Now, if you’d all give your undivided attention to Mr. Winderiver, we can get this done with.”

“Thank you, Sheriff.” There were some uncomfortable coughs in the room. “As you may know, certain documents were stolen from Mr. Bindlestiff’s office safe a few weeks ago. The pages took a very roundabout journey here in the village, wherein they were stolen yet again ... and again.”

“This is outrageous!” snorted Mr. Bindlestiff. “Those are my pages, and I own them. I want them returned instantly!”

“Be that as it may, sir, I do not have the pages. I did at one point, and because of that, a few of us embarked upon a great journey prior to the Battle of the Burrows, first to the university town of St. Borgo, where we learned very little; and then to the Dwarf city of Gildenhall, where we learned *quite a bit*.”

“Sheriff, you should arrest the bookmaster here,” barked the smelting boss. “He has confessed to stealing my ancient papers!”

Dorro looked at him flatly. “That could be awkward, sir, as we have reason to believe that they themselves were stolen quite a while ago. How they came to be in your possession is not of great interest to me, but there is a battalion of Dwarf warriors in the village right now, and they might want to find out how you took possession of them. I might suggest that you refrain from doing so—if you still like your neck attached to your body.”

The smelting mogul said nothing, but you could see the blood draining from his head, leaving only a sickly grimace on his face.

“Pray continue,” was all Bindlestiff managed to say.

“After several misadventures, these Ancient Dwarf manuscripts landed in my hands. In the interest of knowledge, I decided to consult a professor at the College of St. Borgo for a translation of the pages. This was not to be, as this scholar—a certain Professor Larkspur—stole the pages and fled the city, assuming the documents to have a material value. Judge him as you may, but we believe that this professor ran smack into the army that we just battled and is now quite dead.”

Dorro squirmed at the thought of Professor Larkspur’s decapitated head hanging around the corpus of a slain goblin fighter.

“Greatly disappointed, our small troupe ventured north to Gildenhall, the great city of the Dwarves. It was there that we were granted an audience with the Seer, a wise sorceress who deciphered the ancient runes for us.”

“Get on with it, Winderiver!” barked Forgo. “This isn’t a one-man theatrical, you know.”

Dorro didn't like his soliloquies interrupted, but kept on anyway. "As I was saying, the Seer deciphered the manuscript pages. In them was conclusive evidence that the black rocks imported by Mr. Bindlestiff's smeltery and burned as fuel emit toxic fumes that are well known to cause illness among non-dwarven species."

There was a hushed gasp in the small crowd, though Bindlestiff himself said nothing.

"Furthermore, I have witnesses to this, among them, Crumble and Aramina of the Dwarves and Wyll and Cheeryup. We all heard the Seer quite clearly—the stones do not cause illness to the Dwarves, but all else may develop a hacking cough, leading to unconsciousness and death. In that light, the smeltery must be closed immediately!"

There was clamoring in the small room, mostly in favor of closure, but Osgood Thrip and the Mayor railed against the accusation, saying more research was needed. Yet as Dorro knew, both Halflings were benefitting directly from Bindlestiff's business. The noise was quelled when Aramina drew an arrow from her quiver and shot it across the small gaol room, sinking its shaft deeply in the opposite wall.

"That'll be enough from you lot," she snarled. "If the Seer says it's true, then there's no reason to question it!"

"She be right," chimed Crumble. "The Seer can look into the past, present, and future. If she says that bit about the black stones, then it be true. You'd be fools to keep using them stones in your forge, Mr. Bindlestiff. But if I may ask, how did you get them? They're kept under guarded supply in the North."

Until now, Bindlestiff had said nothing, but had an indignant look on his porcine face. Finally he spoke.

"I think it will be of great interest to you, Crumble, as to where I got the black stones. I made an honest deal with no tomfoolery attached, but I am a Halfling of business and knew it was a good opportunity. I acquired the stones via a deal with your brother—the dear, departed Mr. Wump. I even have our signed contract in my office, that is, if one of you hasn't stolen it already!"

There were gasps as the smelterer played his hand.

"I could kill you for saying that about our brother, Bindlestiff," snarled Crumble, he and his brothers shooting daggers at the Halfling. "... *if* it wasn't likely true. I know my brother Wump, and while I loved him, he was prone to shady practices. I think it amused him, and honestly, crafting a deal to bring rare dwarven coke to the Halflings sounds just like something he'd do."

His brothers nodded in embarrassment, and even Aramina spoke. "T was one of the reasons we're split apart, Wump 'n' me. He was obsessed with gold and money—perfectly normal Dwarf traits—but I have no use for the stuff. I just want to live on the land, chasing our enemies, and



keeping 'em at bay. Wumpie thought I was mad, of course, but despite the beauty of Gildenhall and its mines, my life was meant to be spent under the stars and with an axe in my hand."

Looking off, she cried further, "Ah, Wumpie ... *why did you do it?*"

"Then who murdered our brother, Mr. Dorro?" begged Crumble. "That's the last piece of the puzzle that makes no sense."

Suddenly Sheriff Forgo cut in: "Hey, where did Bindlestiff go? He slipped out!"

Everyone looked around, and indeed it was true. Mr. Bindlestiff had snuck out of the room while Dorro and Aramina were speaking. He'd escaped!

Suddenly, Mungo spoke for the first time, scratching his whiskery chin. "I guess that means Bindlestiff had a hand in that Dwarf's death, Mr. Wump. I bet the deal went bad, so ol' Bindler killed him or made Fibbhook do it. Makes sense, don't it?"

Sheriff Forgo furrowed his brows. "Y'know Mungo, that's one of the most astute things you ever said in your life. You might be right. Now, I need some volunteers to bring a fugitive to justice. Who wants to lend a hand?"

Suddenly, over half the hands in the room shot into air, each one stretching for the chance to drag Hiram Bindlestiff to gaol for the murders of Wump—and possibly every Thimble Downer who was sick, dying, or dead from the Grippe.

## The Smoke Clears

In a trice, Gadget Pinkle, Aramina, Crumble, and his brothers saddled up their ponies and took after Hiram Bindlestiff. Considering the smelterer's rotund profile, the Sheriff didn't think the posse would need much time to apprehend him.

In the interim, he enlisted Dorro, Orli, and a few others to help him do an unenviable task—shutting down the smeltery.

The small group ran over to the forge, located in its hollowed-out hillock near the eastern side of Thimble Down. Owing to the fact that there had been a major battle, the smeltery was largely shut down, its vast furnaces cooled and just a few Halflings milling about in the dark, cavernous interior.

"Hullo Sheriff. Glad to see you made it through the fight."

Stepping out of the gloom was the pair of Mrs. Mick and Stookey McGee, two Thimble Downers who had found employment with Mr. Bindlestiff and thrived in their new jobs. Forgo was morose that he had to break the news to them in particular.

"*Uh*, hey there, Stookey 'n' Mrs. Mick. Yep, glad we all made it through this hellstorm. Never seen anything like it in all my days.

"Nor us!" laughed Mick, "But we're back and ready to go! There's a batch of ore that just came in, and we need to get the furnaces back up to speed so we can refine it and get it poured for a gaggle of new orders."

Forgo looked like he was going to be sick; in fact, he couldn't even get the words out. Sensing his friend's pain, Dorro took the lead.

"Stookey, dear Mrs. Mick, I hate to say this, but there's not going to be any more refining or smelting here. Sadly, we're here with signed orders, from the Mayor himself, to close this facility. *Forever.*"

The two workers stared at the bookmaster like he was speaking Dwarfish to them—they couldn't believe their ears. Stookey blurted out, "This must be a joke, Mr. Dorro. The smeltery is the best thing to ever happen to Thimble Down. And our families, too!"

"Please don't pull our legs!" cried Mrs. Mick. "My poor Ben hasn't been able to work since his back gave out last year, and my income is all we have."

"It's true, Mick." At last Sheriff Forgo found his voice. "It hurts us to tell you this, but the smeltery is the source of the Grippe. We have proof—it's them black stones you use to fuel the

furnaces. They put the poisons in the air, and that's what we're all breathing; almost killed me, in fact. I'm sure Bindlestiff will make good on your last wages, but you'd be doing us a great kindness if you told the rest of the workers to go home so we can close up the place. This is important."

In shock, Stookey and Mrs. Mick retreated into the dark shadows, sad and shaking their heads.

"You had to do it, Forgo," said the bookmaster. "I know it's a ghastly job, but this place did far more harm than good. And these are skilled workers now. It's early, I know, but Thimble Down lost more than a few skilled tradesfolk, and several of these folks can likely do their jobs."

"Their bodies aren't even cold in the ground yet, and you've already found replacements!" snarled Forgo. "Yer a class act, Winderiver."

"You know I'm right, Sheriff! Half our village has been torn to pieces. We'll need hale and hearty workers to rebuild her. If the Mayor has any brains in his head—which is always questionable—he'll hire them immediately to begin the restoration. Or else, I'll give the idea to Farmer Edythe, as it looks as if she may be our new leader."

"You might have something there, Winderiver. *When one door closes ...*," mused the Sheriff.

At that, the pair headed back into the light of day. Maybe the village would get through this after all, they both thought quietly.

\* \* \*

Dorro's next stop was northward.

With Orli beside him, they borrowed ponies and sped up the road towards West-Upper Down. All about them was devastation from the fighting: burnt-out burrows, blasted trees, and many corpses, some so ravaged that the bookmaster couldn't tell if they were goblin, Dwarf, or Halfling.

He was sure some elves and Men-folk had also been killed, but their bodies had been retrieved by their own kind for burying elsewhere. Indeed, he noticed some parties of Dwarves in the distance, gathering up their own dead for the final ritual. He remembered Wump's funeral and knew that many of these corpses would be burnt as they were sent to the next world.

The goblin dead would get no such honor. Their bodies would be loaded onto wagons and dragged many miles into the Great Wood where they'd be left as carrion for the wolves, bears, and vultures. It was cold justice, many felt.

Along the way, the bookmaster thought about the one outstanding thread that hadn't fit into place: the murder of Wump. The more he learned about this Dwarf, the more he disliked him. Unlike honest, amiable Crumble and his equally lighthearted brothers, Wump was out for the

benefit of Wump—he certainly knew the sale of the black stones was, if not illegal, then designed solely for his own profit. And quite intentionally he didn't cut his brothers in. Dorro wasn't sure what was the norm in Dwarf culture, but still, it didn't paint an attractive image of Wump. At times, he wasn't even sure if Aramina liked the Dwarf—and she was once his wife!

*Could she have killed him?*

Dorro let that idea roll around inside his head for a moment as he and Orli trotted up the road.

*She does like her work, as bloodthirsty as it may be. Knocking off Wump would be like swatting a flea to her. And she could justify it by saying she was protecting the reputation of the other Dwarves.*

Dorro let other figures flow through his mind as potential murderers.

*What about Crumble or any one of his brothers? Or in fact, Orli? He had no love for his uncle, as Wyll has told me. Apparently Wump beat the boy not long ago. But these brothers seem so jovial together and Crumble's threats to avenge his brother's death feel credible. This brings me to Bindlestiff and Fibbhook. They are the most likely culprits—maybe the deal went bad or Wump decided to rat them out to his brothers. Dash it all!*

Dorro was frustrated by this large web of potential murders and motives. It confused him, but at least he knew one thing—the reason for Wump's murder was about silver or gold. This, he felt, was a fact. Indeed, it was the root of most murders.

“Here we are, Orli!”

Dorro and the Dwarf boy pulled up on their reins and jumped off their ponies. The bookmaster looked around and saw that the village of West-Upper Down had been largely spared the ruination of Upper Down and parts of Thimble Down. Some chewed-up turf and fields, perhaps, but the goblins must have raced through this tiny hamlet on their way to the bigger prize, knowing they could come back and lay waste here on their return.

Dorro banged on Mrs. Finch's door, which was locked and all silent within.

“*Children! Mrs. Finch!* This is Dorro Fox Winderiver. Are you alive? Please!”

“Knock again, Mr. Dorro,” begged Orli. “And if that doesn't work, my axe could take it down in a heartbeat.”

The burly Dwarf boy laid his hand on his axe head, a formidable piece of metal that could probably take down a mid-size oak tree in a one swing.

To both their surprises, they heard tittering. It evolved into giggling and full-on laughing. They looked up, and there on the roof of the burrow were two younglings and an old, frail Halfling woman, laughing heartily.

“You didn't see us, Mr. Dorro?” hooted Cheeryup. “We've been up here the whole time, looking right at you, you silly goose!”

“We were so intent on the door, that we ... *oh poo!*”

Dorro put his hands on his hips and looked exasperated. “Do get down here, you irksome child and that other one, and let me hug you both! And do help Mrs. Finch down carefully. You owe her your lives!”

A moment later and they were all together again, hugs and cheer going around freely.

“However can I thank you, Mrs. Finch? You did me the greatest favor of my life—for once, I didn’t put these two in harm’s way.”

“’Tis nothing, Mr. Dorro. My late husband, Nate, was fond of your Ma and Pa, and they were kind to him. Younglings, I remember this gent when he was but a toddler running around the yard with no pants on! *Oooo*, he had the softest, pinkest bottom you ever saw. All covered with dimples, it was!”

At that, she and the young ones all laughed again, while Dorro blushed a deep shade of plum.

“Please, Mrs. Finch! These children don’t need to hear this. But my offer stands—I shall do you any favor I can.”

“None be required, Mr. Dorro,” cackled the old woman. “I was glad no to be alone during this ordeal.”

Suddenly, Wyll and Cheeryup began to confer and whisper to themselves. Then they ran over and whispered into the bookmaster’s ear.

“I see ... *I see!* Well, well, Mrs. Finch, the younglings here have divulged interesting information—for example, you have a leaky roof. And your furniture smells moldy. And your bed springs creak.”

“Oh dear, none of that matters to me. I’m just an old woman who lives alone here, tending my garden and talking with me friends and neighbors.”

“Regardless of those facts, madam, I may have a solution. Owing to the fact that the smeltery in Thimble Down has just been closed, I know for a fact that a certain number of skilled workers will soon be available and looking for employment, at least temporarily. If you would allow me to hire them to re-fit your burrow, in effect, you’d be doing these Halflings a tremendous favor. They need the work, you need some tidying-up done, and I need to repay a debt to a very kindly, sweet old friend. What do you say, Mrs. Finch: *yay or nay?*”

“Well, I don’t know, Mr. Dorro, it’s all so sudden—”

“I’ll take that as *a yes!*”

At that, Dorro bent over and gave the ancient lady a kiss on her brow, causing the lady to blush this time.

At that, Mrs. Finch invited them all inside to have tea on her moldy and soon-to-be-ridded-of old furniture.

## The Trouble with Wump

With Mrs. Finch's burrow projects squared away and the children back in the village, Dorro refocused on the murder of Wump.

A little after supper, Dorro ambled through the village, watching his fellow Thimble Downers begin to rebuild their homes and lives. He reached his destination and knocked. A minute later, a face peeked out of the door and invited him in.

Very discretely, Dorro asked the gentleman if he could spare a few minutes for a walk. It would be very beneficial, he assured the gent.

Very beneficial, indeed.

\* \* \*

A short time later, the pair returned to the burrow, but this time, two Halflings were waiting for them—Sheriff Forgo and Mr. Timmo.

“Good evening, Winderiver. Mr. Crumble,” said the lawman.

“*Bah!*” was the Dwarf's only response, as he angrily stormed past Forgo and Timmo, and into the burrow he rented with his brothers and son.

“That went well, Winderiver,” smirked the Sheriff. “I hope you know what you're doing.”

“We'll find out,” offered the bookmaster as he entered the burrow. There, sitting around the table, was the sullen Dwarf, Wump's former wife Aramina, and his brothers Flume, Two-Toes, and Magpie, all of whom were perplexed by Crumble's surliness. They had just finished their own suppers and were finishing it off with mugs of ale, to which they added drops of belladonna to boost its potency to levels Dwarves found pleasurable and relaxing

“I'm sorry to upset you, Crumble, but I thought it best to be honest.” Dorro was standing and wringing his hands, Forgo and Timmo beside him. “I think it's time we told your brothers.”

“Told us what, Mr. Dorro?” asked Magpie. “And please, you and the Sheriff come have a beer with us.”

“No thank you—I need to keep my head clear at the moment, Magpie. Gentlemen, I've come here tonight to talk to you all about Wump, your recently deceased brother. I believe I've solved his murder and am fairly sure you won't like it.”

“It was that Fibbhook and Bindlestiff, wasn’t it, sir?” barked Two-Toes. “One of ’em is dead, but the other is still on the lam. I couldn’t believe the porky fellow eluded us today. But we’ll get him tomorrow, and when we do, I’ll string him up right then and there from a stout pine branch!”

“Actually, if you do that, Mr. Two-Toes, I’ll have to arrest you for murder,” coughed Sheriff Forgo. “I’m the law around here and administer punishments according to our own laws, thank you.”

Two-Toes said nothing, but looked embarrassed. He put another few drops of belladonna into his beer and took a sip.

“If I might keep going, gentlemen, I think Bindlestiff is no doubt mixed up in this crime, but not as the murderer. No, that person was to remain a mystery to me, but I figured it out—or close enough—today and just now told your brother my suspicions.”

“And they’re completely *bollocks!*” yelled Crumble. “The accusation is pure fantasy.”

“Come now, Crumbly, calm yerself down,” cooed Aramina. “Let the nice Halfling finish talking.”

“As I said, there have been several details of Wump’s murder that bothered me, among them the condition of the corpus when we found it all those weeks ago.”

“What details, dare we ask, Mr. Dorro?” queried Magpie, tugging on his beard.

“First, there was the fact that Wump had suffered many broken bones during his demise, yet ... yet he had no open cuts or wounds. How could he have so many internal injuries, yet nothing on the outside.”

“That’s beyond us, Mr. Halfling.”

“Is it Magpie?” Dorro coughed to clear this throat. “Actually, once you all told me about a method of Dwarf punishment for thefts. I believe you told me the if you caught a Dwarf making a theft, you’d put them in a leather bag and beat them with rocks, punches, or anything hard. Am I recalling that correctly?”

There was silence in the burrow, while Wump’s brothers looked casually about the room.

“Certainly, if Wump were put into such a bag—even if he were actually beaten to death—you’d never find open wounds. Instead, his corpus exhibited a strange collection of broken bones.”

“This is madness!” roared Crumble. “Ye can’t be seriously suggesting that my brothers here killed our brother Wump. That’s patently absurd. If you were anyone else, Mr. Dorro, I’d have me sword out.”

“D’ya want me to take care of him, Crumbly?” leered Aramina pulling out her hand axe. “I can do it quick ‘n’ nice, y’know.”

“No, of course not, you silly cow! Put that blade away.”

Now Crumble was really angry, not only at Aramina and his brothers, but also himself for letting things get this far. “Tell me, lads—tell me this is Mr. Dorro’s mad lark!”

Sadly for the Dwarf, neither Magpie, Flume, nor Two-Toes was able to do that. Instead, they sipped their tankards and looked at the foamy tops absently. At last, Two-Toes stood up awkwardly, looking like a child who got caught stealing an extra piece of pie. Crumble’s face was one of shock, while Aramina was simply bewildered; she knew it was time for her to put her axe away and remain quiet.

“I know this is difficult, Crumble me brother,” began Two-Toes, “But y’see, we had to do it. Even if you now have us killed or exiled, we had to do it. Wump had become wicked. Awful and terrible and wicked! We knew what we had to do.”

“What could Wump have done?” cried Crumble. “Sure, he was sometimes a greedy bugger, and his personality was flinty.”

“*Oh*, don’t I know it . . . and I was fool enough to marry him!” cackled Aramina.

Now it was Flume’s turn to stand up. “But Crumble, our brother had grown so greedy that he wanted your money.”

“My money?” said Crumble aghast. “I have only my claim in Gildenhall. And I haven’t worked that mine for years. Sure it contains some gold, silver, and minerals, but was it worth murderin’ about?”

Magpie rose, “But brother, it wasn’t just the gold; he wanted to kill you! He made plans—written plans, and we found them, in a letter.”

“To whom?” Crumble was looking sadder by the second.

Two-Toes’ voice echoed throughout the burrow. “To that villain Bindlestiff! Why it was that scoundrel who made the deal with Wump to import the black stones from the north. And in that letter, they discussed the fact that the stones would make yon Halflings sick and die—and both would make piles of money.”

Flume continued, “He and Bindlestiff also made plans to work your claim in Gildenhall—Wump keeping the gold and silver, and the ores and black stones he’d send south to the smeltery. Both fellers would be rich as kings in a few years. Wump had gone crazy with the gold fever!”

“Remember brother,” added Magpie, “It was Wump that secured us these jobs at the smeltery. He brought us down here to keep an eye on the operation and work out them long-term plans with Bindlestiff. They were both up to their necks in the evil!”

“Ah ha!” called out Crumble, pulling himself to his full height, “There’s one flaw in your accusations, brothers—Wump couldn’t get my claim if I died. According to our laws, it would have gone directly to young Orli, with you fellows as the guardians.”

Magpie began to quietly weep. “But Crumble, in Dwarf law, who gains control of an inheritance if the last son in a family dies?”



“That’s easy,” laughed Crumble, feeling he had the upper hand at last, “Why everything goes to ... his father’s next brother. And that would be Wump.”

All three brothers now approached Crumble and laid hands on his shoulders. “I’m sorry, brother. But it’s all here in this letter.” Slowly Flume fished it out of his pocket. “Wump and Bindlestiff plotted to kill Orli, too, and then take control of your claim. It’s all here in Wump’s own handwriting, sloppy as it was.”

“Lemme see that,” said Aramina sharply. “I knew his handwriting better than anyone.” She snatched the pages away and scanned them. She nodded and also put a hand on Crumble’s shoulder. “He was a no-good rotter, that ex-husband ’o mine. If I’d known about this plot, I’d-a killed him me’self!”

Crumble sank onto a wooden stool, his face in pure shock. A few words slipped out.

“So ... how did you get him in the leather sack? Wump was a beast and was stronger than any of you, even combined. I can’t imagine it.”

\* \* \*

“Maybe I can be of assistance here, Crumble.”

It was Dorro, speaking softly from the back of the burrow.

“You see, your brothers are very crafty fellows and knew not only how to break bones without any evidence of it, but also how to put him into a deep, dreamless sleep from which he’d never return. It’s something I’ve been puzzling over since you arrived in Thimble Down—the belladonna drops you put into your beer to kick them up a notch. Of course, belladonna is terribly poisonous to Halflings, but only mildly so to Dwarves, hence the small narcotic effect you get when adding it to your ales. Yet if one were to put a dramatic amount into a glass of wine, why, you’d even render a Dwarf unconscious.”

There was silence, as Dorro kept going.

“And that’s what your brothers did, Crumble. On the night the children were caught breaking into Bindlestiff’s office, they also found the letter—I recall you saying you went for a long walk, Crumble. That is perfectly in keeping with the timeline. As you were out, they had time to offer Wump a jolly glass of wine, or more likely honeygrass whiskey, one laced with a potent dose of belladonna. I’m sure it was followed with laughs and pleasantries, as your brothers wanted to remember the Wump they knew as youths—fun, silly, and jolly, long before he turned greedy and evil.”

“Shortly, he fell asleep, probably right there on the bench where Aramina is sitting. Your brothers carried him out back, sewed him into the leather bag, and carried him to the roof of Bindlestiff’s cave. In his already-weakened condition, his heart rate lowered dangerously by the

dose of belladonna, your brethren committed the final act of this grim play. They beat Wump to death with rocks and sticks and whatever they found—a fitting death for a thief.”

“At last, they cut him out of the bag, laid his broken, but unbloodied corpus in a nook on top of the smeltery, and quietly returned home before you returned. It was in its own dark way, a brilliantly conceived murder.”

Crumble sat there with Wump’s letter to Bindlestiff in his hands and began scanning its lines. In short order, he found the part about his own murder, as well as Orli’s. He dropped his head and began to wail and moan at the utter tragedy of it all.

## The Weapon

“The last remaining piece of this saga, of course, is to apprehend your brother’s co-conspirator, Hiram Bindlestiff.”

Dorro looked at the buttons on his vest distractedly. “It shouldn’t be hard to find him. If I’m correct, he’s likely in the only hiding place of which he knows, one where Fibbhook discovered Wyll a few weeks back. I speak, of course, of the Pie Thief’s cave, up by the River Thimble.”

“My guess is that Bindlestiff is there right now, scared and hungry, but still dreaming up some mischief. As you venture forth to apprehend him, you will want to be on your guard. Sheriff, you may want to accompany these brothers on this excursion, at least if you don’t want rough justice done on the spot.”

“I would agree with you, Winderiver,” rasped Forgo. “We will leave at first light, and I shall come here to collect you gents and lady. I warn you not to get it in your head to try snatching Bindlestiff tonight. The murder of Wump is, unfortunately, outside of my hands—that’s for Dwarf law to decide. But catching Bindlestiff, who’s a Halfling like us, is fully in my jurisdiction, and I intend to follow it through. Do I make myself clear?”

The Dwarves all nodded. Dorro spoke: “Then it is time for us to bid you goodnight. Remember, don’t be too hard on your brothers, Crumble. They acted out of love for you and the boy. And as for Wump, the fellow he became wasn’t the brother you knew or the husband you wed, Aramina. He’d become sick with love of gold and money, and in the end, the disease got the better of him. Best to leave it that way.”

The trio of Thimble Downers turned and let themselves out of the burrow.

\* \* \*

“That went well, I think,” whispered the bookmaster as they strolled down the lane.

“Better than that, I should say,” chimed Mr. Timmo. “Your observations, Dorro, were bloody brilliant.”

“I must agree, Winderiver—that was some damn fine detective work”

“Thank you all.” The Sheriff rarely conveyed compliments, and when he did, Dorro swelled with pride. “It was a most peculiar case, and I had a devil of time figuring it out.”

“I think the Mayor should give you an award for this one!” chirped Mr. Timmo. “Of course, I’d ask to make it. A medallion or trophy, perhaps. I’d give him a good price!”

“I know something that I am suddenly without—a silver pocket watch. It was taken by the Dwarf Seer as the price for her knowledge, and I am bereft without it. Even if it’s not a prize, I will happily pay you for a new one, Timmo.”

“Wonderful—I’ll work up some new designs immediately.” Timmo exchanged looks with the Sheriff. No words were said, yet the look in Forgo’s eyes clearly meant:

*We’ll twist the Mayor’s arm until he pays for the watch. Even if we have to break it!*

\* \* \*

“Now be careful, everyone. Bindlestiff might be a buffoon, but that doesn’t mean he’s not quick or armed. A clever fellow like that might have also set a trap or two.” Forgo wasn’t going to take any chances—he wanted this Halfling taken cleanly and safely.

“Oh, come on, Sheriff!” giggled Aramina. “Let Malachite Molly have a little sport with the old frog. I’ll have him chased out in no time, what with me ’n’ my battle axe!”

“She’s right, y’know,” whispered Crumble. “No matter what defenses ol’ Bindler has, Molly will flush ’em out and put them out of commission. She’s like a bleedin’ hunting hound—she can smell trouble!”

“Against my better judgment, I will allow this,” said Forgo gravely. “But again, do not kill him unless it’s a matter of your own imminent death.”

“No worries, skipper! I don’t want him dead yet. We have to put the blighter on trial first and make him admit he’s a rat. Then I’ll cut off his—”

“Aramina, shut it, will you,” barked Crumble. “Now boys, clear a way and let Molly get through. She’ll get this done in half a tick!”

At that, Magpie, Flume, and Two-Toes made a space in their line for Aramina and Molly to get through and approach the cave’s opening. But while Forgo might have gone for a stealthy approach, Molly chose intimidation and fear, launching in a fearful whooping sound that would scare the stoutest of hearts.

“*Whooo-lee-lee-lee! Whooo-lee-lee-lee!* We’re comin’ to gut ya, Mr. Bindlestiff—or should I say, *Bindle-stuffed!* Yep, we’re going to stuff you like a pigeon, lest you get your tail out here right quick.”

Clearly Aramina loved her work.

She disappeared into the cave for what seemed like an eternity. The company soon heard loud reports—*Bang! Blam! Boom!*—the sound of explosions.

“Them’s must be the booby traps she’s triggerin’ off,” muttered Crumble. “Lots of ’em!”

After a few nerve-wracking minutes Malachite Molly stepped into the sunlight and waved for the troupe to approach. A few minutes later, they all stood in front of the orifice, wondering what was up.

“He was here and set a whole bunch o’ nefarious traps—black-powder bombs, cave-ins, fake snakes—he had it all. I can’t find the bugger through ...”

*Whoosh!* A flight of arrows flew through the sky and one pierced Aramina through the shoulder—she screamed in surprise. A second flight came on its heels, striking the heavily armored Dwarves, causing pain and panic. They dove behind trees and rocks, while Two-Toes and Sheriff Forgo grabbed the huntress and pulled her to safety.

“What kind of trickery is this I wonder?” mused Crumble, scanning the tree line on either sides of the entrance.

He bolted northward along the shore, keeping low, Flume and Magpie following him. It didn’t take long for them to return, pulling with them an irate Hiram Bindlestiff, whom they’d hastily bound in rope. And Flume carried a strange-looking wooden creation, something like a scrambled-up loom.

“I knew there’d be a trick, and there was!” sneered Crumble. “How is Aramina?”

Two-Toes looked over the patient and replied, “Just a bolt to the shoulder. I got it out and put some herbs on it. She will heal, though pain will follow for a few weeks. We might ask that Halfling healer Nurse Pym to add a few stitches.

“Ridiculous!” croaked Aramina. “I’m fit as a fiddle and ready to dance! I just want to know how the fat toad got the jump on us.”

“I want my solicitor. I demand my rights!”

Bindlestiff’s cries were silenced by a quick kick from Sheriff Forgo.

“You’re lucky I don’t hold court right here, Bindlestiff,” roared Forgo. “No question we’d find you guilty and hang you from that pine tree. Rough justice, we call it!”

“So how did the old weasel shoot us with such accuracy?” wondered Flume.

“I can guess the answer is here, one I’m rather familiar with,” said Sheriff Forgo referring to the strange loom. “It was a contraption Bindlestiff found in the Pie Thief’s lair and put to use. A few months ago, the thief—who, I still can’t believe, is my own deputy, Gadget—stole the device from our armory; it hadn’t been used for decades. It was invented by a long-deceased Thimble Downer for the defense of our village. The weapon is a lightweight, ground-mounted crossbow on which you could load seven arrows at once. One master drawstring controls all the pulleys. Load the device, pull the drawstring, and fire. It was quite ingenious in fact.”

“So why was it kept quiet all these years?” asked Aramina. “Could be a weapon of great wonder and destruction?”

“Maybe that’s the reason right there,” wondered Forgo. “I think we all knew that this device could be used as much *against* us as *for* us. And furthermore, most Thimble Downers would agree that we are creatures of peace, not warfare. So we decided not to go down that road, despite the clever device and its obvious worth to others. Its inventor died soon afterward of natural causes, and we decided to store the darned thing in the armory. And that was the last of it, at least until Gadget got his mitts on it.”

“Oh, how we would love to use such a tool in the goblin wars!” crowed Aramina with glee. “We could mow down the enemy by the score.”

“But what’s to keep the goblins from capturing the weapon from the Dwarves and using it against your soldiers?” Forgo cautioned. “No, it would be best to destroy the accursed thing.”

“Give it to me, Flume,” commanded Crumble, who held the multi-bow and inspected its clever workings. “The Sheriff is right—it’s a devilish instrument. I am sorry, Aramina.”

At that, Crumble lifted the contraption over his head and smashed it on the ground. He proceeded to stomp all over it, crushing the pulley mechanisms and all other workings. Now no one would be able to copy the infernal weapon.

“Now let’s take our prisoner back to Thimble Down. There is justice that needs to be dealt to this swine and I am hopeful that the Mayor can administer it. If not ... *we will.*”

## Fool's Gold

The entire way back to the village, Hiram Bindlestiff cried and whined about how he was a wronged Halfling, and how Wump had been to blame for everything.

Next, he threatened to have his solicitors sue them all within an inch of their lives. And when that didn't make his captors free him, he reverted to bribery, offering each of them piles of gold.

"You will be the richest Dwarves in the Northern Kingdom," begged the smelting kingpin. "Think of it, Sheriff—no more spending nights fighting criminals in Fell's Corner. Now you'll be in a comfy feather bed with servants to attend your every need. You know you crave it!"

"Actually, I only wish for two things, Hiram. One of them is a tall, cold pint from Mr. Mungo's taps. And the other is for you to shut the hell up. Sadly, I don't think I'll get either of them."

Magpie had been sent ahead to find Nurse Pym and bring her to the gaol. Soon they were at the small, round building—one of the few freestanding structures in Thimble Down—and unwinding after a whirlwind of events. With Bindlestiff locked up in the back and Pym attending to Aramina's wound, the remaining Dwarves returned to their burrow.

After an hour, the lawman decided to leave Gadget Pinkle in charge and set off for that mug of beer at the Hanging Stoat and something savory and warm for luncheon. In his own exhaustion, Bindlestiff was fast asleep in his cell, reducing Forgo's worry even more. Inside the tavern, Mr. Mungo read Forgo's expression and led him to a quiet table in the corner; in short order, Freda the barmaid had brought him a mug and a bowl a beef, sage, and potato stew, accompanied by a small jigger of honeygrass whiskey, on the house.

*That Mungo is a prince among Halflings,* thought Forgo as he tucked into his supper. It was the best meal he'd had in a month, and for the first in a long time, the lawman relaxed.

He left a few coins on the table and strolled back to the gaol, whistling a tune in the cold afternoon air.

"Hello, Gadget, I'm back!" he chirped as he entered the building. "Gadget, I'm here!" Something wasn't right.

Forgo rushed back into the cells to find his deputy not only locked in, but also unconscious on the floor. Hastily grabbing a key, he picked up Gadget Pinkle as if he were a rag doll and plunked him on a cot.

“Wake up, boy! Can you hear me, lad!” Forgo even gave the young deputy a few quick slaps to awaken him.

“Oy, *me head!* What happened?”

“I was hoping you’d tell me, Gadget. I found you on the floor and our prisoner gone.”

The young deputy suddenly looked sheepish.

“Bindlestiff said he had sharp stomach pains and needed some water. So I brought him a ladle-full and he musta jumped me. Hit me with something hard—that pewter bowl, I guess. That’s all I remember.”

“Can you take yourself to Nurse Pym? She should look at your head.” Forgo was disappointed in the young fellow, but remembered how incompetent Bosco had been in his early days and what a brave hero he’d become. Even then, the memory of Bosco stung the Sheriff bitterly.

“No, I’m fine, Sheriff, I really am! Put me to work.”

“Fine, if you say so. Now go get me Dorro Fox Winderiver and tell him to meet me outside the Bumbling Badger. Dash as fast as you can, boy!”

\* \* \*

“How bad is it?”

“Oh, about the usual.” Sheriff Forgo tightened his belt, looking at nothing in particular. “*Yer* basic disaster.”

“What happened?” Dorro was slowly catching his breath after the quick evening walk.

“Hiram Bindlestiff bopped Gadget on the head and escaped. Worse, I can’t find the Dwarves. They’re not in their burrow, nor at any tavern in the village.”

“You think they’re connected?”

“I think Crumble and his brothers—and Aramina—got wind of his escape and went out for a hunt. I’m fearing the worst.”

“But you warned them not to break Halfling law,” added the bookmaster.

“That was when he was in gaol,” growled the Sheriff. “Now that Bindlestiff is an escaped prisoner, I suppose he’s fair game. I don’t think they’ll adhere to the ‘bring ‘em back dead or alive’ adage, either. I’m pretty sure it’ll just be ‘*dead*, thank you very much.’”

“So where do we start?”

“Let’s swing around to the Hanging Stoat and loop around to the smeltery. But if they’ve taken Bindlestiff to the Great Wood, we have no chance of finding him.” The Sheriff looked irritated, as if he were about to throw in the towel on this particular career choice.



For the next several hours, Forgo and Dorro searched all over Thimble Down, in every tavern, down every lane, and all around the smeltery, including its roof. There was no sign of the Dwarves or Bindlestiff. Around two o'clock in the morning, they came back to the gaol, exhausted and grumpy. Forgo offered the bookmaster an extra cot in the back, but Dorro declined, preferring his own cot in the library's rare book room, where he occasionally took naps.

Dorro was in deep slumber the next morning when he became aware of heavy pounding on the front door. He roused himself and buttoned his vest while running to answer it.

"What's the matter?" he cried, pulling open the heavy oak door. There, looking panicked, was none other than the deputy.

"*Mr. D-d-d-dorro!* Sheriff Forgo requests you meet him in front of the smeltery. Right now, if you please, sir!"

More than a few Thimble Downers smirked at the sight of the gangly deputy running down the frosty lane, while the bookmaster followed, still trying to button his vest and sleeves. The pair found the Sheriff, who appeared to be in conversation with a gentleman they did not know. As they drew closer, it became clear that there was something queer about this fellow. He did not move or react, despite Forgo's obvious gestures. The true story was something altogether more sinister.

"Sheriff, what's the matter?" gasped Dorro. "And who is this ... *Sweet King Borgo!*"

The bookmaster covered his mouth to keep from being ill. However, Gadget lacked that particular self-control and was sick all over the lane.

"So you do recognize him, Winderiver, don't you?" Forgo was clearly disgusted at his find. "It's our friend Hiram Bindlestiff, dead as a doornail, as we figured."

"What's wrong with him? Why is he shining?"

"Our Dwarf friends left us a letter, most cunningly placed in Bindlestiff's fingers, as if he were handing it to us. Shall I read it here, or do you need to go lie down? Gadget seems to be ahead of you."

The two turned around to see Deputy Pinkle wan and passed out on the cold ground. "He may be a brilliant thief, but the lad has no stomach for gore. Anyway, let me proceed."

\* \* \*

And this is what the letter said:

"*Good Day to ya, Sheriff!* 'Tis I, Crumble, the Northland Dwarf. I hope the dawn finds you well, at least better than our friend here. We have, as you can see, found our Mr. Bindlestiff and administered our own brand of law—we hope ya don't mind, but felt obliged to finish the job."

“You see, when we heard ol’ Bindler was on the run again, we knew it was our time to act. It didn’t take long to find him, cowering behind a few burrows in Fell’s Corner. Aramina has a knack for tracking game in the wild, and finding this porker was a cinch for her. She verily sniffed him right out, like truffles in the dirt! *Ooo*, but did he howl and whine at the sight of our bunch o’ mugs, all laughin’ and hollerin’.”

“We discussed it amongst ourselves and tried to come up with a fitting punishment for such an evil creature. Not only had Bindlestiff knowingly imported black stones to the South and imperiled yer folk’s health (something I did not know and still feel aggrieved about), but he encouraged Wump’s greediness, to the point where my brother decided to kill not only myself, but my boy Orli. Yet that is—or should I say *was*—Mr. Hiram Bindlestiff: a greedy business feller who cared little for those around him. Only for them’s that brought him gold, silver, and wealth of every kind.”

“Aramina, *a-course*, wanted to chop his fingers ‘n’ ears off, but we talked her out of it. We voted and decided that, according to Dwarf law, his punishment should be death, which was fine by us. But we do have some compassion, so recalling the disposition of my brother, we gave him many jiggers of your excellent honeygrass whiskey, all laced with sizable draughts of our belladonna juice. Ol’ Bindler was in excellent spirits, thinking we wuz all friends and this would blow over by morning. He simply fell asleep, never to awaken again. We checked his heart and breath, and knew Hiram Bindlestiff was a blight on this earth no more; he died a contented Halfling, dreaming happily of coins and stacks of silver bars.”

I” must credit my brothers Two-Toes, Flume, and Magpie for developing the next part of the plan. Considering how Bindlestiff made his fortune off the melting, purifying, and refining of metals, we decided to smelt the ol’ bugger himself!”

“So last night, in the wee hours, we lit up one of the furnaces in the closed forge and whipped up a vat of hot pyrite. When it was good ‘n’ hot, looking like liquid star-shine, we dipped the Bindler’s corpus in a few times until he was well covered. Then lickety-split, me brothers got him out, cooled it, and set him to a perfect standing posture.”

“And that, gentlemen is what you have in front of you—the life-like form of Mr. Bindlestiff, all expertly cast in pyrite. Or, as most folks call it, Fool’s Gold. We felt it quite the right material in which to cast this fine gent, considering his rank and personage and all that muckety-muck. Considering the care we took in dippin’ him, I’d say he’ll stay fine the way he is for a month or two; thence you can peel off the pyrite and dispose of the remains as ye see fit.”

“As for us Dwarves, we have since skedaddled from the fine burg of Thimble Down as fast as we could, owing to the fact that we just murdered a feller and didn’t feel like spending any more time larking about yer gaol. Most of us shall return to Gildenhall and resume digging, gathering, and smelting metals for the use of our brethren.”

“As for me, my life took a sudden twist earlier last night when Aramina—the aforementioned Malachite Molly—asked me to become her betrothed. While I am quite fond of the lass, at first I demurred, owing to the fact that she’s a fighter who lives in open country, while I’m a digger and a metalsmith of a sorts.

But Aramina said that she’d give up her fightin’ ways just to be with me, and would return to Gildenhall. Now, I know this lady and knew that would be a life of misery for her, yet was touched at her sacrifice. We discussed the matter more, and she offered up a fine notion.”

““Why not join our battalion, Crumbly?” she said. ‘We’ve never had a blacksmith in our ranks and are forever fighting with dull swords and notched axes. Why, if you wuz with us, we could keep our weapons sharp and protect our lands from them goblins even better! We could even get you a homey wagon for yer tools, put some stout ponies up front to pull it, and a portable furnace on wheels bringin’ up the rear. And sometimes, you ‘n’ me can sneak into the wagon for a little smoochin’!”

“Why, Sheriff Forgo, that was an offer I could not turn down. Not only would I be with a grand lady, but I could see the countryside, practice my craft, and do my bit to protect the Wide Green Open from them horrible goblins, trolls, and worse. And after this bit of mischief, I feel it’s my time to give back and do the right thing.”

“And that’s where our story ends. I’m sure Orli will miss your Wyll something fierce, but I bet their paths will cross again, and perhaps the lad can come visit Gildenhall again. My brothers and I, along with my bride-to-be, wish you, Mr. Dorro, and the fine folks of Thimble Down the very best.”

To your Good Health,  
*Crumble, the Dwarf*

\* \* \*

Forgo looked at the bookmaster and folded up the note.

“Well, ain’t that *something*,” was all he said. He hoisted Gadget up off the ground, tucked him under his beefy arm, and started back towards gaol.

In his wake, Dorro stood shivering in the lane—alone and thoroughly confused.

## Lessons

Dorro didn't often hold meetings at the library, but on this blustery late-Fall morning, there were few patrons, save Bedminster Shoe. As usual, Mr. Shoe was providing crisp, efficient service for the folks who showed up—a few younglings bundled up with scarves and hats, and eager to hear a ripping good yarn from the scribe.

“See the way Bedminster is showing them kids how to read. Remember back in our day?”

“Course I do, Forgo, ye fool! We had classes most days with yon late schoolmaster, Cecil Root.” Nurse Pym gave a rare smile, making her look many years the younger. “Mr. Cecil was harsh when he needed to be, but ye can't argue with the results. T'weren't for him, none of us wee ones would ever know our letters, nor our numbers.”

“True enough, Jessie, true enough.”

“I remember Mr. Cecil catching me at the river with my fishing pole, rather than studying my arithmetic. Here, I was trying to catch a big bass, and instead, he caught me!” Dorro laughed with his friends, all of them fondly remembering their younger days and all the long years that had passed. “And now here we are, old and fat ourselves.”

“Speak fer yerself, porkchop!” scowled Pym, knowing all too well she was anything but lithe.

“How are the patients, Jessie? Is the Grippe receding?” asked Forgo.

“Aye, it 'tis. Ever since ye closed the smeltery, folks been getting better every day, even dear Mrs. Tunbridge. True, I thought Cheeryup's mum wasn't going to make it for a while.”

“Thank goodness she's well. How many did we lose to the disease?” asked Dorro quietly.

“Hmmm, maybe twenty villagers all told. Too sad to think about, what when you add in the dead from the battle. Then it rises to more like seventy Thimble Downers, many in the prime of their lives. Breaks my heart, it does.”

The nurse was silent after that.

Dorro looked across the room. “The reason I've called you here is because of an idea. It's been rumbling around my brain for a while, and now it's thumping even louder. I think you two may have hit upon the same thing here.”

“What idea?” The Sheriff had no idea what Dorro was blithering about.

“About the schoolmaster—it's true, we haven't had one for nigh on thirty years. And why not?”

“Oh, you know how cheap our mayors are,” rasped Forgo. “When Mr. Cecil passed, the Old Mayor didn’t want to spend any more money on the position, especially since your family had just promised to build the library. It was assumed that this fine institution would fill that need in the community.”

“It fills a role, certainly,” Dorro continued, “But it’s not the same as a proper schoolmaster. Now here’s my little thought ...”

\* \* \*

“That’s *outrageous*—I won’t stand for it!” The current Mayor was incensed. He crushed his bushy eyebrows together and pounded the desk. “That’s blackmail, Winderiver! How dare you?”

There, in the Mayor’s office, stood Dorro and the Sheriff, along with Osgood Thrip and Farmer Edythe, who had gained quite a bit of ground in her campaign to become Mayor herself.

“I don’t need *you*—I have this election sewn up,” he boasted, but then shot a quick glance at Thrip, whose face was grave.

“Do you really, Mr. Mayor? I think not.”

Dorro had his thumbs in the pockets of a bright yellow vest, the one he wore when he was feeling triumphant.

“On the contrary, I’m fairly sure that Farmer Edythe will not only win the election, but she will trounce you soundly. Why, you can’t step into a tavern on either side of the High Street and not hear your fellow Thimble Downers talking about Edythe’s bravery in the Battle of the Burrows—they talk about that almost as much as they talk about your cowardice!”

“*Out—rageous!*” bellowed the Mayor again, acting like a spoilt child. “I should have you thrown out of my office instantly.”

“But you won’t,” purred Dorro. “I know the good Sheriff here doesn’t have an opinion either way, but I bet your closest ally would advise against it. Wouldn’t you, Osgood?”

The look on Osgood Thrip’s face could have melted stone, but instead of answering, he merely walked behind the Mayor, and leaning over, whispered in his ear. The Mayor looked as if he were about to explode, while the bookmaster continued.

“Your lordship, the election is already in the bag for Edythe. Either you take our deal and retain your seat, or you do not—and return to your old life as ... *what* ... a tailor? You remember how to hem breeches and sew buttons, don’t you, Mr. Mayor?”

Thimble Down’s top elected official said nothing and just sat in his fine oak chair, glowering.

“Splendid!” said Dorro. “So this is what you’ll do. As Mr. Bedminster Shoe’s work as a scribe seems to be diminishing—he’s doesn’t have much of a head for business, does he?—a number of us think he’d make a wonderful schoolmaster for the village. Our younglings haven’t had a

proper one for decades, and it's time we prepare them for the days ahead when they'll be mothers and fathers, bankers and merchants, and maybe even mayors. We'll also be the envy of every other Halfling village in the entire county, if not the Kingdom, and you know it!"

"To that end, sir, you will hire Mr. Shoe to conduct classes on five out of every seven days at the library—I shall donate the space—and thus we all win. We get a school, the children get an education, and you get the election. Edythe will back out of the race and give it to you on a silver platter. For all that, we only need a few things from you."

"It's extortion!" the Mayor murmured icily.

"It's *what*?"

A sharp look from Osgood Thrip made the Mayor change his mind. "Oh, nothing. Keep going!"

"Precisely," said Dorro. "From you, we will require a salary for Mr. Shoe of ten ... *no*, make it twenty silver coins per year, plus a bonus at year's end to be determined by the school committee over which I will preside."

"Second, you will designate the Great Wood and the River Thimble as places of irrevocable beauty and write a series of laws that will forever protect them as open, natural places that no Halfling or other creature can use for business or any so-called 'progress.' They will stay the way they are in the Wide Green Open, something I'm beginning to learn quite a bit about. Don't worry—I will help you write these special writs of protection, assisted by my special advisor in these matters, Dalbo Dall."

"That drunkard Dalbo? Have you gone mad, Winderiver?" The Mayor puffed out his cheeks, making his mutton chop sideburns verily dance on his face.

"Actually, Dalbo is an authority on the Great Wood, and all matters related to the natural world. We're lucky to have his consultations," crowed the bookmaster.

"Finally, you will forever ban any industry from the village of Thimble Down that creates excessive smoke, waste, poison, or yet-unknown toxin that could harm either its citizenry or the denizens of the Great Wood. On that account, in particular, you will create a standing committee, led by none other than Farmer Edythe, and its word shall be binding. And for that, sir, you shall remain our Mayor."

"Fine! So be it!" snarled the Mayor. "Anything else?"

Sheriff Forgo coughed awkwardly. "*Erm*, on behalf of your office, I did promise Mr. Dorro a new silver pocket watch, seeing as his was lost in the line of duty. It was taken from him by the Dwarf Seer, who gave us that most-important information about the Grippe, if you may recall."

The Mayor's jaw hung open. "You promised Winderiver on *my* behalf? What is this world coming to!" Thrip shot him another intense look. "So be it! At this point, the treasury is shot

anyway. Well, there you are, bookmaster—on the whole, it seems you've won the day. You can have all of that; you have my word on it."

"Ah, not so fast, m'lord." Dorro fished in his pocket and pulled out a document. "I do have a contract, which contains the arrangements for the school and teacher—beautifully drawn up by Mr. Bedminster Shoe, ironically—and ready for you to sign, with Osgood, Forgo, Edythe, and myself as witnesses. The original will be locked in the archives at the library, while copies will be posted about the village as proof of its lawfulness."

The Mayor began grinding his teeth. He spoke quietly and emotionlessly: "I'll get you for this, Winderiver. I will!"

He reached for his quill and ink bottle. A few quick flashes of his hand and it was over—Dorro had his authorized agreement, and the Mayor had his election. The rest initialed the document as a formality.

"I wouldn't expect you to do anything less, Mr. Mayor," smiled Dorro curtly. "In fact, I enjoy our little games. They do so amuse me."

With that, Dorro held out his arm for Farmer Edythe and led her grandly from the room, both of them beaming in a moment of utter and complete victory.

Not knowing what else to do, Sheriff Forgo muttered "G'day" and beat a quick retreat from the room, leaving the Mayor and Osgood Thrip to stew in their misery.

\* \* \*

Outside the Mayor's house, the trio found Wyll and Cheeryup bundled up on a bench in the sun.

"Ahoy, you two. Aren't you supposed to be at the library?"

"Mr. Shoe said we could come find you," said Cheeryup. "He told us he had just received the happiest news of his life and was so delighted he said we could pack up 'n' go play."

"And what would that news be, Uncle Dorro?" Wyll Underfoot looked at his uncle shrewdly. "He said you would know."

"I shall divulge all tonight at supper, young Mr. Underfoot" said Dorro, waving his hand with garish theatricality. "Cheeryup, you and your mother are more than welcome. And you two as well, Edythe and Forgo, plus Mr. Mungo. I will summon the inestimable Mrs. Fowl to conjure us up something mouthwatering."

The children rolled their eyes, knowing that the bookmaster would regale them with an extended, if not practically endless, recasting of recent events. But that, they knew, was the price of admission for one of Mrs. Fowl's delicious dinners.

“Bring Bedminster Shoe, won’t you, Forgo. He’s a central character in the saga. Oh, and Gadget Pinkle—our deputy *and* thief! I think we’re all becoming fond of the lad. Now I’m off to an appointment and will see you folks later, around seven o’clock.”

“Where are you going, Mr. Dorro? Not making trouble, are you?” Cheeryup put on her scolding face.

“Of course not, young lady! I’m merely going to visit the good Mr. Timmo. He’s designing a new silver pocketwatch for me.”

He glanced slyly over at Sheriff Forgo.

“And a *very expensive* one, at that!”

**THE END**



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