

Guardian of the Mountain

by David Dalglish

Jerek was rich. Filthy, stinking rich. No other thought raced through his head as the gold glittered in the light of his torch. It ran like a frozen river along the sides of the tunnel, thick with treasure, a cave carved of wealth.

"Would you...look...can you see it?" asked Dan, his simple-minded friend, mouth open and eyes sparkling.

"I can see it," Jerek said, smacking Dan's shoulder. He felt a wave of elation shaking loose, and he didn't dare stop it. He jumped and hollered, his torch waving wildly.

"I told you it was true," he shouted, spinning and laughing. "I told you!"

Dan only shook his head and grinned.

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They camped at the forest's edge, not far from the cave's entrance. Before them loomed the steep slopes of Elfspire, a mountain whose original name Jerek didn't know, nor could he pronounce if he did. It was the southernmost tip of the Elethan Mountains, which hooked into the Stonewood Forest before rising above it, white and barren. No vegetation grew on its sides, not even pale grass or scraggly weeds.

Jerek set his pack down as Dan gathered the last of the firewood.

"Hurry it up," he said as he pulled out two black bricks. "It's almost dark."

"I am," Dan said, trotting over with his arms full of snapped branches and twigs. He was a big man, but also tall so the weight wasn't too unseemly. With a cry of celebration, he dumped them into a pile. Jerek thought to scold him for the carelessness.

"Thanks," he said instead, in too good a mood to complain.

"Can I light?" Dan asked, pointing at the bricks. "You got to last time."

Jerek shrugged.

"You're just taking advantage of my happiness," he said as he handed the bricks over. "Don't get used to it. The hard work starts tomorrow, and it won't stop for days."

"I know," Jerek said, the bricks dwarfed by his big hands. With incredible care and concentration, he leaned over the kindling and spread his arms wide. In a single quick motion, he slammed the bricks together. A great shower of sparks erupted about him, the embers glowing red and violet. Upon landing, they burned hot, even the thicker pieces of wood quickly catching fire. Dan lifted his arms above his head and whooped.

"Hand them over," Jerek said. "Those cost twice what you eat in a month."

"That's a lot!" Dan said, rubbing his ample stomach.

The sky was clear and the weather warm, so they didn't bother with their tents. On opposite sides of the fire they lay down in their bedrolls and blankets. The stars shone bright, not a hint of clouds in the sky. Jerek knew he needed sleep. His body ached from the toll of carrying his equipment through the forest. It seemed the trees had fought their approach, scratching at him with their limbs and hurling up their roots to ruin even the faintest of paths. But they'd made it. The rumors, the ones everyone in Trewick had laughed at, were true. Tired, itchy, and sore, Jerek felt so very *awake* that he couldn't close his eyes for more than a few seconds at a time.

"Hey, Jerek?" asked Dan, evidently having the same trouble.

"Yeah, Dan?"

“You falling asleep over there?”

He chuckled.

“Sure thing, Dan.”

“Oh.” He heard Dan roll over. “Just making sure.”

Jerek lay there, counting the stars. After ten minutes, he heard the first rumble of Dan’s snoring, which would soon rival a bear’s growl. A soft wind blew, rustling the leaves of nearby trees. Time crawled on. Dan continued snoring.

“Damn it all to the Abyss,” Jerek said an hour later. He flung off his blanket and stormed away from their dying fire. At the nearest tree he stopped, pulled down his trousers, and began to piss. Just as he was buttoning them back up, he heard a rustle of leaves. Jerek spun, his hand reaching for a nonexistent dagger. His eyes scanned the forest’s edge, cold and blue in the starlight. Nothing. No one.

“Dan?” he asked, thinking maybe the simpleton had heard him wake.

“He sleeps,” said a voice to his right. “As should you.”

Jerek spun, his arm out wide in a punch that fell a foot short of the intruder’s nose. To his shock, it was an elf he nearly clobbered.

“Fuck,” said Jerek as he leaned his back against the tree, his hand once more falling to his side in search of his absent dagger. “What are you doing here? King Baedan ran your kind out years ago.”

The elf’s face sagged at those words. He wore a strange mesh of green and brown cloth, interwoven with strips of leather. His hair was long and gray, his eyes the color of wet earth. Most striking were the aged lines on his face. Jerek knew elves lived a long time, but he’d never seen one look so weathered, so *old*.

“Your king is a fool, same as you,” the elf said. “You’ve come unwelcome to a place most sacred.”

Jerek felt trapped. He saw no visible weapon, but the elf could easily command strange sorts of fey magic.

“We’ve got as much right as you to be here,” Jerek said, trying to sound confident. “More, probably. Who are you to call me unwelcome?”

“You were but a speck of dust when the gold first filled those caves,” said the elf. “And you are unworthy of my name. If you must, call me Evermoon. It is an ugly translation, but that is all you deserve. An ugly race of ugly men. The darkness will not abide your sacrilege. Take your friend and go. Do not harm the mountain, or the treasure within.”

Jerek tensed, preparing for any sort of attack, but none came.

“And if we don’t?” he asked. “You going to kill me?”

Evermoon narrowed his eyes. A grim smile spread across his pale, wrinkled lips.

“Not me,” he said, his body fading like stars before the light of the sun. “Leave, human. You’ve been warned.”

And then he was gone. Jerek shook his head, and if it weren’t for the anger burning in his chest he might have thought the brief encounter a dream.

“Run me off?” he asked, tightening his trousers. “You think you can do that? I don’t care about your sacred this, holy that. The gold is mine. You hear me? Mine!”

He returned to bed, where the fire had dwindled to faded embers. Before wrapping himself in the blankets, he retrieved his battle-worn sword and placed it at his side. With his hand on the hilt, he finally managed to close his eyes and sleep.

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Come the morning, Jerek woke refreshed and eager for digging. A few swift kicks got Dan out of bed as well, who lumbered around like a drunkard before hurrying behind a tree to do his business. Jerek reignited the fire with the bricks, then began cooking breakfast.

“Had funny dreams last night,” he heard Dan shout from behind the tree.

“That so?” asked Jerek, the corner of his lip twitching as he remembered the elf. That too seemed like a dream, now that the sun had risen and soft light filtered through the trees.

“Yuh huh. Bunch of flowers were talking to me. That’s silly! They said to leave.”

Dan came back around the tree, pulling at his pants.

“Like we’d listen to talking flowers,” he said, grinning.

“That’s a smart man,” Jerek said. “Now eat up. That gold ain’t going to mine itself.”

They carried their equipment up the slopes of the mountains, following a smoothed pattern in the rock that looked deceptively like a worn path. There were several caves, but Jerek took them to the one they’d scouted the night before. The daylight glittered as it shone inside, illuminating the entrance like the gates to the Golden Eternity. Both carried pickaxes, and Dan a shovel as well.

“Shame we have nothing to smelt the ore with,” Jerek said as they set their supplies down at the entrance. His sword he kept at his hip, feeling uncomfortable without it since the elf’s appearance. “Maybe once we get a bit of gold we can build a big pit nearby, lead a horse or two through the forest with bricks...”

Dan stretched, grunting long and loud.

“Maybe we can get people to help us,” he said. “That sounds good, Jerek.”

“Just us,” Jerek said, smacking Dan across the arm with his palm. “Forever, just us. If others find this place, they’ll take it away. That’s why you can’t tell anyone. Understand? This is our secret place. It’ll be hard work, but the wealth will stay ours. We’ll live like kings. How’s that sound?”

“If we’re kings, can I buy a birdie?” asked Dan as they entered the mine. “One of those pretty ones, like at the market? I like the red ones, but they’re not only red. They have some blue, and yellow on the wings...”

They hacked into the mine, tearing lose the rock. It seemed everywhere they tested was a vein. Jerek could have closed his eyes and swung, and still he’d have struck gold. The morning passed, slow, steady, and covered with sweat, while Dan droned on about different birds. They piled the ore at the entrance, some larger chunks, some smaller. He’d go through it later, find the pieces with the least impurities. They’d have to lug everything back by hand, so there’d be no way to take everything. With what money they made, they could afford to buy horses or a donkey. It was that second trip he knew would make them truly rich.

“Hey Dan?” he shouted as he popped his back and leaned his pick against the pile.

He waited a moment. Dan arrived at the entrance, long streaks of dirt covering his sweaty arms and face.

“You say my name, Jerek?” he asked.

“Sure did. You need a drink?”

Dan shrugged. He was panting heavily, his shoulders stooped.

“I think I might like that,” he said. “I’m working hard, aren’t I?”

“Sure are,” said Jerek. “Go ahead and sit. I’ll be back with the waterskins.”

“You know, I think I will sit down.”

Dan let out an exaggerated grunt of appreciation as he sat. Jerek chuckled as he walked back to camp. Everything Dan did was greatly exaggerated. He’d rarely complain, instead rely on what he probably thought were subtle hints to reveal his wants. For Jerek, he was the perfect assistant. Few complaints, and no risk of betrayal. They’d soon have enough wealth to buy kingdoms, and all Dan could think about was getting a few silly birds to tweet and sing for him.

Once at camp he grabbed one of their waterskins. He’d filled them at a stream they’d crossed about halfway through the forest, the water shockingly sweet and cool. At first he’d wondered about it, but now he figured the elf had blessed it or some such nonsense.

“Probably worships the water and prays to the mountain,” Jerek chuckled to himself. “Damn elves. No sense at all.”

He took a long drink, relishing the cold taste on his tongue and the chill that traveled down his chest and into his belly. He shook his head as if he’d just drank the strongest of liquor.

As he did, he spotted movement from the corner of his eye.

Pretending not to notice, he corked the waterskin and grabbed another for Dan. With both in his left hand, he slowly shifted his right to his side, mere inches from the hilt of his sword. He couldn’t see him, but Jerek knew someone hid in the line of bushes not far to his left. Whistling, he started toward the mountain.

“Hey Dan!” he shouted. “Come get your damn drink!”

He stopped directly before the line of brush, calling for Dan one more time. Sunlight streamed in scattered beams through the trees, and in its light he saw the glint of steel.

Still calm, still acting unbothered, Jerek took two steps. When he went to take a third, he dropped the waterskins, pulled free his sword, and swung. Movement exploded throughout the brush, and he cut nothing but twigs and brambles.

“Stop!” ordered a man, stepping to the side of the vegetation. His hair was long and disheveled, his clothes worn leather. He held a small bow in hand, more suited for hunting rabbits and squirrels than killing a man. The line was pulled taut, and his arm shook from the strain.

“Easy there,” Jerek said, his sword at ready. He shifted as the man began to circle. “Let’s talk about this, eh?”

“Drop your sword,” said the man. “Or I’ll feather you.”

“You couldn’t kill a lame doe with that thing,” Jerek said. “You think you can take me down, one shot?”

“No,” said a second as steel pressed against the back of his neck. “But I could.”

Jerek rolled his eyes and swore.

“All right,” he said, dropping his sword and raising his hands above his head.

“Sword’s gone. Now put down your damn bow.”

The first man slowly released the tension of the string, but he kept the arrow ready.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Jerek. So what’s a pair of bandits doing this far out in the middle of nowhere?”

“We’re not bandits,” said the man behind him. “And we’re not here to kill you.

You’d already be dead otherwise, so just calm yourself. Understand?”

Jerek nodded.

The sharp point left his neck, and then the man stepped around. Jerek saw the connection immediately. The two were brothers, with the same long red hair and green eyes. The one with the bow appeared the smaller, his features slightly emaciated. The older held a sword, handling it with far too much familiarity for Jerek to feel comfortable.

"What's going on here, then?" he asked. Since it appeared neither were ready to kill him, he lowered his hands.

"We figured this would be easier without your simpleton friend," the older said. "My name's Mathis. That's my brother, Russ."

"This is a mistake," said Russ.

"Enough. Jerek, we've been here a day, and camped about a mile southwest of here. We spotted your torches last night at the mountain. It doesn't take much imagining to know why you're here."

Jerek felt his heart sink. So the brothers had already seen the gold. There was no way they'd let him live, not now. No man could resist the allure of that much wealth. He thought of lunging for his sword, but two against one, he didn't think the odds in his favor. Perhaps if Dan would finally show up wondering where his drink was...

"So much for not being bandits," he muttered. "So what you want from me? Going to make me leave empty-handed? It ain't happening. You both got to know that."

"No," said Mathis. "We're offering to share the work."

Jerek blinked and tilted his head to one side, as if not certain he heard correctly.

"Excuse me?" he asked.

"Share it," said Russ. "Not like you deserve it."

"We're not murderers," said Mathis, glaring at his brother. "And there's many caves beyond the few you've seen, enough gold for ten lifetimes. I don't want to kill you, and neither do I want to risk you coming back with a few friends to slit our throats."

"So we share?" said Jerek, hardly believing his luck. A part of him panged at the thought, but the rational part of him knew there was far more gold than he and Dan could ever mine by themselves. If they stayed at different tunnels, perhaps they could work out some sort of arrangement...

"We share," said Mathis. He outstretched his hand. "I'm taking a chance in this, Jerek. Please, don't prove me wrong. Blood will spill otherwise."

Jerek winked as he grabbed Mathis's hand and shook it.

"I'm a greedy bastard," he said. "But I'm not much of a killer. Frankly, if I can make a living by the sweat of my own brow, I'll..."

He stopped as Dan came barreling into their camp, a bewildered expression on his face.

"Where's my drink?" he asked.

The two brothers glanced to one another.

"Dan," said Jerek, chuckling. "I'd like you to meet Russ and Mathis."

Dan looked over and saw them, and a wide grin spread across his face.

"Are you here to help us dig?" he asked.

Russ rolled his eyes and retreated back into the forest. Mathis glanced once at his brother, then smiled to Dan.

"Yeah," he said. "I think we are."

It seemed nothing could contain Dan's excitement.

"That's swell!" he cried. "That's just swell!"

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After a long rest and a quick bite of rations, they returned to the mine. Russ was waiting for them, sitting by their pile of ore with a pickaxe lying across his lap. Jerek noted the long dagger that hung from his belt. At least the bow wasn't in sight, he decided.

"Where's your brother?" Jerek asked as they approached.

Russ nodded toward the tree line.

"Mathis wants you to meet someone," he said. "Figures it'd help keep a bastard like you from betraying your word."

"A third? Where is he?"

"She," Russ corrected, but when pressed, said no more.

Jerek shrugged and gave up.

"Go get started," he told Dan. "I'll be with you in a moment."

"You promise to come help me?" asked Dan. "I don't want you leaving me in there by myself."

"I won't."

"Promise?"

Jerek rolled his eyes.

"I promise."

Dan trudged into the mine, torch and pickaxe in hand. He tried striking up conversation with Russ, but the younger brother ignored him or made quick, dismissive comments.

"You're the quiet, silent one, aren't you?" he finally asked.

Russ stood and flung his pickaxe over his shoulder.

"I have work to do," he said. He lit his own torch and entered one of the smaller nearby tunnels. Jerek shrugged, amused by the man's attitude. They were the ones that had nearly killed him, not the other way around. If he could afford to be polite and cheerful, surely Russ could as well.

He watched the trees, waiting for Mathis. The delay annoyed him a little, but given how much ore they had already collected, it wouldn't be more than a day or two before they had more than they could carry. Again he cursed his lack of a mount, wagon, or extra helpers.

Mathis stepped out from the trees, and holding his hand was a small girl in a plain brown dress. Jerek grunted, realizing how off his guess had been. The girl had long dark hair, and she skipped as they approached.

"So we're a family man," Jerek said. "I must say I'm a little surp-"

He stopped short as he got a good look at the daughter. She'd brushed aside her hair and stared up at him, a tight small across her lips. Her eyes were solid black, with only the tiniest hints of white at their edges. He felt her stare bore through him, and before that tiny little girl he felt naked and vulnerable. Biting his lip, he shook the feeling away.

"Cute kid," he managed to say.

"And that's all she is, a kid," said Mathis, clearly understanding Jerek's discomfort. "And that's how she was born. I've taken care of her since her mother died. That's what I need the gold for, Jerek. I want to buy us a home. I want to have a patch of land to farm and raise my child. I won't kill for that. You can keep mining long after I'm gone, make yourself a king for all I care."

The girl was looking at him, her head tilted slightly to the side. For some reason, Jerek felt the hair on his neck stand up.

"Say hello to Jerek," said Mathis.

"Hello." The girl curtsied. "My name is Mira."

"Hello, Mira," said Jerek. He nodded. "Nice to meet you."

"Go run off and play," Mathis said, kneeling down and kissing her cheek. "Don't go too far into the trees, all right?"

"I won't," she promised before skipping back down the slope. Mathis stood and watched her go.

"I just want to give her a good life," he said, his eyes never leaving her. "Can you understand that, Jerek?"

Jerek nodded.

"I know a good man when I see one." He grinned. "That's usually a sign for me to rake 'em over the coals and take twice as much coin from their purse. I guess for you, I can make an exception. We are partners, after all."

Mathis smiled.

"Sounds good. Let's get to work."

Jerek used his fire bricks to light his torch. Mathis had one of his own, and as Jerek was lighting it for him, they heard a scream from the tunnels. It started off only alarmed, then twisted and rose into one of horrific pain.

"Dan?" asked Jerek as he drew his sword.

"No," Mathis said, his face pale. "That's Russ."

The two ran into the cave, torches in one hand, swords in the other. They heard a second scream, this one even more pained. The sound bounced through the tunnel, a nightmarish echo that chilled Jerek's blood. The scream cut off halfway through, and the sudden silence was terrible. Mathis led the way, running headlong through the mountain, heedless of any jagged rocks or uneven steps. It took only moments before they reached Russ.

"Russ!" Mathis shouted, dropping his torch and falling to his knees beside his brother. "Russ, you all right?"

Russ lay on his back, his pickaxe beside him. His torch burned by his feet, its flame sputtering. Blood soaked his clothes. Along his face were three deep gashes running from his forehead to his neck.

"Get him out of here," Jerek said, hurrying deeper into the tunnel.

"Who did this?" Mathis asked as he hooked his arms underneath his brother's shoulders.

"Just go!" Torch leading, he followed the winding pathway into the mountain. For a while he heard the sounds of Mathis dragging his brother out, but those quickly drifted away. Deeper and deeper he went, the tunnel curving seemingly without end. His path grew uneven, sharp edges of rock jutting out from the sides. His run turned to a jog, and then to a walk. He saw no footsteps, no sign of any passage. He had first thought the elf responsible, but the further into the tunnel he went, the less certain he became.

At last he stopped. The air had grown cold, and he felt its chill in his bones. His sweat clung to him like ice. His torch had begun to flicker, and he felt the weight of the mountain atop him. It wasn't natural. No cavern, no tunnel could possibly go so deep

without break or change. As the light flickered, and darkness began to creep at his eyes, he heard a soft, low growl.

Jerek swung his torch toward the sound. He saw nothing, just the tunnel continuing deeper and deeper into the hidden bowels of the earth. He took a step back, watching as the shadows danced and the gold glittered around him. Even this far in, the gold remained. It wasn't natural. It didn't make sense. The entire fucking mountain was made of gold.

"Who's there?" he dared ask, hoping the sound of his voice would calm his nerves. Instead, the sound echoed and shifted, sounding more afraid with each reverberation. And then he heard a roar. It came from deep within, far beyond the meager light of his torch. Jerek turned and ran.

As he did, he heard the click of claws against stone chasing after. Higher and higher he climbed, following the path to daylight. His torch wobbled in his hand, and he watched it burn lower and lower with a growing dread. He heard rock break behind him, then a long screeching sound of something cutting the walls. He ran faster, the gold flickering around him like a taunting reminder of everything he would lose should he bleed out upon the cavern floor.

A roar chased after him, but the tunnel was near its end. With a cry of elation, he burst out into soothing daylight. When he spun to face the entrance, he saw nothing, just rock and darkness.

"Jerek!" he heard Dan shout. He turned to see the big man waving him over. Beside him, Mathis tended to his brother, who he'd wrapped in a blanket.

"Will he live?" Jerek asked as he approached. He felt dizzy and lightheaded, and he sucked in air like the greedy man he was.

"I don't know," said Mathis. He knelt over Russ, a needle in hand. He gestured to the vicious wounds across his face. "I need to sew these shut. He's got some cuts on his arms and chest, but these are the worst."

Jerek nodded, still trying to regain his breath.

"Did you find anything?" Mathis asked, not looking up. Jerek glanced back to the tunnel, almost expecting some vile creature to be peering out at him from the darkness. But there was only the glittering gold.

"Nothing," he said. "I couldn't find nothing."

"My daughter," Mathis said as he did his best to thread the needle with shaking hands. "Please, go find her. She's alone, Jerek. Alone..."

Jerek looked to the forest line. An ill feeling blossomed in his heart, but he nodded.

"Sure," he said. "I'll find her. Don't worry. I'm sure she's fine."

Mathis nodded but said nothing.

"Where you going?" Dan asked when Jerek headed down the slope.

"Just getting Mira," he said. "You help Mathis, all right? Do whatever he says."

"I will!" Dan shouted. "I'll be a big help!"

Jerek entered the forest and paused. Mathis had never shown him where their camp was, only given a vague direction and distance. Still, for them to mine alongside them, they must have moved their camp closer. Besides, Mathis had asked the girl to stay nearby.

"Mira?" he cried, hoping she'd hear him and save him the trouble of searching.

"Mira, where are you? Your father wants to see you."

No response. Cursing, Jerek picked a direction and started jogging. He decided to stay close to the tree line, and if he couldn't find Mira, he'd try the other way next. The whole while, he kept shouting her name.

Only the quiet forest greeted his shouts. Without realizing it, he began crying out a little quieter, as if the forest might be angry with him for his disturbance. The further he traveled, the thicker the trees grew, until he was certain Mira could not have gone that way, not without tearing her dress and getting lost. He turned and jogged back toward their mine.

"Mira?" he continued to shout. "Mira, where are you girl?"

It seemed the forest was fighting against him. Thorny little bristles bit his skin, and he wondered how many tiny scratches might be bleeding across his hands and arms. Stupid girl, he thought. She was lucky she wasn't his daughter. Making him run around like this, he'd tan her hide good. If Russ wasn't bleeding out like a stuck pig, he might have done so anyway, just to teach her a lesson.

He forced through a thick line of bushes, then stumbled into a clearing. Sitting upon a fallen log, her back to him, was Mira. Before her was a deep space of shadows, the tree branches above interlaced and thick with leaves.

"Damn it, there you are," he said.

Mira turned and smiled at him.

"I made a friend," she said. "His name is Flowers."

Jerek took her hand and glanced into the shadows, seeing nothing.

"Sure thing," he said, pulling her back toward the mountain. Mira followed his gaze and frowned.

"He's gone," she said. "You scared him."

"I'm a scary guy."

He led her back to her father.

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That night they set up camp together, a large bonfire burning between their tents. Jerek and Dan were to sleep in one, while Mathis tended his brother in the other. Jerek had borrowed Russ's bow, killing and cooking a rabbit for them to share. Mathis ate in silence, talking only when Jerek prodded conversation out of him.

"How's Russ?" he asked.

"Fever's burning him," Mathis said, wiping his mouth. "He's lost a lot of blood."

"I'm sure he'll pull through."

Mathis nodded, his eyes vacant.

"I hope so," he said.

On the other side of the camp, Dan and Mira played. He'd lift her atop his shoulders and prance around while making animal noises. When she grabbed his ears, he'd squawk like one of his favorite birds. Jerek watched them play, envious of their worry-free nature.

"Something did that to him," he said at last.

"Should have listened," Mathis said, shaking his head. "Knew this place was bad."

Jerek took a bite of meat, then frowned as he chewed.

"Listened to who?" he asked.

Mathis glanced at him, apparently fighting for a decision.

"The elf," he finally said. "Two nights ago an elf warned us not to mine the mountain."

"Let me guess, was he an old fucker, gray hair, called himself Evermoon?"

"He warned you as well?"

Jerek drew his sword and laid it across his lap.

"He must be behind this," he said. "Not sure how, but he is. Whatever it was, it tore Russ up pretty good, but he fought it off. I have no doubt about that. Whatever went after him, it wanted him dead."

"Those are claw marks," Mathis said, shaking his head. "You know that, right? I've seen a man mauled by a bear, and those cuts on his face are pretty damn close."

"You think a bear did that to him?" asked Jerek. "Guess it's possible the elf befriended one. You know, maybe Russ just spooked it, that's all. It ran back into the cave when I went looking."

Mathis tossed the bones of his meal to the fire.

"You really think a bear did that?" he asked.

Jerek sighed.

"No, I don't. But I don't know what else to think."

Dan arrived, Mira on his shoulders tugging at his hair.

"I'm a horsie," Dan said, a grin on his face. "See? A good horsie!"

He reared back and pretended to buck Mira off, who only grabbed tighter and giggled.

"That's enough play," Mathis said. "It's time for bed, Mira."

"Where will she sleep?" asked Jerek. Mathis pointed beside the fire.

"Right here with me. We'll need to keep watch, and I don't think your friend will prove too trustworthy. That leaves just you and me."

"I can do it!" insisted Dan.

"You just sleep," said Jerek. "You worked hard today, right? Hard day's work means good night's sleep."

"I guess you're right," said Dan. He stretched and yawned. "Bed time."

"You want first watch?" asked Jerek.

"I don't think I can sleep anyway," Mathis said, glancing at the tent where his brother lay.

"Wake me when you start feeling tired," said Jerek as he crawled into his tent. "And make sure you keep that fire roaring. Don't know why, but I feel a lot safer with it going."

"Will do," said Mathis, but he looked tired, so very tired. Jerek couldn't imagine how he felt, but he thought it might be similar to the bone-deep ache that dragged at his own body. In blankets beside Dan, he fell asleep before the big man could even begin snoring.

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A jabbing pain stirred Jerek from his sleep. He knew his leg felt strange, but he couldn't tell what. Then the pain hit again, and he realized he was being kicked.

"What?" he mumbled, sitting up. He saw no one, just Dan facing him, his mouth hanging open, drool running from his chin to his pillow. His leg shot out, a reflexive movement as if he were trying to walk. This time Jerek shifted out of the way, barely avoiding the blow.

"Damn fool," he said. He rubbed his eyes, feeling unbearably tired. It was as if being awake were painful. Still disorientated, he sat there in his uncomfortable bed trying to figure out what was bothering him.

"Mathis?" he finally asked, realizing at least part of the puzzle. He glanced out of his tent to see the man hunched over beside the fire, his head slowly bobbing with his breathing.

At least the fire's healthy, he thought, glad that whatever attacked Russ hadn't sneaked in while they were unguarded. As he shifted his weight to his other arm, still trying to convince himself to climb out into the cool night air and take Mathis's place, he saw movement from beside his tent. He grabbed his sword lying next to him and then tensed, doing his best to make no noise. The figure moved, casting a shadow across the tent that slowly moved toward the fire.

Jerek let out his breath when the figure appeared in view. It was only Mira. His unease remained, however, so he watched as she stood before the fire. Her head tilted to one side, listening. Her hands stretched over the flame, as if she were warming her palms. She whispered something, but he was too far away to hear.

And then, to his horror, the fire drifted down to smoldering ash and then died.

In the distance, a strange beast roared.

"Mathis!" he shouted, leaping out of the tent with sword in hand. He stumbled over a root, his vision worthless in the sudden darkness. His knee smacked against a rock, and he hissed in air as his eyes watered. A glance to the sky showed only a barely visible blanket of clouds. It seemed even starlight was denied to them. Another roar rolled down the mountain, closer, louder.

"Russ!" he heard Mathis scream. Hoping against hope, he approached the center of their camp and spun. The darkness was too thick. He couldn't see anything approach, be it bear, puma, or creature far worse. They needed a fire. They needed light. Disorientated, he looked for his tent and his supplies within. It sounded like the commotion had awoken Dan, and he heard his scared cries nearby. He followed the sound, and then cursed as his face struck the poles of his tent.

"It's dark!" Dan wailed from inside.

"It's all right, buddy," Jerek said as he slipped inside, his hands fumbling in the darkness. "We'll be fine. Can you be calm for me, Dan? Can you be strong?"

He received no answer, just more whimpering. The sound stabbed his gut, but he did his best to ignore it. His hands brushed across his pack, and a grin spread across his face despite his fear. He yanked out the two black bricks, trusting their magic to save him. His elation didn't last long.

A brutal cry came from the other tent, coupled with a fierce roar. It was like that of an enormous cat, but deeper, angrier. The sound of steel striking steel rang through the camp. Knowing his time was short, Jerek lunged out from the tent, dropping his sword so he could grab a brick in each hand. He rushed to the dead fire, flung his arms wide, and then slammed the bricks together.

Showers of sparks rained down as another pained scream erupted from nearby. The fire roared back to life, and in its light Jerek retrieved his sword. The creature roared one last time, and Jerek looked but could not find it. Mathis stood beside his tent, his clothing shredded and torn. Blood dripped from several wounds across his chest, and he wiped at another long gash across his forehead. His sword hung limp in his grasp.

“Russ,” he said, falling to his knees before the entrance to his tent. “Gods, why?”

Jerek glanced inside, then wished he hadn’t. Russ’s throat was torn open, blood splattered everywhere. Dan’s sobs continued, and at their sound guilt pierced his chest. He returned to his own tent and flung it open. Whispering softly, he knelt and wrapped his arms around the big man, who continued whimpering.

“We’re fine now,” he insisted. “Everything’s fine. The light’s back. Be a strong man, no crying. We’re safe. Safe. You believe me?”

“I don’t believe you,” Dan cried.

“We’re safe, I promise.”

“Yeah, but I...but I still don’t believe you.”

Despite his words, his tears were starting to slow. Jerek hugged him tight, then punched him in the shoulder.

“Big guy like you,” he said. “What are you scared of? You could wallop a tree and make it fall.”

Dan grinned even as snot ran from his nose.

“Now you’re being silly.”

“Damn straight. Now get yourself cleaned up and back to bed, all right?”

Jerek left the tent and looked about, feeling confused and frightened. What in the Abyss was going on? He looked back to Mathis, who cried beside the body of his brother as he held his daughter in his arms.

His daughter...

He approached, his knuckles white as he clutched the hilt of his sword. Mathis wrapped his arms tighter around Mira, as if he sensed his anger.

“She did this,” Jerek said, pointing with the tip of his blade.

“She’s just a girl,” Mathis insisted.

“I saw her!” Jerek shouted, louder than he intended. “She raised her damn arms and then the fire went out. What’s going on? Whatever is...whatever did *that*” – he pointed toward Russ’s body – “she helped it. You understand? She *helped it*.”

Mathis stood, placing Mira behind him as he grabbed his own sword.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“I want to know what’s going on,” Jerek said. “About her, and about what you fought.”

Mira peered around Mathis’s leg. Her father’s blood had smeared across her dress, and seeing her look up at him with those black eyes sent a shiver up his spine. Mathis held his free arm before her, keeping her safely back.

“Tell me what you saw,” Mathis said. “How could she have helped that...thing?”

Jerek bit his lip, trying to remember everything.

“You were sleeping,” he said. “Dan’s fidgeting woke me up. She walked out to the fire, which was nice and healthy. She tilted her head, like she was listening to something. Then, and I’m not making this up, she lifted her hands and started whispering. Just like that, the fire went out. I heard a roar from the mountain immediately after, like it was just waiting for her. Waiting for the fire to die.”

“Flowers asked me to,” Mira said.

“Shush,” said Mathis, pushing her further behind him.

“I think I’d rather she talk,” Jerek insisted. Mathis glanced back to her, then sighed.

“Fine,” he said. “But give me a moment for fuck’s sake. My brother’s dead, and I need to do something about these cuts.”

“Make it quick,” Jerek said, returning to the fire and tossing in some extra wood to keep it burning strong. He watched Mathis tear an extra shirt into long strips of cloth, then wrap them about his chest and head to stem the bleeding. They were soaked with blood, but the wounds appeared fairly shallow. Jerek’s foot tapped the ground faster and faster as his nervousness grew. He didn’t know what was going on. He didn’t know how great their risk truly was. Gold, all that gold, suddenly in danger. His wealth, his fortune, his future...

“What will you do with him?” he asked, nodding toward Russ’s tent.

In answer, Mathis collapsed it atop the body, making a thick covering. He stood, his arms behind him and his head bowed. Jerek rolled his eyes. He never understood the religious types. Money was a lot more dependable than prayer.

“Come on, Mira,” Mathis said when he was done. She took his hand, and then the two sat down beside the fire, Mira in his lap.

“Let’s start with finding out who this...Flowers is,” Jerek said. “She mentioned that name to me before, back when Russ first got attacked.”

Mira shifted uncomfortably, a tiny frown tugging on her bottom lip.

“You need to answer,” Mathis said

“Flowers is my friend,” Mira said. “He’s real pretty. He said he wanted to play with me, but he couldn’t. He doesn’t like the light. So he asked real nice, really nice daddy. So I put out the fire.”

“Shit,” Jerek muttered.

“Is Flowers an elf?” Mathis asked. “Does he look old, with white hair and wrinkles?”

Mira shook her head.

“I told you, he’s pretty! He told me to call him Flowers, because that’s what he’s made of.”

“Flowers?” asked Jerek. “Seriously? That what cut you up so bad, Mathis? A bunch of fucking flowers?”

Mathis scooted his daughter off his lap.

“Go sleep in the tent,” he told her.

“But he’s snoring,” she whined.

“Do it anyway.”

Mira went to Jerek’s tent, moping the whole way there. Mathis waited until she was inside to begin talking.

“I’m sure you can imagine how difficult it’s been raising her,” he said, punctuating his sentence with a sigh. “My wife, she...she died giving birth to her. It was terrible. And then Mira had these black eyes, scared the shit out of the midwife. Something is off about her, I don’t know what. She knows things she shouldn’t know, like she can look into my head and see everything I’m hiding. She’ll talk to people I can’t see, and every now and then, she’ll...”

He waved a hand toward the fire.

“Every now and then she’ll do something she shouldn’t be able to do.”

“She’s talking with the creature,” Jerek said. “Is that really possible?”

“I don’t know,” Mathis said. “What else do we have to go on?”

Jerek shrugged. He rubbed his eyes, feeling horribly tired. The clouds remained thick above them, so he didn't have the slightest clue when dawn would arrive.

"What about that creature?" he asked. He nodded at the bandages wrapped around Mathis's chest and forehead. "I was too busy getting the fire relit. What did you see?"

Mathis winced, as if the pain of his wounds had reignited.

"It was like fighting a shadow. I could see it, just barely, because it was *darker* than the night. It looked like a man, only more slender."

He curled one hand, then placed his other about a foot away.

"It had claws this long," he said. "And these teeth, enormous teeth just grinning at me..."

He closed his eyes and shuddered.

"I don't want to fight it again," he said.

"So what do we do?" asked Jerek. "If Mira's right, the thing doesn't like light. It waited until our fire died, and it seemed to have fled when I got it burning again. Perhaps we can keep mining, just make sure we have torches nearby, perhaps two separate campfires overnight..."

"Are you out of your mind?" asked Mathis. "I'm leaving. We've got enough ore to make a nice pile of coin. I can buy a strip of land somewhere, nothing big, but it's better than dying here in this god-forsaken forest."

"We can't just abandon all that gold!"

Mathis stood.

"We can," he said. "And if you're smart, you'll come with me. You want to return with an army to kill that thing, you go right ahead. But my daughter and I are leaving."

He grabbed a branch and lit one end in the fire. Like a torch, he carried it over to his tent and set it aflame.

"What are you doing?" asked Jerek.

"We don't have time to bury him," Mathis said. "It'll take almost two days to get out of the forest. But I'm not going to leave him here. I don't know if it will or not, but I'm not letting that thing eat him."

Slowly the body burned. Jerek sat beside his own fire, and as waves of smoke blew against his face he wondered how things had gone so terribly wrong.

*

Come the rise of the sun, they packed their things. They said little to one another, just quick questions or muttered comments. Jerek loaded Dan's pack with every scrap of ore he could carry, and then a little more. Dan winced at the weight.

"It's kind of heavy," he said.

"I know," Jerek said. "But you're strong. You're an ox. You'll carry it all, right? Keep it safe?"

Dan nodded.

"Yeah, yeah, I will."

Jerek packed the rest of the supplies in his own pack: food, waterskins, and torches. He left their creature comforts, such as their blankets and tents, behind. They could always buy more. He crammed the rest of the pack with more ore. Mathis put a modest amount in his own.

"I'll need to carry Mira much of the way," he explained. "She'll never keep up otherwise."

"I'll give you a little of what Dan's got when we make it out," Jerek promised, not sure if he meant it or not. He probably did.

After one last meal, they trudged deep into the forest, putting their backs to the mountain. Passage was far from pleasant. Whatever semblance of path they had followed in was gone. Bushes seemed to block every way they chose. Branches scratched at their faces. Mathis cut through with his sword whenever things grew too difficult. Sometimes Mira walked at his side, sometimes he carried her in his free arm. Dan brought up the rear, huffing and puffing as he walked.

"Hold up," Mathis said, raising a hand to stop them. They were at a thick line of brush, but beyond them they heard the sound of rushing water. He put Mira down, then slowly pushed through to the other side.

"Stay with her," Jerek said to Dan before following.

The old elf waited on the opposite side of the stream. He sat on a log with his arms crossed, as if he'd just waken from a nap. His eyes lingered on the water, though he no doubt knew they approached by the sad sigh he made.

"I warned you both," he said. His voice was weary and weak. "Yet still you ventured into the mountain. You have no idea what is buried within that sacred rock, what danger you put our world in with your reckless digging."

Mathis approached the edge of the water and pointed with his sword.

"You killed Russ," he said.

"Not I," Evermoon said, finally looking up. "The guardian killed him, and he'll kill you as well, all of you. Unless I send it back, which I can, but first you must accept my proposal."

"We're not interested," Mathis said, his voice nearly a snarl.

"Speak for yourself," Jerek said. "What is it you want, elf?"

Evermoon pointed past them, to the line of brush where Mira's head peeked through, spying on them.

"I want her," he said. "She is different. You both know this to be true. Give her to me to raise, to teach. If not, the guardian will kill you all, and I will take her anyway."

Jerek looked to his partner, who stood frozen at the water's edge.

"She's always been difficult to raise," Jerek offered, his voice hesitant. "You said so yourself. Perhaps she'll be better here."

"So she can be raised by an elf?" asked Mathis. "Alone in the forest, with nothing but a monster to keep her company? He won't love her, not like I do."

Evermoon crossed his arms, and he didn't bother with a lie.

"I won't, but I'll teach her. Her power will soon spiral out of control otherwise. She'll be a danger to everyone she knows and loves. Give her to me. There is no reason for you to throw away your lives."

Jerek stepped closer and put his hand on the man's shoulder.

"Mathis..."

Mathis shrugged him off.

"Get out of here," he told the elf. "Now, or I'll cut your throat and leave you hanging so the stream runs red for miles."

Evermoon sighed.

"So be it."

He turned and vanished behind a tree. Mathis sheathed his sword and returned to the line of brush, bumping his shoulder into Jerek as he passed.

"Let's grab a drink and a rest," he told Mira as he picked her up. "Just a moment, all right honey?"

Mira kissed his nose.

"What's wrong, daddy?" she asked.

"Nothing, sweetie," he said, rubbing his arm against his face. "Nothing."

*

After a short break, they continued. Much as he hated to do it, Jerek removed some of the ore from Dan's pack. The big man had started lagging behind, his face flushed red like a strawberry.

"Sorry I can't carry it all," Dan said.

"Don't worry about it," Jerek assured him. "We'll be coming back."

"I'll still get my birdies, right?"

Jerek tightened the straps to the pack and slapped him on the shoulder.

"Sure thing," he said.

The rest of the day passed with a lot of huffing, sweating, and cursing. As the sun lowered, Mathis finally called them to a halt.

"We need to stop," he said. "Get out all your torches. We're going to light this camp up like it's the surface of the sun."

Instead of one big bonfire they built two smaller fires, one for each side of the camp. They had five torches, and they positioned them against the trunks of trees, some angled in the branches, others tied securely with bits of string. They lit all five. Beside the two fires, they stacked plenty of extra wood.

"I don't want to go looking for more after dark," Jerek had explained, and Mathis agreed.

At last their camp was secure.

"Not too bad," Jerek said, surveying the area. He wiped sweat from his brow.

"Keeps the place a little hot, but I think I'll manage, no blanket and all. Just keep an eye on that daughter of yours, all right?"

"I'll keep her at my side at all times," he promised.

Jerek cracked a grin as he lay down, Mathis once again taking the first shift.

"Just don't fall asleep this time, eh?"

*

Jerek awoke to someone shaking his shoulder. He lurched upward, feeling his heart race. Someone was saying something, but he wasn't sure what as he reached for his sword.

"Jerek!" the intruder hissed. He rubbed his eyes with his hand, then realized Mathis knelt beside him.

"My turn?" he asked, suddenly feeling foolish.

"The night's been quiet," Mathis replied. He held Mira in his arms, who was fast asleep. "I can't keep my eyes open much longer."

Jerek got to his feet, his back aching from the rough undergrowth. He'd slept on a thick patch of grass, but every shift his body made seemed to have found a hidden twig or rock.

"I've got you covered," he said as he grabbed his sword from beside his makeshift bed and sheathed it. "Get some shuteye."

Mathis lay down in Jerek's bed, Mira still in his arms, and tried to get comfortable. *Good luck*, thought Jerek.

Mathis had set up a broken log as a stool beside one of the fires, so Jerek took his seat and rest his head on his hands. He wondered what he was supposed to be watching for. Something with big teeth and claws like swords? He remembered the scream Russ had made as the thing shredded him to pieces. Suddenly the fires didn't seem so warm, the air quite so hot. He tossed another log onto each.

The night crawled, a droning collection of crickets, owls, the popping of the fires, and Dan's rhythmic snoring. He felt sleep tug at his eyes, tempting him with its steady call.

"Not gonna happen," Jerek said, shifting positions and pinching his arms a few times. "Just hoping I fall asleep, aren't you?"

"Not you, just the others," said the elf from directly behind him.

Jerek fell off the stool. Cursing, he spun on his knees, grabbing his sword and flinging it before him in a desperate defense. The elf stood at the far edge of the camp, and the look on his face made Jerek feel like a foolish child.

"What do you want?" he asked as he got back to his feet. He kept his sword at ready, just in case. Never knew what those tricky elves might do, he figured.

"I've come in hopes you might see reason when your friend will not," said Evermoon.

"You mean Mira," Jerek said. "Pretty sure you already got your answer, elf."

"Yes, but not from you," said Evermoon. "You're not attached. You have no emotions for that...thing."

Jerek was struck by the sheer animosity spoken in that final word.

"She's just a little girl," he said. "Strange, perhaps, but that ain't a crime. You don't truly want her. I can see it in your wrinkled face."

"You have no idea what she is. She is a child of the Goddess, a daughter of Balance. She should have been born of elven blood, not tainted with human imperfections. What I desire doesn't matter. I have a responsibility to teach her, to help her control the power that will soon rage through her veins."

He pointed to where Mathis and Mira slept.

"Your lives are at stake, and theirs. Don't be foolish. You have no reason to protect her. Bring the girl to me and I will send the guardian back to its mountain."

Jerek glanced at the sleeping couple, Mira wrapped safely in her father's arms. With her eyes closed, she looked just like any other girl. Yet he remembered the way she'd spoken, her arms raised to the clouded sky. The fire had died without a moment's hesitation. So young, so undisciplined...what might she be when she was older?

He looked back and saw the coldness in the elf's eyes.

"I can't," he said. "Not to you. I won't condemn her to such a life. You won't love her. I may not be the most sentimental of sorts, but even I know we're nothing without that. Leave us be, elf. You're not wanted here."

"Neither are you," said Evermoon. "I will have her either way. You might have lived. No longer."

"We've got this place burning like the gates to the Abyss," said Jerek. "What can your little pet do?"

Evermoon chuckled, the sound gravelly and ill.

“Nature is against you,” he said. “Can you sense it? Smell it in the air? Your doom is coming.”

He faded into the forest, vanishing like the light of a lightning bug. Jerek shook his head, as if trying to shake away a lingering dream. Their doom was coming? What a load of shit. All five torches were burning strong, and they had two fires. Even if Mira tried to put one out, they’d have plenty of time to...

Jerek stopped. The hairs on his neck stood on end. He did smell it. The earthy richness flooded his nostrils. The whole forest quieted, as if its night creatures also sensed the approach. Dread clawing his throat, Jerek looked to the sky. The clouded, angry sky. Lightning crackled, and then the thunder hit him like a fist.

“Mathis!” he screamed as he ran across the camp. The heavens opened up, and down came a rain so thick the cold drops stung his skin. He fell to one knee, ready to shake Mathis awake, but he already was, his eyes wide with terror as he clutched his crying daughter.

“What is...” he asked, the rest drowned out by another booming crack of thunder. The sound nearly stopped Jerek’s heart, so close was its proximity. Dan wailed above the storm, terrified by the sudden torrent.

“We have to protect the fire!” screamed Jerek.

“With what?” asked Mathis.

Jerek looked around. Nothing. They had nothing. One by one the torches sputtered and died, unable to withstand such heavy rain. The first of the two fires dwindled into a pile of wet ash and smoke. As the light of the other faded, Mathis and Jerek stared, each hoping for some idea, some shred of sanity from the other.

From the direction of the mountain, they heard the guardian roar.

“We need to give her up,” Jerek said as the last fire died.

“I won’t!” Mathis screamed.

“We have to!”

Another roar, closing in on them with frightening speed. It echoed around them like the thunder.

“I can’t,” Mathis pleaded, his voice pitiful and weak compared to the cacophony.

“Then *run*.”

Jerek hurried to his tent, his feet sinking in the mud. He found Dan crying beside his pack filled with gold. Jerek grabbed a few chunks of ore, stuffed them into his pocket, and then reached out blindly.

“Grab my hand!” he shouted.

“I’m scared, make it stop!” Dan shouted back.

“You can cry later, now grab my damn hand or I swear I’ll leave you here!”

Jerek felt something big and strong wrap around his fingers. He gripped it back, and leading Dan along like a child he plunged into the forest.

“Mathis?” he screamed as he ran. “Mathis, where are you?”

He heard no sign of the father. The thunder boomed, and following it was the creature’s roar, bestial and angry. It was close, too. So close. They ran through the darkness, stumbling over roots and plowing through bushes. Jerek felt thorns scratch his skin and wet leaves lash his face. He was bleeding, though how badly he didn’t want to know. Dan cried, doing his best to keep up but always falling behind, always needing another tug to keep him going.

"I can't," he said. "Jer, please, I can't, I can't, I can't..."

"You can!" Jerek screamed. "Goddamn it, move!"

He wasn't sure, the thunder was too loud, but he thought he heard a scream. The wind picked up, and the rain pelted them from all sides. Everywhere was darkness. Jerek had to run with his hand before his face, and several times he pushed off against a tree he might have struck headfirst. A sudden tug on his arm alerted him to Dan's fall. His grip broke. He turned and reached out, crying out his friend's name.

"Where are you?" he asked.

"My leg," Dan said, his voice a barely understandable sob. "I hurt my leg. It hurts, Jer, why can't we stop. It hurts, it hurts so bad..."

Jerek found his arm and tried to pull him up. Dan had curled into a ball, though, and he was far too heavy and strong. He pulled anyway, pleading with him to move.

"I can't," Dan kept saying. "I can't, don't make me, I can't. It hurts, it hurts!"

Another roar. He couldn't even tell the direction. So close, he couldn't think, couldn't see. Everything was darkness and teeth and hunting claws and hungry eyes.

Jerek fell to one knee and put his hands on Dan's head.

"Dan," he said, hoping he'd be heard above the noise. "Please. I'm sorry."

He turned and ran.

"Don't leave!" Dan screamed. "Jer, don't leave! Don't leave me!"

The pleading chased after him as he stumbled forward, running at a reckless pace with both his arms out. He struck one tree, bounced to the side, and then kept going.

"Don't leave me! Don't leave! Don't..."

The sudden silence was far worse than any of Dan's screams. Sobbing, Jerek ran on.

He didn't know how long he ran. His lungs burned, and he felt like he'd soon vomit. The center of his chest ached, and his whole body itched from the many cuts. His run became a stumbling jog, then a walk. It took him longer and longer to push off from every tree he bumped into. The chill of the rain seeped deeper into his skin. And then it seemed he stepped on air, and he was falling, falling. The darkness lit up into bright white as pain flared throughout his head. His last moment was how thankful he was he'd no longer have to listen to that horrible damned roar.

*

He awoke with a fever.

"Dan?" he asked as he rolled onto his back. His head throbbed, and his limbs moved as if his veins were full of tree sap. His skin itched. A thick knot swelled from his forehead. When he opened his eyes, he immediately shut them. The light of morning burned.

Morning...

He lurched upward, then regretted the motion. He felt his stomach heave, and without the strength to move he vomited upon his chest and neck. The smell filled his nose, a smell of blood and bile. Again he felt sick, this time turning to the side so he didn't foul himself further. As he coughed and gagged, pieces of the prior night came back to him. He remembered his talk with Evermoon, of the sudden downpour, his run in the dark, of leaving Dan...

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I couldn't stay. You couldn't understand, you wouldn't, but I had to. I *had* to."

He cried anyway. His chest heaved with his sobs.

“Fuck you, elf!” he screamed to the quiet forest. “Fuck you!”

They were all dead. They had to be. Unconscious and smothered with mud, he must have somehow gone unseen. He doubted such luck a second time, not without others to distract and lure the guardian away. Come nightfall, he had to be gone, he had to be out of the damn forest and on his way back to Trewick.

Jerek cleaned himself off best he could, grabbing a pile of leaves and smearing them across his lap. His head swam, and he felt horribly thirsty. He had no water, no supplies at all, just his sword at his side, a dagger tucked into his belt, and his pockets full of gold. Using a tree for support, he forced himself to a stand. The world swirled unevenly, and with eyes closed he waited for the vertigo to pass.

Finding out which direction to go was another problem. The best he could figure was to put Elfspire behind him, but to do that he had to see it. From where he stood, he saw only the thick canopy of leaves. Weak as he was, he couldn't imagine trying to climb up to look.

The sun, he realized. He could figure out directions by the sun. It seemed the clouds had come at the elf's bidding at night, but during the day he finally had a break. The light streamed in visible waves through the leaves, leaving little doubt as to which direction it was rising from. It took him a moment to orientate himself, but finally he turned to where he thought was south and began walking. Long as he kept checking every hour or so, and did his best to keep moving, he'd make enough progress.

He hoped.

For the first hour, he more stumbled than walked. His arms felt wooden, and his stomach heaved at odd intervals. His thoughts rumbled sluggishly through his head, snippets of memories and concerns that seemed to have no real bearing or reason. He remembered how Dan hated eating rabbits because he thought they were cuddly. He thought of Mira's strange eyes, and how naked he'd felt before them. As his stomach grew in anger, he thought of some of the meager meals he'd eaten in Trewick. If given the chance, he'd strangle a beggar for a bowl of soup.

Not that he'd be strangling anyone in his current shape.

Near the end of the third hour he found a stream, a small one he never remembered crossing on their way toward the mountain. Panic struck him, and for a while he spun round and round, unable to gauge direction by the sun or see the looming mountain in the distance.

Calm down, he told himself over and over, until finally he collapsed to his knees beside the stream. Even as he shivered he splashed the cool water across his face and shoulders, then drank his fill. Exhausted, lost in despair, he lay atop the soft grass and closed his eyes.

When he awoke, he was covered in sweat. He rubbed his eyes, trying to remember where he was, then panicked again. He'd slept! He couldn't afford to sleep, not with the sun continuing its march toward the horizon. Jerek lurched to his feet, steadied himself, and then looked around. As his heart thudded, he slowed his breathing and tried to think. The nap seemed to have done him good; he felt more energetic than he had all morning, and it seemed his fever had broken.

“I'll be all right,” he said as he took slow, steady breaths. “Just a nap. Plenty of time to get out of here.”

A slight tingle of discomfort harassed him in the back of his mind. Jerek glanced around, trying to decide the reason. The stream still trickled along, cold and comforting with its babbling sound. The trees swayed in a soft breeze, their branches thick and intertwined.

Intertwined...

Jerek looked for the sun but saw only a thick canopy of leaves. He was deep within shadow, the trees drawn tightly together with but a small gap by the stream. He took a step, then stopped and drew his sword as he heard pained, rumbling laughter. Waiting for him on the far side of the enclosure was the elf.

"You seem to care little for your survival," Evermoon said, his smile twisting in the darkening shade. "This forest will be your death, yet you slumber by the water like a babe?"

Tree trunks swelled, the leaves thickened on their branches, and brush sprouted upward, closing in the gaps with twisting vines. Jerek stood shocked by the sight, as if the very forest were awakening, trapping him in a prison of bark and leaf. The area by the elf was where the shade was at its darkest, deep as the bowels of a cave. And from within that shade Jerek saw the creature.

It was slender, like a starved man dying in a gibbet. The shadows swirled about it, as if it were made of an evil smoke pooled together into tangible form. So dark it was, darker than the shade, as if not the slightest bit of light dared reveal itself against its form. Thin, slanted eyes glared out, a pale white, a dead white. Invisible lips pulled back to reveal enormous teeth, viciously sharp at their tips. When it lifted its hands, long claws the size of daggers stretched out, made of that same pale white, not a color but the total void of all light, shape, and substance. Jerek's heart pounded in his chest as the creature softly growled.

"What is that thing?" he asked, taking a step back. His sword shook in his hand.

"You took gold from the mountain," said Evermoon. "You've angered its guardian."

The guardian rumbled in agreement. To Jerek, it sounded like an animal about to pounce on its prey.

"Take it," he said, his free hand pulling the gold from his pockets and hurling it at the elf. "I don't want it. Take the gold and leave me alone!"

"You left your friend to die," Evermoon said, watching the chunks of ore roll across the grass. "You're a greedy man and a coward. You deserve nothing."

Jerek turned and ran. The only gap he saw was by the stream, but even it was thick with brush and low-hanging branches. The guardian snarled. He didn't know if the darkness was deep enough for the creature to attack, but he prayed for time. When he reached the water's edge he dove in, and on his hands and knees he crawled toward the gap in the enclosure. The chill water splashed across his face, the mud slippery beneath his fingers.

The branches above completed their growth, encapsulating them in their private night. With a roar the guardian leapt, snarling like a dog unleashed. Jerek drew his sword and slashed at the vines blocking his way, their sides bristling with thorns. He hacked once, twice, and then with a desperate cry lunged forward as he felt something sharp stab at his back. Half his body emerged into brilliant daylight. The light poured in through the gap, and as his back bled he heard the creature shriek in wounded fury.

Sword still in hand, he crawled the rest of the way out, then spun and stared at the gap. From within he saw dead-white eyes leering out. Jerek pointed his sword at it and laughed, his bewildered mind torn between amusement and anger.

“Come get me,” he shouted. “You got Mathis, Russ, even Dan, but you can’t get me, can you, demon?”

He staggered to his feet, splashing water everywhere. Mud dripped from his pants and shirt.

“I’m right here!” he screamed. “Come on! Stick your scrawny little neck out here so I can cut your damn head off!”

Jerek laughed even as tears ran down his face. He waved his sword about, faked a charge, and then climbed out of the water. Sheathing his sword, he looked to the sky. The trees had bent and curled inward to form the trap, so now outside of it he had a clear view of Elfspire. Putting his back to it, he started jogging while his adrenaline was still high. The guardian’s roars chased after him, gradually fading with time.

It didn’t take long for his lungs to ache and his head to swim. The past night was a barely remembered nightmare. He coughed and heaved as he ran, determined to continue until his body gave out. He had to travel as far as he could before nightfall. Once out of the forest, he might have a chance to survive.

The hours passed in a dull haze of leaves and tree trunks. He walked much of it, unable to keep such a drastic pace. He focused on his breathing, in and out. When his feet started bleeding, he wrapped them with torn pieces of his shirt. His back ached, and dimly he wondered if the shallow cuts might be infected. Of course, none of that would matter if the guardian thrust its long claws through his forehead.

Lower and lower fell the sun, until in long shadows he stumbled on throbbing, blistered feet. The forest had taken on a deep orange hue, the last remnant of light before darkness. Already he saw thick storm clouds gathering above Elfspire, ready to blot out the stars so the creature could hunt freely.

“How far,” he asked as he slumped to his rear, his back against a tree. He winced as he bent his knees and tried to stretch his legs. “How far will you chase me?”

He put his head against the bark and closed his eyes. Perhaps it would be better this way. Instead of fleeing in terror, he could die in his sleep, free of the pain, blood, and exhaustion. Perhaps it would be...

His eyes snapped open as a great roar thundered through the forest, the primal cry of the guardian as it gave chase from whatever cave or hole it hid within. Jerek glanced up to see thick clouds smothering any remnants of daylight. Again the roar came, and he knew he could not wait. He’d come too far. If he wanted to die, he should have stayed at Dan’s side and held him as the rain poured down.

Jerek was aware of very little of the chase. The clouds rumbled, but they dropped no rain. Instead the air grew strangely thick, and the feel of it burned his lungs. He staggered over roots and weaved through the trees. He needed no sight to guess his direction. Long as the guardian roared at his back, he knew which way to run.

“Just a little longer,” Jerek whispered as the trees spread wider and wider. He was nearing the end; he had to be. His back was aflame, his feet one giant blister of pain. But he was almost there. Almost. Branches slapped at his face, but he pushed them away. So far the creature had stopped roaring. Maybe he had gone too far.

And then he saw the forest's edge. His heart leapt in his throat, and without realizing it, he punched a fist into the air and cried for joy.

Until the guardian stepped out before him, its toothy grin wide, its slanted eyes twinkling with amusement.

Thought you escaped me, didn't you? those eyes said. Thought you were free? You're mine, Jerek. All mine.

"It's not right," Jerek said as he collapsed to his knees, his chest heaving as he fought for every breath. "I made it. I'm here."

The guardian softly growled, its inflection rapidly bouncing up and down. Jerek could hardly believe it. It was laughing. The damn shadow demon was *laughing* at him.

Whatever fight was left in him flared with new strength. He wouldn't die, not on his knees while the wretched thing mocked his struggle. Out came his sword as he stood, staring eye to eye with the creature.

"Nice claws," he said. "Let's see how well you use them."

The guardian lunged, its dead-white claws leading. Jerek stepped to the side, shocked by the thing's speed. His sword flailed, and he was just as shocked that he managed to block in time. The claws rattled against the steel, then veered to the side to cut air. Jerek stepped back as the guardian whirled, slashing outward as if it were in the middle of a violent dance.

He parried the first few, then jerked his head back as the sharp tips sliced short of his throat. He felt the wind of their passing, and a shiver ran up his spine as he realized how close to death he'd come. The guardian stopped its spin, roared, and then plunged both sets of claws straight for his chest. Jerek sidestepped, parrying the thrusts to the side. The scraping sound they made against his sword was horrifying. The claws were sharp as steel, if not sharper.

The guardian's teeth snapped, and it lunged again, its jaw open wide, its aim for his throat. Jerek tried to slash its head, but claws batted his sword away as if it were a toy. Teeth nipped at his neck, and he felt his bladder let go. But no blood. No wound. Jerek staggered back, waving his sword wildly before him in a pathetic defense. The guardian hunched down, circling him like a stalking animal.

Jerek clutched his sword in both hands, his mind reeling. The thing was playing with him, like a cat with a mouse. Here he was, so close to safety, but he was the last. The guardian had all the time in the world to bleed him dry.

A plan formed in his head, desperate perhaps, but better than nothing. Already he knew his skills were pitiful compared to its speed and strength. It was taunting him, but if he could use that...

"Come on," he yelled, suddenly going on the offense. He slashed and cut with wild abandon, every second knowing the creature could gut him if it wanted. His heart hammered in his chest, yet those dead-white claws never swiped at his exposed arms or face. Instead the guardian twisted, dodging blows and striking the sword with mocking taps. Jerek let his attacks slow, exaggerating his significant exhaustion. The creature grew angrier, its blocks more vicious. It was getting bored. Tired and lacking in skill, Jerek knew he provided very little entertainment.

He thrust his sword for the guardian's chest, using every bit of his strength. The creature grabbed the blade in its claws and twisted, pulling it free of his grip. The sword fell with a dull thud to the grass. Jerek took a step back, very little falsehood in his act of

horror. The guardian approached, its claws glinting, its grin wide, its eyes hungry. Its claws snaked around his throat, slamming him against the trunk of a tree. Blood ran across them, dripping down their sides from superficial wounds on his neck. One last game, Jerek realized. One last taunt.

The creature put its face an inch from his. Its breath was cold and earthen, like a draft of air from the bottom of a well. From its throat came a soft growl, almost a purr. Jerek stared into its eyes, hollow spaces in a nightmarish existence, colorless voids within the darkness. His whole body trembled. His lips quivered. He felt his heart might explode.

And then he pulled the dagger from his belt and rammed it deep into the belly of the guardian. Icy liquid ran across his hands, and the fist around his neck loosened as the thing howled in horrible agony. Jerek twisted the blade, then let it go. The creature pulled back, and in that pause, he slipped from its grasp and bolted for the forest's edge. Screams of pain followed, and then rustling footsteps as it gave chase. It was close, too close. He imagined the claws slicing into his back, the shadow wrapping around his body and pulling him into the forest, deep into the chasms beneath the mountain to feed. He felt the cold of its breath on his neck.

But no claws came. No pain. Nothing but an exhilarated cry as he leapt out from the forest into the tall grass of the outlying fields. He rolled across the ground, unable to run another step. His breaths came in vicious gasps. He turned back to the forest, and just as he'd hoped, the guardian stalked at the edge, snarling in anger.

"I beat you," he said. He felt another mad laugh building in his chest. "That's right. I fucking beat you, you damn demon!"

The guardian tilted its head, pulled the dagger out from its waist, and then flung it.

Jerek shoved himself back, the dagger piercing the earth just inches beside his neck. His smile wavered. Defeated, the guardian turned and vanished into the deep recesses of the Stonewood Forest. For several long moments Jerek lay there, his eyes closed and his heart racing. When at last he caught his breath, he pushed himself to a stand.

He was hardly surprised to see the elf standing at the forest's edge, Mira at his side.

"I got out," he said to Evermoon, his voice lacking any real triumph.

"A shame," said Evermoon. He put a hand atop Mira's head. "But I have what I wanted. I am old, human. I need an heir, and I can think of no better than the daughter of a Goddess. You are one of few to have ever survived the snares of the guardian. Make something of your wretched life. Perhaps Celestia, in her infinite wisdom, had reason for your escape."

He took Mira's hand and led her back into the forest. Before they left, Mira glanced back and waved.

"Tell daddy I'll miss him!" she shouted.

Then they were gone. Jerek shook his head, stunned by the audacity of the elf's lie to the girl. He felt a pang of guilt for Mathis, and an even stronger one for Dan.

"I'm sorry," he told the forest. His hands shook as his adrenaline faded. "I'll be back Dan. I swear it. I'll burn this whole forest down if I have to."

Treewick was a long two days from Stonewood, but he'd manage. He wouldn't die now. Revenge in his heart, he said goodbye one last time and headed for home.

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THE HALF-ORCS

The Weight of Blood
The Cost of Betrayal
The Death of Promises
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WORLD OF DEZREL

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Thank you for your readership. I hope I gave you a nice chill.

David DalGLISH
September 27th, 2010.