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Delve into Darkness

A Fantasy Tale

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Claire decided to kill the youngest one first.

The air was filled with the scent of leaves and the sound of running water, masking her presence. The stag lifted its head only seconds before the arrow thudded home in its breast. A born hunter, she knew the larger ones might have taken two or three shots to bring down. She might even have had to chase the animal for half the afternoon to get in a second shot. But besides being an expert with the bow, Claire Leelam was also well known within the tribe for being lucky. If it had been another hunter, the stag would have stepped out of the way or bolted at the last second. Yet, with Claire, it was generally one shot, one animal for dinner.

Claire's tight leather outfit squealed slightly as she rose to retrieve the animal. Because she was so lucky, Claire was adventurous and well as brave. Only she would venture into the Doom Brother's domain to hunt for the tribe. All the others steered well clear of it. But lucky Claire went hunting where the animals were. She pulled a dagger from her belt.

"Are you going to help?" Claire cried out as she rose and approached the stag.

"What do you want me to do?" the young boy Gareth complained, "It's over twice my size and probably three times my weight."

"Cut some branches," Claire explained, "Well build a trellis and drag it back to the village."

"And when the Doom Brothers hear us pulling a carcass through their woods? What then?"

"We'll face them," Claire replied. "Fetch the branches."

It was a long haul back to the village. Jasper, the town leader met them as they entered. He directed several of the villagers to take over dragging Claire's catch. He sent them to the meat smoking hut, where the animal could be dismembered.

"We may not have time to cut up your stag," Jasper announced.

Claire gave him a sly wink, "You have something planned for the afternoon?"

Jasper's face was grim. "Yes, leaving. The Tuman clan has decided to claim ownership of the entire valley. They've chosen our huts and firepits to keep themselves warm this winter. We have until sunset to leave."

"So we fight," Claire declared.

Jasper looked at her like a petulant child. "We have no warriors here."

"Then the hunters will have to do."

Jasper's head sunk to his chin. "We cannot face the clan. Their numbers, their weapons."

Claire stood straight, the breeze picking up the black hair on fur which wrapped her boots. "We cannot leave all we have built. All we have worked for." She turned to Gareth. "Go get some shovels, boy."

Gareth looked like every other teenager since the dawn of time who'd been told he was expected to do work. "Get the shovels, get the wood, get the arrows. Just once I'd like to be told to fetch some ale," he grumbled.

"Fetch the shovels, boy." She berated him.

Jasper gave her a wry smile. "You plan to fight off the clan with shovels?"

"Yes," Claire grinned, "as a matter of fact, I do."

"Let's hope you're not digging our graves." Jasper retorted.

Claire directed a pair of farmers to start another pit to the south of the village and then turned to a second group who had just finished digging theirs. "Go see Morgan, the Woodworker. Get a packet of sharpened stakes and plant them upright like apple trees in the bottom of your pit."

Jasper approached, his shirt off, his chest caked with dirt, grime, and sweat. He put his shovel down next to him. "And what makes you think the clan will not simply walk around your pits?"

"It's fall," Claire explained, "the perfect time of year. The ground is littered with leaves. We'll have the fisherman's wives stretch nets over the pit and cover them with leaves. They'll see them not."

"All the better for us, eh?" Jasper joked.

"And more the pity for them," Gareth said peaking his head over from his pit. Like Jasper, his chest was equally covered in sweat and filth, but in the boy's case, he didn't have to remove his shirt first. The orphan boy didn't own one.

By the dawn, the village was quiet. The only sound to be heard was the calling of birds. Tuman Jackthorn looked over the village. There was not a soul in sight. As expected, the villagers had simply cleared out, abandoning their neatly constructed thatched roof homes. He motioned two more fur-clad clan members to his left. He set them around to flank the village in case anyone remained. They took only a few meager steps before stealthy arrows brought them down with a crashing thud upon the leaf-strewn ground. Jackthorn scanned the huts, but he could see no movement. Being no fool, he checked the treetops near the village as well. But they too were empty.

He sent hand signals to the others to keep their heads down. More arrows flew. Fewer clansmen drew breath. Anger stirred among the Tumans. By the third volley of arrows, they could no longer be contained. They rushed the village. Their head-long charge changed direction when they came upon the pits. The screams and cries of Tuman warriors drowned out the morning birds. Only Jackthorn and two other cautious clansmen remained. They slowly crept backward, retreating from the village. They kept to the trees, crouching low. One more volley ... and there were none.

Claire jumped down from a tree behind the last of the clansmen. Stationing herself to block off their retreat, she glanced around. She kicked a body, but it remained still. In the distance, she could see the other villagers rising from their hiding places in the huts. The threat was over, at least for now.

As she approached the village, Jasper met her. "They will return."

"And we will be ready," Claire responded.

Jasper looked unconvinced. "And in the spring? When the wind has blown away the leaves which cover the pits? What will we do then?"

Claire did not respond.

"I need you to take them to the mountains," Jasper pointed to the villagers.

"Me?" Claire questioned him. "I'm no leader."

Jasper nodded his head in agreement. "I know, you're a loner. But I need you to lead in any case. You're all we have. I need you to journey to the old mines. To bring out the tin and the copper ore. We need to make weapons before the snows melt."

"Send someone else," she demanded.

He grabbed her by the arm as she attempted to walk away and stared down at her. "I cannot. I need the others here to build the forge."

Blond locks drifted behind her in the wind. "I'm no nursemaid to lead a flock into the mountains."

"You are now," Jasper retorted. "You can't go by yourself to dig the ore we need. So, you will need to take others."

"You expect me to keep them safe in the mountains? How am I to accomplish this feat?" She laughed.

"I have no one else. You'll have to think of something."

"You're a fool, Jasper."

He gave her a huge grin, displaying all his teeth. "For letting you talk me into this course? You couldn't be more right."

Gareth picked his way over the rocks, looking for a handhold. His fingers slipped, and a pile of stones and dirt cascaded down the slope. From behind him, he could hear Claire spitting and coughing. "You want to watch where you're going?" She spat.

"You want to lead?" He suggested awkwardly.

"Do I look like a miner to you?" She hollered up the slope. "Do you think I can chase the smell of tin as if it were the trail of a goat?"

Gareth did not answer. He climbed up and over a large rounded boulder and vanished. Claire's eyes scanned for the boy to reappear above the boulder, working his way higher up the mountain slope, toward the mines. But the mountain face remained empty.

She looked down at the long line of the others behind her, picks and shovels strapped to their backs. "Stay here," she called out. "Until I find out what has happened." The others failed to show any smiles, clinging to the rocks in the freezing blasts of air.

Claire climbed over the boulder, only to slip into a deep opening on the far side. Her hands desperately flailed to reach a place she could grab onto something to slow her descent. But the smooth, rounded surface of the boulder left her hands no purchase. She fell into the darkness, like an animal swallowed

by the maw of some giant creature. She landed on the rough sand at the bottom with an uncomfortable crash. She scanned the environ in the dim light seeking some sign of Gareth but was disappointed. Besides the difficult climb back up, the only other path available was a cave opening. It smelled of wood smoke and the remains of a fire. Men had been here before and might remain there still.

The place was damp and cold, even hidden from the scouring winds of the high peaks. Drawing her bow, she crept into the cave. On the wall were long burned out torches sunk into holes cut in the stone. She fought off a feeling of dread. The inescapable feeling of impending calamity. Although her dark, smooth leathers would hide her, her blond hair stood out as a beacon in the darkness. What made her mother popular among the men-folk, would most likely be her undoing. She cursed her golden locks and moved on. Turning a corner, the way was lit by a strange glow which clung to the walls. She would smell water dripping from the ceiling. She scraped off a bit from the walls with the tip of her arrow. It fell to the ground but remained glowing.

Carefully she stepped over the glowing remains and proceeded. After a time, her eyes adjusted to the gloom. It wasn't long before she found the boy, seated atop a pile of bones. Thirty, perhaps forty men had proceeded them, but they were no longer any threat. "What are you doing up there?"

Claire could see Gareth's white teeth as he opened his mouth in a giant wide grin. "Look," he said. In his hand, he held a finely crafted short sword. It gleamed in the half-light. It looked to be made of silver, not the fine bronze of modern swords. Worth something if melted down and sold, but hardly useful as a weapon.

Gareth swung the sword in a wide arc and brought the blade down on a bleached skull. The pieces of the long dead cranium exploded into shards which filled the cavern, flying in all directions. Claire ducked to avoid the spray of bones. Shielding her eyes with her bare forearm, she waited for the rain of bone fragments to stop. She fully expected to see the bent form of the weak silver when she opened her eyes again. Yet when she looked up, Gareth was holding the sword proudly above his head. Not a mark was upon it. It gleamed, its form unchanged, in the strange glowing light.

Wrapped in furs and leathers, each man carried a heavy bundle on his back. They snaked their way along the trail which led back to the village. Claire had taken the group on a shorted path for their return, to lessen their burden. One which cut across the lands of the Doom Brothers.

As they made the turn to head for home, the oldest brother, Hamilton appeared from behind a tree. "I see you've been poaching on my lands again. You've been warned before about this."

"We're just passing through," Claire explained, "No hunting. No poaching. We'll be gone before you know it."

"And you've brought others with you. How sad for you ... and them." He announced.

"I've told you, we're leaving. You won't even notice we've been here."

"I think not. I think you're about to find your final resting place beneath these fir trees. Don't think your exceptional beauty will stay my han ..." His sentence was cut short by an arrow shaft protruding from the right side of his chest. Claire readied another shaft and aimed it at one half of the Doom Brothers.

Hamilton pulled out the point with a grunt. "You'll need more than a simple arrow to dispatch me. You'll need silver." He announced.

As everyone watched, Hamilton transformed into a massive wolf. Lips snarling, fangs dripping saliva. Claire reached behind her shoulder and grabbed the hilt of a sword she had acquired in the secret mountain vault. As the huge wolf charged her, she brought the sword down with a crash upon the wolf's neck. The air was filled with the splash of blood, The sickly-sweet shell of gore. The villagers let out a shrill and piercing cry. A head rolled to the ground. The thud of a body followed it closely. Hamilton's dead eyes glanced up at Claire. She had always been the lucky one.

"I think a beheading would work as well," she announced casually.

Jasper watched as the first flakes of snow became to fall. The air smelled clear, a mere wisp of ice in the wind. It was still not yet winter, so the snow would melt soon. Still, less time remained until spring. He urged everyone to hurry their pace to build the forge. They would have need of it soon. In the distance, he could see Claire and the others returning. Something must have gone wrong. He expected them to be hauling carts of tin and copper ore, but they only carried bundles no bigger than sacks. He stepped forward to meet them. "What's happened? We'll need far more than a few small sacks to forge our weapons. This looks like barely enough to make a spear point or two."

Claire took the bundle from Gareth and opened it at Jasper's feet. Shining silvery swords tumbled out. Together with daggers and spear points of the same metal. Jasper picked one up. It felt sturdy and strong in his hand.

"I think you'll find this adequate for our defense," Claire announced.

Jasper peered at her quizzically "What is this metal. I've not seen it's like before."

"It is a good and resilient one," Claire explained with a grin. "I call it steel."