

FORGOTTEN REALMS

TROY DENNING

THE
TWILIGHT
GIANTS

THE
OGRE'S
PACT

BOOK
I



The chief's eager face loomed above the cooking fire, over which Tavis was suspended like a deer on a spit. The giant's stout wife was at his side, clutching Brianna's rope-sheathed sword in her pudgy fingers. Ribbons of early morning light were streaming down through the smoke hole, forming hazy blue halos around their knobby heads.

"That'll do you no good," Morten called. He was yelling much louder than necessary, for his words were intended as much for the hide-swaddled scout as for Noot. "Tavis won't scream."

"Will too," Noot growled. "Burning hurt."

"Maybe, but Tavis won't yell. He won't give you that satisfaction," the bodyguard maintained. "And I'm not going to make your rabbit run, either."

Noot scowled. "Not?"

"Firbolgs die with honor," Morten explained as the logs beneath Tavis began to burn. "We don't beg for mercy. We don't show pain. We just die."

"Maybe we skin you alive," Noot warned. "That hurt plenty."



The Twilight Giants Trilogy

by Troy Denning

The Ogre's Pact

The Giant Among Us

The Titan of Twilight



The Ogre's Pact

Troy Denning



THE OGRE'S PACT

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Cover art by: Duane O. Myers

eISBN: 978-0-7869-6158-0

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Europe, U.K., Eire & South Africa, Wizards of the Coast LLC, c/o Hasbro UK Ltd., P.O. Box 43, Newport, NP19 4YD, UK, Tel: +80457 12 55 99, Email: wizards@hasbro.co.uk



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In Memory of Colorado State Trooper

Lyle F. Wohlers

Who died in the Line of Duty,

November 4, 1992

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the following people for their encouragement and support: my editor Rob, for his hard work and kind words; Ken, Sue, and Troy for giving me the chance to meet and speak with the people who read my stories; my friend Bruce and instructor Lloyd of the AKF Martial Arts Academy in Janesville, Wisconsin for their thought on bottling giants? Jim W. for his enthusiasm and valuable suggestions; and most especially Andria, for her support and forbearance.



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Prologue

The hill giant waited behind the portcullis, scowling as the blast of trumpets heralded his arrival. His hulking figure, with stooped shoulders and gangling arms, filled the archway almost entirely. A child could not have squeezed between his rotund torso and the granite walls of the inner gate, while the crown of his pointed skull came close to scraping the vaulted ceiling.

“It appears Noote passed the winter safely enough,” observed Camden. The king was watching the giant from the window of the royal library. “He’s as plump as ever.”

“He’s also eight hours early,” griped Bjordrek. The chamberlain was a gray-haired man with a slender nose and a pointed beard. “Perhaps I should send him away for a few hours, Your Majesty.”

Camden shook his head. “Let’s be happy he managed to arrive on Brianna’s birthday. That’s doing well for a hill giant.” Though the king tried to sound cheerful, his words seemed hollow and melancholy—even to him. Hoping to do better, Camden leaned out the window and called, “Raise the gate for my friend!”

The portcullis began to rise, the muffled clatter of its hidden chains rattling across the expanse of the inner ward. While he waited, Camden surveyed the preparations for the evening’s celebration. From the spire of every tower waved a pennant of purple or gold, while the standards of the royal guard hung over the interior wall, spaced at even intervals so each company would know where to stand. Dozens of servants wandered about with brushes and pails, scrubbing indiscernible bits of grime off already clean surfaces. The cobblestone courtyard scoured three separate times during the last tenday, shined like silver.

Still, the king was not satisfied. “Bjordrek!”

The chamberlain scurried to his side. “Yes, Your Majesty?”

Camden pointed to a section of yellowed tapestry that could be seen through a window across the courtyard.

“Did I not say that everything visible from the inner ward was to be fresh and clean? The evening must be perfect for my daughter!”

Bjordrek’s face reddened, whether with embarrassment or anger the king could not tell. “I shall reprove the Sergeant of the Gate myself, Your Majesty.”

Camden made no reply, for Noote had ducked under the portcullis and was now striding across the ward. Fresh bearskins covered the hill giant’s chest and loins, and a satchel of untanned deer hide dangled from his shoulder. He wore his coarse, black hair cropped short and ragged, while his tiny round ears seemed out of place on a head so large and lumpy.

When Noote saw the king watching him, he took the satchel from his shoulder and raised it into the air. “Noote bring present!”

Camden forced himself to smile, trying not to think of what the satchel might contain. “That wasn’t necessary, my friend,” he called. “Your presence will be gift enough.”

The hill giant returned the smile, revealing a set of jagged gray teeth filed to sharp points, and stopped outside the king’s library. Though the second floor of the High Keep was nearly twenty feet off the ground, Noote had to lower his head to peer inside. He opened the satchel and withdrew the half-frozen carcass of a snow leopard, its head smashed to a gory mess.

“Brianna like?” The hill giant displayed the dead beast by its tail. “Kill myself.”

“Certainly.” Camden had to fight to keep his nose from wrinkling at the odor. “It’s—we the pelt is really quite exquisite, isn’t it?”

“Good.” His eyes twinkling with delight, the hill giant dropped the carcass back into its sack.

The king eyed the satchel, imagining how his daughter might react when Noote dropped the squalid thing across her lap. After a moment, he returned his gaze to the giant’s face and still smiling, suggested, “Perhaps Bjordrek can take your gift and have it prepared.”

Noote frowned, puzzled as to what preparations might be necessary. Nevertheless, he readily nodded. “Don’t lose claws,” he advised. “Make good wolf collar.”

The hill giant stuffed the malodorous satchel through the window. Camden quickly stepped aside to let his chamberlain accept the gift.

“I’ll take this to the tanner immediately,” sniffed Bjordrek, reluctantly wrapping both arms around the heavy bag.

“Yes, that’s good,” agreed Camden. Although it would take much longer than a day to prepare the pelt properly, the chamberlain would have little trouble securing a suitable replacement from the royal tannery. “Perhaps you could have it made into a nice cape or shawl—or something.”

“I’ll see what I can do.” The chamberlain went to the door, but hesitated there. “Before you go, is there anything I can do to help you relax?”

“What do you mean by that?”

Bjordrek winced at the king’s tone. “Forgive me for saying so,” he said timidly, “but you seem rather upset.”

“If I am disconcerted, it’s because of your woefully inadequate preparations,” Camden snapped.

The king made no attempt to conceal the exchange, for he knew that nothing upset Noote more than being excluded from a conversation. Besides, over the years, Camden and the hill giant had developed a peculiar camaraderie, sharing with each other a great many things more personal than the king’s feelings toward his chamberlain.

Bjordrek stood in the doorway, a resentful spark flaring in his eyes. He bowed and began to back away.

“Wait.” The king’s tone was gentler, for he could see that he had pushed Bjordrek to the breaking point. “You’ve done well. If I’m tense, it’s because I worry about my daughter.”

That much, at least, was true.

Bjordrek nodded sympathetically. “Then Brianna hasn’t told even you whom she’ll choose tonight?”

“No.”

The chamberlain sighed. “Let us hope it won’t be the scout,” he said. “It wouldn’t do to have the princess marry a commoner—especially that one. Can you imagine what the earls would do if a firbolg were to become king?”

“The one thing I *do* know is that Brianna won’t marry Tavis Burdun.” Camden’s voice was as morose as it was certain. “You and the earls may rest assured of that.”

The chamberlain cast his eyes toward the heavens. “At least we can thank Stronmaus for that much.”

Bjordrek bowed again, then disappeared into the stairwell.

Nooté cursed in the rumbling language of his race. "Nooté not expect wedding!" he grumbled. "Only bring one present."

Slowly, the king turned to face the hill giant. "There's no need for concern, Nooté," he said. "You know as well as I do Brianna isn't going to marry anyone."

The hill giant furrowed his heavy brow, then rubbed his leathery knuckles across his chin. His gaze grew sad and dropped toward the ground.

"Oh, yeah," he said. "Nooté forget about that."

The Weary Giant

Through the open window of the enormous hall rolled a series of distant bellows, rumbling like muted drumbeats beneath the melody of the lodge musicians. Tavis Burdun rose from his seat and raised his palm toward his performers. The fipple pipe squealed into silence and the tambourine crashed to a stop, bringing the dance of the fire giant to a jumbled, stomping halt. From the streets outside came the slap-slap of a flat-footed runner. The lumbering gait was distant and erratic, too heavy for a human foot, each step echoing slightly louder as it rebounded off the rough-hewn walls of the Weary Giant Lodge.

The dancer cast an impatient glare down at the banquet table. Dressed only in a tunic and loincloth of red dragon hide, the fire giant was a lanky figure with thin legs resembling barren sumac boles, long spindly arms, and skin as black and shiny as coal. His blocky head loomed among the murky rafters more than twenty feet above, his scarlet hair and orange beard reminding Tavis of a fireball bursting high in the night sky.

“I’ll finish my dance,” the fire giant demanded.

“Of course, Kwasid. But give me a moment—please.”

The innkeeper knew dancing was sacred to fire giants, but Kwasid would have to endure a short interruption. Tavis did not like what he heard outside, and with Princess Brianna among his guests, he had no intention of letting something unpleasant develop on the grounds of the Weary Giant.

After listening to the distant steps for a moment longer, Tavis said, “There’s a verbeeg loose in the village.”

“Verbeeg!” The voice came from two seats away. There sat Earl Ruther Dobbin, lord mayor of Stagwick, with a pitcher of ale and a pile of goose bones before him. “A verbeeg in my village?”

“I’m afraid so,” Tavis answered. Verbeegs were one of the races of giant-kin, cousins of true giants. They were notorious thieves, for they believed that all things belonged to a people. “And it sounds as though he’s heavily loaded.”

Earl Dobbin considered this, his round face slowly stiffening with tension. Finally, he scowled at Tavis. “Phaw! You can’t know it’s a verbeeg! Why not a hill giant, or even an ogre?”

Either option would have been preferable to a verbeeg. Hill giants seldom stole anything valuable, and if they did, their chieftain, Noote, forced them to return it. Ogres were even less cause for concern. Though they were the most savage of giant-kin, for some unknown reason no ogre had committed a crime within the kingdom of Hartsvale in twenty years.

Unfortunately for Earl Dobbin, Tavis was sure of what he’d heard. “If a hill giant were running through Stagwick’s narrow streets, he’d be knocking huts down with every step,” the innkeeper explained. “And ogres have high arches. They move on the balls of their feet, so their soles don’t slap the ground.”

The earl’s cheeks reddened. “I’ve killed an ogre or two in my time,” he said. “I’ve seen nothing strange about their feet.”

“Then you never looked, as I’m sure Tavis has.” The retort came from Runolf Saemon, who sat on the other side of Tavis. A tall, wiry fellow with a hooked nose and pale eyes as blue as mountain columbines, Runolf was the only man in the room who could chastise the lord mayor in such a manner. As Sergeant of the Northern Frontier, he commanded a full company of the Border Guard, and not even Earl Dobbin would risk the king’s wrath by speaking lightly against such a man. “Before Tavis came to look after this inn, he was the best scout of the Border Guard.”

Tavis felt the heat rising to his cheeks. The compliment did not embarrass him, for he was well aware of his reputation. But he found it disconcerting to hear his fame vaunted by the man who had taught him everything he knew. He turned to his mentor and said, “If that’s true, it’s only because I had the finest teacher in the kingdom.”

“Your admiration for each other is most touching,” sneered the lord mayor, “but it fails to convince me you can learn so much about a marauder from his footfalls. Even if he’s a verbeeg, how can you know he carries a heavy load?”

Before Tavis could point out the unsteady rhythm of the marauder’s steps, Princess Brianna said, “I’m sure Tavis is a better judge than you of verbeeg gaits.” Seated between Tavis and the lord mayor, the princess had endured their debate with atypical patience. “If you don’t believe him, perhaps you should run along and see for yourself.”

To emphasize her point, Brianna glared at the earl. From what Tavis gathered, most humans did not consider the princess beautiful. She was extremely tall for her race, with a frame as sturdy as a man’s and a height just a few inches shy of seven feet. But to the former scout, a firbolg who stood over eight feet himself, Brianna was the picture of elegance. She had a striking face with clear skin, a dimpled chin, and sparkling eyes as purple as the flowers in her hair. Her long tresses were as fine as spider silk and more yellow than gold, while her figure was distinctly feminine, with long graceful limbs and gentle curves.

Earl Dobbin finally withered under the princess’s stare and looked away, glancing around the hall with an air of distaste. “I wouldn’t dream of leaving you in this inn alone,” he said. “My guards are quite capable of dealing with the marauder—whatever his race—without my supervision.”

“I’m sure that’s true, but I still don’t want him trying to hide in the Weary Giant.” Tavis glanced down the table, where eleven orphans of various ages sat gathered around the end. All residents of the Weary Giant, they were the reason the firbolg scout had left his beloved Border Guard to become an innkeeper. “Avner, go and close the courtyard gate.”

A sandy-haired boy of fifteen rose from his chair. “I’ll close the gate,” he said. His eyes were steely gray, much too hard and cunning for his years. “But that won’t stop a thief. He can just slip the bar or climb the wall. I would.”

Tavis gave the boy a reproving frown. “Not anymore, I trust,” he said. “Besides, with Earl Dobbin’s guards after him, he won’t have time for that.”

Avner rolled his eyes. “Those oafs never stopped me.”

“Now, Avner!” Tavis snapped, grimacing. No good could come of reminding the lord mayor that most of the Weary Giant’s orphans had lived as street thieves before coming to the lodge.

With a cavalier shrug, Avner went to the door. The boy had not even stepped outside before Kwasid’s voice pealed down from the rafters.

“Now I dance?”

The scout nodded, drawing an ivory-toothed grin from the giant. Against the dark background of the roof, the smile looked like a crescent moon that had slipped and fallen off its back.

The musicians, a brother and sister whose parents had perished in a blizzard, raised their instruments and once again the melodies of the fire giant’s fervent song rolled through the chamber. Kwasid stomped in a circle. Each time a foot struck the ground, sparks of orange shot from beneath his ironclad boots, and platters and mugs jumped off the surface of the banquet table. The entire hall resonated to the giant’s performance, the rough-hewn posts and timber rafters all shuddering in time to the beat.

Kwasid’s eyes glazed over. Wisps of fire flickered upon his ebony fingertips, then he spread his arms and began to spin. Ribbons of golden flame arced through the hall’s murky heights, licking at the gray rafters and roof planking. The giant’s mouth opened, and he sang with the voice of fire, filling the hall with a crackling chant more eerie than it was beautiful.

The performance unnerved Tavis’s guests as well as mesmerized them, but the flames did not worry the scout. He had seen enough fire giant dancers to know that their control was absolute. As terrifying as the performance appeared, Kwasid would not allow the ancient timbers of the Weary Giant to burn.

Without taking his eyes off the dance, Tavis leaned toward Princess Brianna. “I hope you’re enjoying yourself.” He had to speak loudly to make himself heard over the giant’s crackling voice. “This banquet won’t equal the ball at Castle Hartwick this evening, but the children wanted to show their gratitude for all your help.”

“There’s no need to thank me,” she said. “As a priestess of Hiatea, I must help.” Hiatea was a deity of the giants, but many humans in Stagwick also worshipped her as the goddess of nature, family, and child-rearing. “And besides, it’s no trouble.”

“My lady, you’re too modest,” Tavis said. In the few months since he had found himself in charge of the orphans, the princess had made the long ride from Castle Hartwick at every opportunity, always bearing gifts of clothing and other necessities for the children. “I suspect you’d help us even if your goddess did not wish it.”

“Certainly not!” snorted the lord mayor. “The princess would never consort with rabble by choice.”

Brianna graced Earl Dobbin with an acid smile. “To the contrary, Lord Mayor,” she said. “If I were to shun all the rabble in the kingdom, I should have to lock myself away from my father’s courtiers and instruct my servants to admit no one but these poor orphans.”

Earl Dobbin’s face darkened, and Brianna returned her attention to Kwasid. The fire giant was near the end of his performance, kneeling on the floor, his torso whirling wildly and his fingertips trailing cyclones of yellow flame.

Kwasid’s gyrations stopped, and he threw his chin back, arching his spine until the crown of his skull touched the floor. His eyes flared like embers, and, with a tremendous shudder, he sprang high into the air. The giant’s hands streaked furiously about his body, weaving a fiery orb of such brilliance that Tavis could hardly bear to look at it.

Kwasid’s voice erupted in a booming crescendo. The sphere vanished in a blazing flash of gold, leaving the fire giant standing in the center of the room with his upraised palms pressed against the hall’s smoking roof. His breath came in broken gasps, as hot as forge gas and

twice as mordant. The room remained entirely still, everyone at the banquet table to frightened or stunned to speak.

Before the dazed audience could gather its wits to applaud, a dull boom sounded from the courtyard. “Unbar these gates!” cried a man’s muffled voice. “By the authority of Lord Mayor Dobbin, open up!”

Noting that he could no longer hear the verbeeg’s footsteps echoing through the street, Tavis rose and bowed to Brianna.

“Excuse me, Princess,” he said. “Avner may be reluctant to open the gate to the earl’s men, so I’d better answer it myself.”

The scout stepped to the chimney, where his hickory bow, Bear Driller, hung. Runolf had helped him make the weapon, which was as famous as the firbolg himself—and a foot taller. As he took the bow and its arrow quiver off the hooks, Brianna’s violet eyes flashed in alarm.

“Surely you don’t need that to talk to the lord mayor’s men?” she gasped.

“Just a precaution,” Tavis said, pausing to give the princess a reassuring smile. The scout was in no hurry, for the lord mayor’s guards had long ago learned that it angered the giant traders who stayed at the inn to have the gates of their lodging battered down. “With the verbeegs about and the guard pounding at the gate, it’s better to be cautious.”

Runolf also rose. “With your permission, Princess, I’ll go with Tavis.” As he had done the morning before, the sergeant spoke rather softly when he addressed Brianna, an amusing contrast to the courage with which the man confronted dragons and marauding giants. Glancing at Earl Dobbin, Runolf added, “Perhaps the lord mayor would like to come along?”

The earl scowled at this suggestion. “I’ll stay with Brianna, in case something unfortunate should happen.”

Brianna’s bodyguard, who had spent the entire banquet standing at the wall behind the princess, stepped forward. “No need for that,” he grunted. “That’s why I’m here.”

Like Tavis, Morten was a firbolg—but the semblance ended there. With a stout frame and a height of twelve feet, the bodyguard was as large for their race as the scout was small. He had a broad nose with an orb-shaped end, brown eyes the size of gruel bowls, and a mane of red hair that would have put a glacier bear to shame. Though his face showed no emotion, his eyes were as alert as those of an eagle, and the huge sword hanging from his belt suggested that if something unfortunate happened, Earl Dobbin’s help would not be required to protect the princess.

Nevertheless, Tavis faced the cautious earl. “Do as you think best, Lord Dobbin.” He tried to keep the spite out of his voice, trusting the princess would note the lord mayor’s cowardice without his help. “I doubt there’ll be trouble, and I’m sure you’ll enjoy the elderberry tarts the children have made.”

Tavis motioned for two of his orphans to fetch the desserts, then he and Runolf stepped out the door. The inn’s courtyard lay between the dining hall and the barn, a fresh layer of straw strewn over the ground. The square was blocked at one end by the sleeping lodge and at the other by a log stockade. In the center of the enclosure stood a well and drinking trough for the animals. Avner was nowhere to be seen, but the youth had closed and barred the gate.

“We’re done waiting!” cried the guard’s angry voice. “Open up, or we’ll batter your gate down!”

Tavis raised his brow at the threat, for it was no secret in the village that a fire giant was

staying at the inn. "Be patient," he advised. "I'm on my way."

The scout started toward the gate, his eyes searching the ground for any sign of a struggle. He saw a few clumps of straw that had been kicked up when he had escorted Brianna into the inn that morning, but little else. The yellow blanket had not been disturbed since.

Tavis slung his quiver over his shoulder, then pushed the crossbar out of its hooks. The beam had barely hit the ground before a dozen of the mayor's guards pushed the gates open and stormed into the courtyard. All were humans, wearing polished leather armor with the hawk's-head crest of Lord Mayor Dobbin. Half carried crossbows so large they could not be aimed without the aid of supporting crutches, and the others carried thick-shafted pikes. They arrayed themselves in a half circle around Tavis and Runolf.

The group leader pointed his crossbow at Tavis. "Give me the thief," he ordered. "Hand over the verbeeg, or we'll tear this inn down!"

"What verbeeg?" asked Runolf.

The guard narrowed his eyes. "This time you've gone too far, Burdun! When you send your thieves to Dobbin Manor, even the princess can't save you!"

"I have no thieves," Tavis responded. "Only children and our guests, one of whom happened to be a fire giant. No verbeegs."

The guard spun away. "Search the grounds," he ordered, waving his crossbow around the courtyard. "Take the buildings apart log by log!"

Brianna's voice rang out from the inn, stopping the search before it started. "That's hardly necessary," she called. "Verbeegs are not mice. They do not hide in nooks and crannies."

Tavis turned to see Brianna leading Morten and Earl Dobbin through the inn's massive doorway. The princess walked across the courtyard, her bodyguard and the earl a pace behind, and stopped at Tavis's side. She studied the lord mayor's men for a moment, then glared down at Earl Dobbin.

"Why are your guards beleaguering poor Tavis again?"

The lord mayor swallowed, then looked to the leader of his guards. "Stinson?"

"A verbeeg broke into your manor," Stinson explained. "We chased the marauder to the grounds, and the gate closed right after he entered. Someone had to be waiting for him."

Lady Brianna studied the ground near the gate. "Your men must be mistaken," she said. "I see no verbeeg tracks."

Tavis frowned. She was right. There were no heel marks, no barren patches where the straw had been scraped away, no hint at all that a heavy foot had entered the courtyard. Yet it had been only a few hours since Morten walked through the gate. The bodyguard's tracks should still have been visible.

Earl Dobbin studied Stinson, then asked, "How sure are you of what you say?"

"I saw it with my own eyes," the guard replied. "We were less than a hundred paces down the lane."

The lord mayor looked back to Brianna. "I must insist. This isn't the first time my men have followed a thief to this inn." The earl pointed at his guards, dividing them into groups of four. "You search the dining hall, you take the lodge. The rest of us will search the barn."

"Lord Mayor, by the grace of my father's law you have the right to run your village as you wish," Brianna hissed. "But I promise you this: if your men break so much as a mug, you won't need to come to the ball this evening. You *won't* be the earl I pick as a husband."

The lord mayor winced, for many considered him the most likely choice. Tavis did not share that opinion, and with good reason—or at least with what seemed good reason to him. During the last few months, the princess had spent more time at the Weary Giant than with all of her noble suitors combined—not all of it with the children. Of course, the scout realized that the earls would be flabbergasted if she named him as her future husband, but he still had high hopes. There were few things Brianna enjoyed more than outraging the royal court, and she had even kissed his cheek a time or two.

After a moment, Earl Dobbin regained his composure and sneered in Tavis's direction. Still addressing Brianna, the lord mayor said, "I don't know why you would take the word of a commoner over that of a noble, but I'm about to prove that this firbolg is nothing but a knave."

With that, the earl started for the barn's closed door. Brianna and Tavis walked at his side while Morten remained a pace behind his mistress. The lord mayor's guards brought up the rear of the procession. As they approached the barn, the scout noted that the straw had not been disturbed since it was laid down. Yet, he had watched Lady Brianna lead her horse into the barn just that morning. At least a few of the yellow stems should have been bent or snapped.

The lord mayor stopped before the door and motioned for his men to open it. As the guards obeyed, Tavis discreetly used his bow to scrape away some of the straw beneath his feet. The layer below was as yellow and fresh as the one on top, and a U-shaped depression marked where a horse's foot had crushed some stems. Someone—no doubt Avner—had spread a fresh covering of straw over this part of the courtyard.

Once the door was open, the lord mayor's guards stormed inside while everyone else waited in the courtyard. A great cacophony of scraping and braying arose as they shoved mangers about and pulled startled mules from their stalls—this in spite of the fact that such areas were too small to hide a verbeeg. From the back of the building came a series of muffled thuds as two guards stomped up the loft ladder. Tavis cringed, fearing the shout of an angry verbeeg would shake the barn, but the only cries were the indignant screeches of an owl.

Lady Brianna scowled at the clamor. "Earl Dobbin, you'd better hope they find your thief," she threatened. "Otherwise, I'll see to it that my father's men visit the same treatment on your hall."

"And if I find my thief?" the lord mayor demanded. "Will you name me as your husband then?"

"*Then* I will consider it," Brianna sneered.

With that, the princess stepped into the barn. Tavis followed, Morten close on his heels. The air reeked of fresh manure and straw. The mules, most owned by villagers who lacked room to board the beasts themselves, had gathered in the back corner, around a huge mound of straw someone had pushed down from the loft. Two of the lord mayor's guards were busily pounding the stall floors with the butts of their weapons, apparently searching for secret doors that did not exist, while the other two cursed and grunted in the loft, using their spears to probe the enormous mass of hay and straw stored there.

After surveying the scene, the lord mayor picked his way to the only stall that had not been opened. Above the gate the rear quarters of Lady Brianna's horse could be seen. The man

was black with white flecks, and had a snowy tail as fine as silk. The earl studied the pen for a moment, apparently unsure whether to open it.

“Don’t do it, Earl,” Tavis warned. “Blizzard is very particular about who touches her.”

The lord mayor studied Tavis for a moment, then a cunning smile crossed his lips. “What’s a better way to cover the verbeeg’s hiding place than to place a spirited horse over it?” He raised the latch and cautiously opened the gate.

Morten started to utter a warning, but Brianna cut the firbolg short. “Be quiet,” she hissed. “The fool was warned.”

The lord mayor stood aside for a moment, watching the horse carefully. Blizzard’s tail stopped twitching, and she did not move, even to stamp a foot. Finally, the earl gave Tavis a confident sneer and slipped into the stall.

Blizzard whinnied—once. When the intruder did not leave, she brought her hoof down on his foot and smashed her hindquarters into his chest. He screamed in pain and shoved her away, then backed, limping, out of the pen. The mare was not satisfied. She bucked her rump high into the air and kicked out with both rear feet. Her hooves caught him in the chest. The lord mayor’s feet left the ground, and he sailed across the center passage, smashed into a stanchion post, and from there collapsed to the floor, his sable cape dangling in a manure gutter.

“You see? Tavis *does* tell the truth,” Brianna said. The princess, who was a skilled healer, knelt at the groaning earl’s side. After running her hands over his torso, she pulled him roughly to his feet. “Your ribs aren’t broken, just bruised. You’ll survive.”

“But I ... can’t ... breathe!” the lord mayor gasped.

“No wonder. You smell like a dung heap!” Brianna taunted. She shoved him into the hands of his two guards. “Take your master and wash him, so he can catch his wind.”

“What about the verbeeg?” asked a guard.

“There is no verbeeg,” Brianna snapped. “Now perhaps you should do as I suggested.”

The earl glared at Brianna and shook his head. “Finish the search,” he rasped.

The guards resumed their havoc, though they were careful to probe the floor of Blizzard’s stall only from the adjoining pens. It was not long before they shoved the mules aside to search the straw piled at the base of the loft ladder. Soon, one of them thrust his spear deep into the heap and withdrew a bloody tip.

“Got something!” he chortled.

The other guards pointed their weapons at the heap. “Come out, thief,” ordered one.

Something stirred, then a sharp hiss sounded from the pile, filling the barn with a foul, sulfurous stench. Crying out in disgust, the guards doubled over and began to throw up.

In the next instant, a cacophony of braying and screeching filled the air. The mules bolted for the door, joined by a swarm of rats that had scurried from beneath the mangers and several owls that had dropped from the rafters. Morten stepped in front of Brianna, forcing the stampede to divide around her and consequently protecting Tavis, Runolf, and Earl Dobbins as well. Still, the lord mayor did not escape unscathed. The horrid smell caused him to retch, and the resultant heaving of his bruised ribs dropped him to his knees in pain.

“Glacier skunk!” Tavis gasped, more perplexed than sickened by the rancid stench. Glacier skunks rarely left their mountain homes, and he had never heard of one actually entering a village.

The others in the room were less curious than alarmed. Morten swept Brianna up in his arms and lumbered out the door with Runolf close on his heels. Next went the guard doubled over, stumbling, and stinking like carcasses left in the sun to rot. They abandoned the lord mayor readily, for glacier skunks were to the smaller striped and spotted skunk what true giants were to giant-kin. When a glacier skunk's fumes hit a man, rivers of stinging tears poured from his eyes, hot embers filled his throat, and his stomach churned like a tumbling boulder. Sometimes he coughed blood, occasionally he stopped breathing, and worst of all, the awful stench stayed with him until a cleric cast the proper spell to remove it.

When it became apparent Earl Dobbin did not have the strength to rise, Tavis scooped him up in one arm and left the barn. After handing the man to the cowardly guards, the scout pulled an arrow from his quiver and turned toward the barn, prepared to kill the skunk if he chose this moment to come running out.

The earl grasped Tavis's arm and pulled him back. "Don't think you've won, Burdun," he hissed. Tiny beads of sweat were running down the lord mayor's pained face, and he could take no more than a shallow breath. "You'll rue this day."

Lady Brianna took the lord mayor's hand off Tavis's arm. "Why? At least he knows the difference between a glacier skunk and a verbeeg." She sneered at the earl, then added, "I'm certain this afternoon's events will make amusing conversation this evening—especially the part where Tavis carries you from the barn because your own guards left you to the skunk."

The earl's face darkened to a stormy maroon. "Tell your tale if you wish," the lord mayor spat. "But be assured that if you continue to protect this cur and his thieves, it'll be my story that draws the last laugh."

Earl Dobbin pulled free of his men and staggered out the gate. His guards loitered in the courtyard for a few moments, debating whether or not to continue the search. Finally, when their fellows returned from the dining hall and the lodge without finding any sign of the verbeeg, they decided to leave rather than search the barn again.

Once the guards were gone, Lady Brianna turned to Tavis. "I've enjoyed your party tremendously."

"I'm sorry for the interruption."

Brianna grinned. "Don't be. It was most delightful to see Blizzard plant her hooves in the earl's ribs," she laughed. "But the time has come for me to leave. There's much I must do before the ball this evening."

Tavis, his stomach knotting in anxiety, frowned at mention of the ball. "Princess, I've a question before you go."

Brianna's expression changed to one of concern. "Yes?"

"Your father didn't invite me to the ball."

"He didn't invite any commoners," the princess said.

Tavis nodded. "I understand, but I'd like to know who you'll choose this evening."

Brianna's gaze fell to the ground, and with it Tavis's heart. Tonight, the princess had no intention of outraging her father's court.

"Whomever I choose, it will be for the good of the kingdom," the princess said, taking his hand. "I hope you'll support me in that decision."

"I'll always support you," Tavis replied, trying to hide his disappointment and failing. "But I doubt an unhappy princess will be good for the kingdom."

Tears welled in Brianna's eyes. "Damn you," she said. A sad smile crossed her lips, and she wiped her cheeks. "I was hoping you'd make this easy."

"I can't do that—yet," Tavis said. The princess's watery eyes gave him hope, for the scout saw in her tears what Brianna had not actually said: that no matter what name she spoke tonight, the one in her heart would be Tavis. "But it's a long time between betrothal and marriage. A lot can happen."

"What are you going to do?" Brianna demanded. "Have yourself reborn as an earl?"

"If that's what it takes, yes," the firbolg replied, smiling. "But until then, the best I can do is kill that glacier skunk so you can retrieve Blizzard."

The scout turned to ask his mentor's help in luring the beast into the open, but Runolf was nowhere in sight. The sergeant had left without a word, vanishing from the courtyard as suddenly as he could disappear in the wilderness. It wasn't like Runolf to leave so rudely, but Tavis took no offense. The sergeant may have sensed something alarming as Earl Dobbin left and decided to follow, not bothering to excuse himself because he did not want to draw attention to his departure.

Tavis glanced back to Brianna. "Give me a moment before coming for Blizzard," he said. "I wouldn't do to have you sprayed today."

The scout took a deep breath and went into the barn. The air remained close with foul-smelling vapors, but the stench had already begun to lose its potency. Blizzard was neighing angrily in her stall, whipping her head from side to side in an attempt to snap her reins free. Tavis advanced cautiously, watching rafters and mangers as well as the straw piled beneath the loft ladder. A glacier skunk, if that was truly what had hidden itself in his barn, was a cunning predator. It could down a bull elk—or a careless firbolg—as easily as a mountain lion could.

As Tavis approached to within ten paces of the ladder, something stirred beneath the straw pile. The scout pulled his bowstring back, then patiently waited for his prey to show itself before he loosed the shaft. A smaller hunter might have fired earlier, fearing that one arrow would not stop a vicious glacier skunk, but a single shaft fired from Bear Driller would stop a charging moose.

A pair of steely gray eyes peered from beneath the straw. "Is the earl gone?" whispered a familiar voice.

Tavis lowered his bow. "Avner!"

The boy crawled from the pile and brushed the straw off his body. Behind him came a wolf-sized skunk with white fur and a pair of black stripes running down its back. It had a cone-shaped head with round ears, a shiny black nose, and four curved fangs drooping beneath its lip. The beast's claws were as long as a bear's and as sharp as a lynx's, while a needlelike barb protruded from the end of its furry tail. A red smear marked where its flank had been pierced by a guard's spear.

"What's happening here?" Tavis demanded.

Avner looked away. "You always say it's important to help others." He focused his gaze on the skunk. "Basil needed help."

As the youth spoke, the skunk sat down. Before Tavis's astonished eyes, it began to enlarge. The beast's fur thinned into a curly mass of hair, while its bushy tail disappeared altogether. Its hind legs straightened out and became more manlike. The forelegs grew long

and more slender, the claws retracting to become fingers and the dewclaw spreading outward to become a thumb. Finally, the creature's fangs receded, the snout narrowed into a long, crooked nose, and Tavis found himself looking at the hairy, naked form of a verbeeg.

The giant-kin rose and offered Tavis his hand. "I'm Basil of Lyndusfarne," he said. "I'm happy to make your acquaintance."

The verbeeg, with gangling arms, bowed legs, and huge feet as flat as a beaver's tail, stood a full head taller than Tavis. He had a typical build for his race, looking gaunt and half-starved, with a distended belly and stooped shoulders. A scrawny beard hung from his chin, while a thick-lipped mouth gave him an affable—and oddly sly—smile. His eyebrows were as gray as his beard and twice as thick, bestowing upon him a surprisingly sagacious aspect for one with such a steeply sloped forehead.

Tavis kept his arrow pointed at the intruder's chest and made no move to take the proffered hand. He had met enough verbeegs to know their race deserved its deviant reputation, and this one's unusual eloquence only made the scout more suspicious.

When it became apparent Tavis would not lower his arrow, the verbeeg glanced down at his nakedness and blushed. "I beg your pardon," he said. "How mindless of me."

Basil reached into the straw heap and pulled out a tattered robe of untanned bearskin. The garment stank almost as much as the rancid vapors that had driven everyone out of the barn earlier, but that did not stop the verbeeg from draping it over his scrawny shoulders.

"I always forget to put my clothes back on after such changes," he explained. "It's rather disorienting experience."

"Are you some sort of werebeast?"

Basil shook his head. "Heavens no," he replied. "I'm just a runecaster—quite harmless, I assure you."

"Verbeegs don't have wizards."

"Watch," Basil replied. He traced a symbol in the air, filling the area with flickers of golden light. The sparkles rose and circled the verbeeg's head like a crown. "Now, which do you doubt—that I'm a verbeeg or a runecaster?"

"Neither, I guess," Tavis said. "What are you doing here?"

Basil looked at the tip of the arrow still pointed at his chest. "Leaving soon, it appears," he said. "But first, I have some business with your young friend."

Avner's face went pale. "We can forget about that," he said. "I'm just glad to help."

"Nonsense. An agreement is an agreement." The verbeeg reached into the straw heap. "Thieves' honor and all that."

Tavis lowered his bow and looked at Avner. "What agreement?"

Avner's only answer was a guilty look.

With a heavy groan, Basil pulled an enormous moose-skin sack from beneath the straw. "In return for hiding me, I promised Avner half the treasure I took from the lord mayor's house," the verbeeg explained. He turned the bag over and emptied an entire library of leather-bound books onto the barn's grimy floor. "You choose first, Avner."

"Books?" the youth shrieked. "I risked my life for ink and parchment?"

Basil's bushy eyebrows came together in irritation. "My boy, knowledge is the greatest treasure." The verbeeg stooped down and selected a book. "But since you have no conception of the riches before you, I'll choose first."

From outside the barn, Brianna called, "Tavis? What's happening in there?"

Tavis spun toward the barn door, which hung ajar so that he could not see into the courtyard. "Wait a moment!"

"Why?" Brianna demanded. Her voice sounded louder, as though she were approaching the barn. "Is something wrong?"

Tavis could not think of what to say. Like all firbolgs, it was nearly impossible for him to lie. He understood the concept well enough, but the strain of uttering false words affected his race more than any other giant-kin. If he said something untrue, his voice would crack, his hands would break out in a cold sweat, and his guilty conscience would not let him sleep for a tenday. Therefore, he did what most firbolgs did when they could not answer a question honestly: he did not reply.

Turning to Avner and Basil, Tavis whispered, "Into the loft with you, quick!"

Avner scrambled up in a flash, but Basil was too large to move quickly. He had to climb more slowly, gripping the side rails and taking great care to place each huge foot squarely on the narrow ladder treads. Cursing the verbeeg's clumsiness, Tavis grabbed an armful of straw and threw it over the books.

"Tavis?" demanded Brianna. "Why don't you answer?"

The innkeeper covered the last book, then looked up. Brianna and Morten stood at the door, squinting into the dim barn.

"Just a moment—"

Tavis was interrupted by the crack of a snapping board. A loud thud quickly followed, then Basil moaned in pain. The innkeeper wheeled around and saw the verbeeg sprawled on the floor, the loft ladder lying in pieces around him.

"How unfortunate," Basil groaned. He pushed himself into a sitting position, then grabbed a shard of gray board. "I feared I was too heavy for the ladder."

A pair of lumbering feet thundered across the barn floor as Morten rushed to Tavis's side. The bodyguard touched the tip of his great sword to Basil's throat and said nothing. Later, Brianna followed, though her steps fell silent before she reached the scout. Tavis turned around in time to see her pull a book from beneath the straw. She opened the cover to the title page.

"*A Full History of the Dobbins of Stagwick*, by Neville Dobbin, the thirty-fifth Earl of Stagwick," she read.

Tavis took a single step toward her. "Let me explain."

"You don't have to," Brianna replied. "I can see for myself what's going on here."

The princess drew her arm back and threw the book. It caught Tavis square in the forehead, breaking the binding and scattering leaves of parchment in every direction. The blow was incredibly powerful, much more forceful than the scout would have expected even for Brianna's large frame, and he found himself stumbling backward, until at last he tripped over Basil's feet and crashed down at the verbeeg's side.

"Please, Brianna. I know this looks bad—"

"You played me for a fool, Tavis," the princess snapped. "While I was protecting you from Earl Dobbin, you were looting Stagwick—and I was blind to what everyone else saw as plainly as the sun in the sky!"

"No!" Tavis started to rise, but quickly found the tip of Morten's sword at his throat.

“That’s not what happened!”

Brianna shook her head angrily. “How could you do this?”

With that, she stepped into Blizzard’s stall and untied the mare. “I’ll send someone for the children this evening. I can only hope you haven’t corrupted them beyond redemption.” She started toward the door and added, “I expect you to be gone by then. It will spare me an abundance of humiliation—and save you several decades of torture in my father’s dungeon.”

Though Brianna’s voice was cracking with grief, she did not look back.

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