

A goblin is a short, emaciated-seeming creature, about the size of a large dog. They tend to be around three feet tall with large, flat heads and long ears. Their skin tends to be leathery and grey, often wrinkled and covered in tiny scars, warts, and scabs. Goblins live by a set of rules that most people find strange. None more so than Dwarfs.

Far Over the Sky Mountains

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The ground was as hard as it was cold. If it had been covered with ice it would have been impassable. The toll on those who cross these passes was an assortment of frostbite and snow blindness, still, Vera Ferrousblade pressed on. She wore a hooded coat of fir with boots to match, a brace of four pistols hung from straps which snaked over her shoulders. On her back, she had strapped on the longest of her pistols, which some termed a carbine. The snow crunched with the same resonance as a man chewing a stale loaf of bread. Each step was a burden, an exertion in a place where the mere drawing of breath was an endeavor in itself.

It was the kind of cold, however, which demanded of you forward progress. No, because placing one foot in front of the other was a sensible activity, but because it was the only activity. In the high passes, the only other opportunity open to you was collapse ... and death is the classic case of no activity at all.

Before her was a slim out hanging of dark grey rock. It gives one the impression of a black grease smudge on the pristine canvas of white which surrounded it. As she approached, warning bells pealed, though none could be discerned, let alone seen. Stepping from the shadows, another stood in her path, towering over her. He too wore the heavy furs of a northern climate, his face barely exposed. Only the steam from his breath betrayed him as anything other than a statue. "You have business in the cleft?" He asked solemnly.

"I do," she coughed out in the extreme cold, "I have pistols which are in dire want of repair. And frizzens requiring hardening at the forge." She threw him a purse of gold coins to demonstrate her ability to pay. She had little fear we would abscond with the wealth, there being few places to go this far up in the Sky Mountain passes.

Such a remote place was an odd one to place a business, the nearest populated area being some distance away. But the Grand Master had wanted a remote site, and this definitely fit the bill. He had found most of his customers were more interested in stealing his secrets than in buying his product. Sometimes you must go to extraordinary lengths to preserve a monopoly.

"Strange for a dwarf make use of such weapons," the guardian remarked.

"I get that a lot," she snorted.

He nodded. "You understand the cleft makes no axes nor hammers of war?"

"I do," she snapped back, "If I'd have need of such, I'd have gone to a dwarven forge."

"Only you then?" he suggested, as he passed her coin purse back. "What of your companions?"

"I have no companions," she protested, "Yes, I mean ... they have been following me since an incident in the lower passes, but they are not my companions." In the icy cold, Vera's memory faded back to the earlier meeting with her pursuers in these freezing passes. She was imaging how others, like the human before her, might have witnessed their meeting ...

Two men huffed and grunted pulling up a wagon on a goat path never intended for such conveyances. Dragging was more like it, as the wheels had long since frozen over to immobility. The wheels didn't often freeze, but today was an exception. "Push, you bastard," the first one called to his associate. "I am pushing, but I don't think it's much of a help." He cried back. He stopped as if frozen in the blinding cold.

“Well, I’m not pulling this damn wagon down the mountain by myself, I can tell you.” He spat back, letting the rope he was hauling slacken a bit. It put more weight on his unwilling colleague.

Nodding his head, he indicated a location off in the distance. “You might want to check with them first if we plan to continue this way.” His voice was shaky, and not from the cold.

“What the devil are you prattling on about? You foul lay-about.” He turned and dropped the rope completely. Before him stood a giant, streaming mist from his shoulders like he was a fire of wet leaves. He was at least three yards tall if he were an inch. Dressed in fine steel armor with a like helm, he carried a sword almost two yards in length by itself. They’d both heard the tall tales of frost giants who were said to inhabit the high passes, but considered them a myth, like the lore of the Yeti. Still considering the massive presence before their eyes, they may have to give additional thought to the reality of Yeti.

As the creature raised his sword for a killing blow, a crack rang out. The creature stood impassive for a moment. Then the wind pushed him over and he landed with a crunch, powdered snow rising from the air around him. Standing behind him was a diminutive figure. In her hand, she held, what appeared to be a pistol, as smoke appeared rising from its mouth.

The giant lay unmoving, his sword still raised over his head, as if ready to strike. The hole in his back would have been gushing blood, but the intense cold put a stop to any outflow. In fact, it was so frigid, the creature’s entire body froze before the giant even had time to lower his arms. So now he lay, arms and weapon above his head. His face buried deep in the snow.

A second creature rose and let out a tremendous scream, witnessing the fate of his brother. The small woman turned, alerted by the hideous cry. At this point, the two men clearly noted her draw a pistol from her holster. She took careful aim and fired. Blood fountained from his face. Yet about halfway into the air, it crystalized into bright red flakes of ice, which rained down upon the ground as if it were hail in a storm.

The second giant fell to the ground. He joined his brother as a hardened corpse, more statue than a once living creature. A third made his appearance. Herself drawing the third pistol the undersized woman pulled the trigger. There was a flash, but the weapon didn’t fire. She dropped the weapon in the snow. As the giant charged her, she pulled a carbine from a strap on her back and leveled it at the approaching terror. It went off with a loud retort. Almost as loud as the reverberation of the giant’s corpse as it fell to the earth.

The gods smiled upon them. Or at least, fate, as the giant’s hunting party consisted only of three members. No more once-mythical creatures made their appearance.

The man who had been holding the wagon’s rope ran up to her. He reached down into the snow and retrieved the unfired pistol. Brushing the snow off it, he examined it closely.

“I’ll have my weapon back if you please,” she barked at him.

“Here,” he said. “Take this one.” He handed her a pistol of similar dimensions. This one was made of metalwork, finely etched with an intricate design. It appeared more like an artwork than as a weapon of defense.

She passed it back to him. "I'd rather have my own. If you don't mind." Her voice was gruff and harsh. The man put his pistol back in his coat and handed the petite woman her more ordinary weapon. He handed her a tall leather bag. "At least take this," he stammered.

Opening the bag, she found it full of a fine white powder. "Snow?" she asked, a bit disgruntled. "I think there is more than enough of this to be found at our feet. No need to carry it around." She handed the bag back to him.

"No, no," he explained. "It's gun powder."

"Impossible," she replied disgustedly. "They don't call it black powder because of its smell, you know." Vera turned to resume her trek.

"It's better than black powder," he remarked with pride. "Not subject to the weather. It's been treated with magic. It repels water."

"Who told you such claptrap?" she declared with a snort.

"We purchased it at the Sky Armory not two days ago. It's the latest invention." His smugness was excessive.

"Who are you two?" Vera demanded, steam pursing from her lips.

His pride turned to shame. He held out his gloved hand. "How rude of me. Allow me to introduce myself. I'm Slipstream Wilcox and this is my business partner, Wheellock Moses Slamhammer." His conceit returned as he made the introductions.

"A pleasure," Wheellock added.

"What are you two doing out here anyway?" She didn't take his hand, both her tone turned from indifference to curiosity.

Slipstream ran over to the wagon, throwing the oiled leather cover off the load. Beneath it, the wagon bristled with rifles and barrels of powder. He smiled a grin which would have put a cat to shame. "We're gun runners." He proclaimed.

"All these weapons," she said, holding back her laughter. "And you couldn't defend yourself from three assailants?"

"You didn't believe me, Wheellock," he snorted at his partner in derision. "I told you we should have kept some of the guns loaded."

The small woman shook her head in disgust. "Well, if this white powder is as good as you claim, perhaps I'll purchase some. I'm on my way to the armory myself."

"Take some of ours than," Wheellock proposed. "What have you got to lose?"

She shook her head in denial. Those must have been the last words of many a ne'er-do-well whose weapon failed to go off in a clutch. Vera stared up the mountain again, paying no more heed to the two gun runners.

“Augh,” squealed Wheellock. “Not looking forward to dragging this load back up the trail.”

The tiny woman turned on a dime. “What do you mean? Don’t even think of following me.” Her tone was angry. It could have instantly melted iron even in this frozen wasteland.

“Nothing to do for it ma’am,” Slipstream retorted, “We’ve a life debt to repay.”

“Best to give up anyway. You’ll never keep up dragging your wagon,” she said, snickering. “Even with my short legs.”

Vera’s mind returned to the present. Slipstream and Wheellock arrived before the guardian of the entrance. “Ah, Mr. Wilcox and Mr. Slamhammer! You and your friend are most welcome in the cleft. Shall we proceed to the Sky Armory?”

The fur covered man guided them into a narrow defile in the rocks. When they emerged, it was into a sunlit garden of balmy temperate. All because the mystic who had founded the armory had wanted it so. In the center of the small glen was a large castle, smoke pouring out of every chimney. Its light grey stones glistened in the sunlight. There was scant room for much else beyond the castle, save for a spot of grass scattered about.

Servants came forward to take their furs and cloaks. Vera almost slapped one of them away, thinking him a bit handsy. When the cloaks were finally removed, Vera appeared beneath her bundles. To the others, Vera appeared to be short in stature, yet she had a muscle structure rivaling any weight lifter or strongman. Vera’s was pleased with her long red mane, which she thought of as distinctively feminine. It dropped down to the region of her upper thighs, the left side knotted into a long braid. The knot flowed over her studded leather armor, which was fashionable among the dwarves.

“You’re a dwarf,” declared.

Vera scowled. “What’s the matter? Never seen a dwarf before?”

“Well, I ...” Slipstream stammered.

“No,” Vera acknowledged. “We don’t have beards. You humans and your racial stereotypes. Makes me want to vomit.”

“Maurice Chandler.” Their tall, lanky guide interrupted as he introduced himself to Vera. “Formerly of Ohio.”

“Ohio?” Vera spat. “Never heard of it.”

“Nor should you,” Maurice replied in an uneasy voice, “It’s more leagues away from here than you could count. Let’s agree I’m from out of town, shall me?” He held out his hands. Vera regarded him as if he was an unwanted suitor requesting a dance. “The weapons you wanted to be repaired?”

“Oh,” she remarked. Vera handed over two pistols and the carbine. “The pistols need the flint springs repaired,” she declared. “It’s the carbine which needs the frizzen hardened. Although if truth be told, the pistols could use the same as well.”

“Mr. Wilcox and Mr. Slamhammer, I’m surprised you’ve returned so soon. Something wrong with the shipment?” Maurice enquired. He was inquisitive but polite.

“No,” said Wheellock. “Everything’s fine.”

“Your regular apartment is ready for you sirs if you’ll step this way.” Maurice prepared to lead them off in the direction of the castle. “Your friend is welcome to join you of course.”

“I’d prefer separate accommodations,” Vera suggested in a blunt tone of voice.

“You could wait outside,” their guide suggested.

Vera looked out at the space leading out to the snow-covered mountain. “Fine,” she spat with a certain amount of venom. “I’ll stay with them.”

The apartment, as Maurice called it, was a lavishly appointed series of rooms laid out with the latest finery. Fine upholstered furniture lined the walls. Magnificent tapestries and crimson banners hung from the walls. The single double bed in the back room was made of four intricately carved posts. The spiral carving work reminded Vera of her hair braid. Vera, however, found the sight of it disturbing, with its space adequate only for two.

To break the tension, Vera faced her two roommates. “How do you two rate such finery?”

Slipstream couldn’t stop grinning. “We’re exceptional customers.”

“Apparently,” Vera commented with a bit more sarcasm than she had originally intended. The two men took in a long breath of air. When they exhaled they appeared shorter than they had been moments before. Servants brought up a large meal and set it up on a table in the center of the main room. The three ate in relative silence, Vera sat across from the two humans. Slipstream and Wheellock sat together, arms crossed. Appearing as uncomfortable as if the table had been set amid the ice and snow.

“Might we ask,” Wheellock broached with a quiet reverence, “what are your intentions after your pistols are repaired?”

“I am on a quest to return her majesty’s crown,” she remarked shoveling in the food from her plate.

“I thought the dwarfs were ruled by a king?” Wheellock asked, displaying his ignorance. “I’d think we’d have heard about a heist of his majesty’s royal jewels. And wouldn’t they have sent more people to recover such expensive items?”

“It’s the queen’s crown, you idiot,” Slipstream heckled his partner.

“The queen has no power in the administration of the kingdom,” Vera explained. “So, they care little for its recovery. But the queen has other plans.”

It took some time, but Vera, at last, devoured the meal placed before her. Her two hosts merely pushed their portions around their plates with a fork. When at last evening came. Vera spread out a blanket on a couch in the main room. Making sure the two could make out what she was doing, she unhooked the warhammer from her belt and placed it at the head of the couch. Pointing at the bedroom, she

addressed the two with enough seriousness to sink a barge. "If the two of you leave the other room before I wake up, I'll demonstrate how well I can still use a hammer."

The night passed quietly, with Vera sleeping about as well as she had ever passed a night. Their slow stagger in the morning gave the impression to Vera neither of the others had spent the night as comfortably. Breakfast went about the same as dinner. Shortly after they took the plates away, Maurice brought Vera in her repaired weapons.

Vera threw on her walking attire more quickly than the servants could comprehend in order to take her leave of the cleft. Before Vera left, she turned to Maurice. "What much do I owe you?"

"Your cost's have already been covered by your companions."

Vera looked at the two gun runners. She imagined there must have seen flames shooting from her eyes, based on the way the way they backed up in a hurry. Vera got out her coin purse to repay them, but Slipstream waved her away. "Your money's no good here."

"How dare you!"

"It's no good arguing," Wheellock explained. "You *have* to let us repay you. It's a life debt. You can't let us walk about carrying a life debt. It's ... it's ... unseemly."

Her voice cracked with anger. "No, I don't have to let you repay me. I honestly don't."

Vera's journey down the treacherous mountain path proceeded at a much more rapid pace than would have been prudent. Even so, twice her journey was delayed by snow squalls. As the sun began to set, she was pleased to find herself alone. Getting out her blankets, she tucked herself in for the night.

In the morning she stretched and collected her things only to find both Slipstream and Wheellock's gun-filled wagon in her path. They offered her breakfast and a place by their fire, but she headed out without saying a single word. No matter how hard she traveled, or how fast, the two were always beside her in the morning. It seems one of them would sleep in the wagon as the other pulled. In this way, they traveled all night to keep up the pace.

Finally, Vera came to Wayward Pass. She took the route to the east, deeper into the mountains. She was sure this would allow her to lose her pursuers as most of the traffic went to the west and down to the warm river valley. Vera smiled and whistled as she walked into the deep pine forest of the upper plateau. The snow was thinning out and she knew the air would only be freezing at night. Convinced she was now alone, she started a fire for the first time during her decent. After warming herself by the small fire, she curled up and slept the sleep of the dead.

When she awoke, both Slipstream and Wheellock were there again, cooking breakfast. "Damn," she muttered. Quickly collecting her blankets, she was on her way again in a flash. Now, however both the whistling and the self-confident grin was a thing of the past. She trudged on in silence. Several times along the way, she took down a needle-filled branch and scraped the ground behind her to wipe out any semblance of a trail. At least twice she went off the path and headed off deep into the woods, where there was little to guide her way. At last, returning to the trail, she broke into a trot to gain some needed ground.

Huffing and puffing, she broke off the trail and bounded into a dense copse of thorn bushes. Deep into her prickly lair she, at last, broke out her blankets. No fire to give away her position this night. At first, she couldn't sleep. Each noise caused her to think the humans were approaching her position. No matter if it was the cry of an owl or the scurrying of voles, she imagined the sound as approaching human footsteps. Finally, the sleep of exhaustion overtook her.

In the morning, she was pleased to find herself alone. She took her time rolling up her blankets and feeling in no mood to rush, she got off to a belated start. The thorn bushes were as hard to get out of as they were to get into. At last, she cleared them and set once again upon her chosen path. The early afternoon sunshine was a pleasant diversion, but she refused to be distracted long. She was soon making up for lost time. Nearing her goal, the trail made an unexpected turn to the right. After rounding the corner, she spotted it ... Slipstream and Wheellock's wagon.

She considered the option of retracing her steps and rushing, headlong, back into the woods. But the two men gave her a wave of recognition, so it was too late. They'd seen her. She approached them, each step sounding like a boulder rolling down the side of a mountain. "What are you two doing here?" She demanded.

"At the castle cleft, they told us the Goblin was said to have stolen the Dwarf Queen's crown, so we figured you'd be headed here." Slipstream looked rather sheepishly at the ground, drawing with his shoes in the fine dirt. "The castle folk told us all about it. And the trails which lead this way. I told you, were good customers."

"Don't be too mad," Wheellock was practically begging. "We only came along to help. Besides in your haste to leave, you forgot to buy some of the Ever-Dry™ powder. But, not to worry, we brought lots."

Vera's shoulders sank. She considered several options, some of them quite diabolical. But in the end, she gave them all up save one. "Come on," she said. "Try to do a better job keeping up this time."

"Would you like to test out some of the powder?" Wheellock asked with all the politeness he could muster, holding out a bag.

Vera stopped in her tracks. Wheellock immediately covered his face with his arms. Vera took the bag and proceeded to load one of her pistols. She shook the existing ball and powder out of the barrel and blew the prime out of the pan. She then replaced the black powder with the white, dropping the ball down the mussel at the end. She took aim and fired at a local tree.

The ball landed squarely in the tree. She examined the pistol and found the outside still as clean as the castle blacksmith had left it. No powder residue or burns at all. "Self-cleaning, too," Wheellock announced proudly. "No more extra time required to clean out your weapon at the end of the day."

Vera reloaded the pistol and tucked the bag of white powder into her vest. "Alright," she declared. "You can stay. You might be useful after all."

The trail to the Grexx goblin fortress narrowed as they approached. Goblins don't require a lot of room to walk. The path could easily accommodate two goblins marching abreast, but not a wagon. They left the wagon in a thicket near the path and made for the cave entrance. Slipstream and Wheellock both

carried long muskets. “You should have brought pistols,” Vera warned them. “Long barrels are hard to maneuver in the tight confines of a cave.”



“These are no ordinary muskets, miss,” Slipstream explained. “It carries a cylinder near the breach which accommodates multiple rounds. We can fire five rounds

each before reloading.” Slipstream wasn’t merely pleased with the prospect of the extra firepower, he was practically beaming.

“Suit yourself,” Vera shrugged. “They look heavy.”

After a few more steps, Vera leading, she halted and smiled. Vera slid Wheellock’s barrel towards the wall. “You know, some people are allergic to nuts. There are those allergic to peanuts and a few who even have a hostile relationship with walnuts if you can believe it. I’m not allergic to either, only to nuts who think they can handle firearms ... when they clearly can’t.”

“Sorry,” Wheellock mumbled.

The cave mouth appeared empty. Goblins tend not to place guards at an entrance ... too conspicuous. They figured it was better to let interlopers inside where it’s dark. In the blackness, the goblins had the advantage. As they entered, Slipstream pulled out a rough glass sphere from his shirt.

He cracked it against the side of the cave as if it was an egg and he intended to make an omelet. He rubbed the orb and it began to glow brightly. Finishing his ministrations, he hastily threw the orb into the air. But rather than smash against the ceiling, it came to a standstill and floated down the passageway a few inches above Slipstream’s head. It followed them, illuminating the dingy corridor as they made their way deeper into the complex.

Vera snorted. “You two are full of little gadget and trinket, aren’t you?”

In a short span of time, they found a misshapen door at the end of the hallway. This did not bode well. You can hide all sorts of thing behind a door. There is also something diabolically evil about using the kinetic energy of the door opener to release, say, a flight of arrows at them.

Vera stared at it, trying to imagine how she might use the white powder blow it up without damaging the contents on the other side. By contents, she was not thinking of the goblins as contents. In the end, she settled on placing her two musket wielding followers spread across the hall. She seemed unconcerned about leaving them as the obvious targets. Vera drew a pistol. Hugging the wall, she steeled herself to open the door in a rush. Fortunately, with her stature, she didn’t have to be concerned about ducking.

When the door flew open ... nothing happened. For a while, you have thought the cold from the mountains had frozen them all. Vera broke the ice, so to speak, by looking into the room. It appeared empty. She looked at her musket backup and mouthed ‘on three.’

“What?” Wheellock asked with a worried look all over his face. Even though he tried to hide it.

“On three,” Vera spat.

“Right,” Wheellock replied.

“Three,” she shouted. She rushed into the room ... alone.

“What happened to one and two?” Wheellock asked.

“It doesn’t matter,” Slipstream yelled. “She’s in there and we’re out here.” They ran headlong into the room, screaming like banshees. Their arrival was perfectly timed to allow them to be surrounded by four dozen goblins. Overall, the tactical situation looked grim.

Vera fired the pistol, point blank, at a random goblin’s face. His head flew backward trailing a fountain of blood. The creature’s body followed close behind. She dropped the pistol and it fell to a clatter on the floor. She drew two additional pistols and drove lead balls into a goblin on her left and another attacking from the right. The two humans added their fire in her support. Slipstream took out another on the right. His target left little to note his former existence save for some bits of armor and a smudge-like red stain on the floor. Wheellock took out one on the left, but the recoil knocked him straight onto his ass.

Five down. In seconds, the goblins had lost a tenth of their number. Vera dropped her pistols and drew the carbine from her back. She took down another one, with the result it left more blood stains than remains. She finished off two more, swinging the butt of the carbine like a club. Slipstream and Wheellock were able to get four more as the cylinders on their musket rotated to bring up new rounds. Eleven more down. Vera threw the carbine at another, but he managed to duck the flying stick of wood and metal. She drew her warhammer from her belt and crushed in his skull. Sometimes, it doesn’t help to duck. The goblin casualty rate had now risen to 25% percent.

“Wait a minute, wait a minute,” came a voice crying out from the back. Vera noted the sound came from a single goblin in the back. He was slightly better dressed than the other goblins in the room. But within the cloud of stinking green creatures, it was hard to tell if what he was wearing was better or an impression caused by the overall reduced filth coverage.

“This isn’t going to get us anywhere.” The statement was so outrageous, it froze Vera in her tracks. She eyed the creature wearily as he approached. The goblin reached up and snatched the warhammer right out of her hands. “Wow,” he announced. He sounded as stunned as Vera looked. “Easier than I thought.” The goblin stared at her with more pleasure than menace. “Allow me to introduce myself. Bitrig, Guard Captain of the Grexx, First Room Advanced Warning Detachment.” He held out his scrawny little hand.

Being a bit more used to negotiations, Slipstream spoke first. “I’m Slipstream Wilcox and this is Wheellock Moses Slamhammer,” he announced. He took the goblin’s hand shaking it as if he was closing a deal. Wheellock managed to get off his butt and brushed the dirt from his backside. The second human added his handshake to his partner’s. It was no less vigorous. “This is our traveling companion, Vera Ferrousblade. You’ll have to pardon her,” Slipstream explained. “She doesn’t talk much. I’m pretty sure she doesn’t shake hands either.”

Vera slowly extended a hand.

“Well then,” Slipstream proclaimed. “I guess she does then.”

Vera and the goblin slowly greeted each other with a tentative handshake. The two finally dropped hands and stood in what appeared to be a determined faceoff. The room as tense. At last, all the remaining goblin lowered their rust covered weapons.

“So,” Bitrig inquired, “What is it you want?”

“The queen’s crown,” Vera said in a demanding tone.

Bitrig’s eyes widened until they were almost twice their normal size. “Are you sure? Nothing else?”

“The queen’s crown is what I was sent to fetch and return it to her is what I will do. So have I sworn before the Great Anvil.” She regarded Bitrig with a dry taste of condescension and contempt. It was more of a threat than a statement.

“You sure?” Bitrig repeated. “You have no other designs upon the Grexx or their possessions?”

“The crown – and only the crown – if you please” Vera sounded resolute.

Bitrig shifted on his two feet and placed his hands, one of them containing Vera’s hammer, behind his back. He pointed his head downward, as if in contemplation. “Alright, I’ll take you at your word. It’s yours.”

“You’re kidding?” Wheellock sounded flabbergasted.

“Not at all,” Bitrig announced. “Seems like a fair deal to me and I could use the promotion.”

“Excuse me?” It was now Vera’s turn to be stunned.

Bitrig smiled, showing off all his crooked teeth. “The Grexx have an open an open position for Warmaster. The jobs have been open for several centuries. But you don’t care about such matters. However, to become Warmaster, I am first required to liberate a large hoard. Believe me, with the amount of gold in the queen’s larders, even if I give you back the crown, it’ll still be quite a haul of swag. And since you don’t want it back ... one large hoard it is.”

Bitrig waited, in case the dwarf decided to change her mind. Seeing no propensity to do so, he continued. “Next I have to touch a live enemy. I believe our handshakes would qualify. So, two down. After I complete the second requirement, I must take an enemies’ weapon.” He brought Vera’s hammer forward from behind his back. “I would imagine this counts.”

“I am also required to lead a successful raiding party,” Bitrig grinned. “As I was the one who led this band into the dwarf queen’s larder ...” he turned his head to address his comrades. “Right boys?”

The was a general murmur of agreement followed by a lot of head nodding. “Right boys?” Bitrig asked again, louder. There was a veritable scream of accent this time. Bitrig winked at Vera, “You’ve gotta keep this bunch in line you know. It helps with morale.” The goblin took a step back. “I think stealing a queen’s hoard of gold qualifies me as leading a successful raid. Don’t you think?”

Vera made no comment.

“All I have left to do is conclude a successful negotiation.” There was an ‘oh’ and an ‘ah’ from the assembled goblin crowd, realizing a momentous occasion was afoot. Bitrig extended out his diminutive fingers. “One crown in exchange for being made Warmaster. Sounds fair. Do we have a deal?”

“The dwarf Queen’s crown, right?” Vera asked. She didn’t trust the goblin for an instant.

“Yes, yes,” Bitrig shouted. “The dwarf Queen’s crown. The one I stole and not a worthless copy. Are we agreed?”

Vera shook the goblin’s hand with a tentative gesture. She honestly expected to be stabbed in the back at any moment. There was a moment of awe and then the goblins in the room started bowing and scrapping on the floor. The act of prostrating themselves before Bitrig went on for several minutes.

“Thanks.” Bitrig gave the dwarf a toothy grin and handed her back the hammer. He knelt and picked up Vera’s pistols. “I believe these are yours.” He remarked, handing them over.

“Thanks for what?” Vera asked.

“Making me the first Warmaster of the Grexx in 500 years.” He beamed. “Now let’s get your queen’s crown, shall we. Would you like to come along, or will you be sending your servants to collect?” Bitrig indicated the two humans. Slipstream gave the goblin a bit of a sneer for referring to the two of them as Vera’s servants. Then he dropped his musket on his foot. Not much you can do to save face after a heavy musket has crushed what’s inside your shoe.

“Pardon me, for calling you servants,” Bitrig grinned back, “Offence intended.”

“No offense taken,” Wheellock related until the realization overtook him. “Hey, wait a minute,” he yelled back.

“Stupid humans,” Bitrig muttered.

“The quest is mine,” Vera declared as if her voice was a thunderous raincloud full of pretention.

“OK, so you’ll be coming along too.” Bitrig concurred. “Boys, get the lady’s carbine.” Two lesser goblins practically ran into each other in a rush to fulfill their Warmaster’s command. “Morons,” Bitrig muttered. The two passed the weapon to Bitrig. He casually turned it over to the dwarf. “Now everyone’s weapons have been returned, shall we proceed?” Bitrig directed some of his men to return to their stations, guarding the entry room. He spoke quietly to one goblin who returned, what Vera had to imagine was the goblin equivalent of a salute. At last, he pointed to the door in the back of the room.

They proceed down the hallway beyond the door, the goblin whistling a merry march along the way.

“Might I ask,” Slipstream directed his remarks at the new Warmaster of the Grexx, “Are you empowered to give us the crown or should we expect another fight to ensue?”

“Excellent question,” Bitrig remarked. “Although it shows a fair amount of ignorance of Goblin culture if I do say so myself. To a goblin, everything in the world is community property.” Bitrig stopped and reached out to grab Slipstream’s musket. Almost at once, Bitrig drew back his hand with a rapid gesture. “Except for weapons. All weapons are considered personal. Extremely personal, if you get my drift. What you ignorant savages refer to as stealing, we refer to as resource relocation and global distribution. This is why there are no stories of a goblin removing anything from an armory. Did we

relocate a single dwarven hammer? By the gods no sir! But your average gold pile, such things are a different matter.”

He threw his whole body into the air to grab Slipstream’s light orb, but it was slightly out of his range. He crashed down to the ground and then calmly whipped himself off. Continuing down the passageway, Bitrig looked over his shoulder at the two humans. “So, since the queen’s crown doesn’t belong to anyone, any one of us can hand it over to you. No problem. It doesn’t belong to you, it doesn’t belong to me. Ergo, you can have it. It looks like crap on me anyway. Give me a good leather beanie any day, I say. Keeps your ears warm.”

“So, you wouldn’t mind if we snuck a few coins into our jackets?” Slipstream asked like a true businessman.

“Not in the least,” Bitrig smiled. “As long as you don’t mind a knife blade inserted between your ribs.”

“I thought you said goblins believe in community property?” Slipstream was taken aback.

“Depends on your interpretation,” Bitrig said triumphantly. “Anyone who tells you cold, hard cash isn’t a weapon is a damned liar.”

“So, you did take a weapon from the Dwarfs,” Wheelock claimed.

“In a dwarfish larder,” the goblin’s laughter echoed in the hall. “They’d have spent it on something stupid, like an anvil ... or, the god forbid ... a soft bed.” There was a snort of derision at the prospect from the assembled goblins.

They came to a halt before a large pit. At its base was a forest of upright spikes with the bodies of interlopers impaled upon them. Bitrig walked over to the wall. At about goblin height was a wooden handle set in the wall. Above it was a sign. It clearly read, ‘Pull lever to close trap.’ Bitrig yanked on the handle and a stone slab swung upward into place to close the pit and act as a bridge.

“We can cross now,” Bitrig announced.

“How do you expect invaders not to find the handle?” Wheelock asked.

“What?” Bitrig’s laughter echoed off the walls, “In a goblin cave? No one ever believes a word we say anyway. Why would they believe our signs? Best camo here is ... keeping things in plain sight.”

They crossed the bridge in comfort. Well at least, in about as much comfort as two humans and a dwarf can get deep in the bowels of a goblin fortress anyway. On the other side of the bridge was a door. Its poor construction implied it was the product of the same builder who had fashioned all the previous doors. Entering the room, they found it draped in black cloth. The interior was lit with celebratory candles from wall to wall. The goblins inside seemed in a festive mood, but things quickly turned somber as the residents saw Vera and the two humans.

“No trouble, no trouble,” Bitrig declared. “Please continue your preparations without any fear.” He spoke over his shoulder to Vera. “You’ll have to excuse us. It’s the holiday season. Everyone is preparing for Death Day. All goblinkind gathers on this day to celebrate the fact we have avoided death for another year. Each day when a goblin wakes he thinks to himself: today I’m going to die. All too often his statement turns out to be prophetic. Because all too frequently a goblin is called to resist the

encroachment of home invaders. Which is odd because we don't live in the best neighborhoods. So, when you've beaten the odds for an entire year, it's a big deal. It's a serious celebration. There's a lot of drinking and eating and well – there's a lot of drinking."

"I'm sorry," Vera apologized.

"You don't approve of celebrations? Bitrig inquired.

Vera looked pensive. "It's ... back there ... well, there'll be fewer celebrants at this year's feast. Due to us, I'm afraid."

"Don't pay it any more mind," Bitrig was collected and professional about his statement, as if he was reading a prepared testimonial. "Things happen. They can't be avoided. Nobody trusts us, we don't trust them." A goblin making preparations passed Bitrig a large silver goblet. He downed the contents in one single swallow. "It could use a little more deer blood, I think, but otherwise it's excellent Pilheha." He turned back to Vera, "Such things can't be helped." Bitrig pondered for a moment. "Unless, of course, you want to offer us one of your humans as a sacrifice?"

Vera, stood frozen.

"I'm only kidding," Bitrig snickered. "Besides we'd need both of them to make it count. Here we are." Bitrig pointed at a rock wall. It was not well shaped, looking as if it had been carved in a hurry. Pick and hammer marks could clearly be seen covering its rough surface.

It was Vera's turn to be confused. "Where are we?"

"The storeroom, of course," explained Bitrig. "Can I borrow your hammer again?" He grabbed it out of Vera's hands like a sibling purloining a lollipop. "Wow. I still can't get over it. Much easier than you'd imagine." While the dwarf was still too confused to react, he struck the wall with the hammer and handed it back to her.

"What did you do?" Vera looked at him with a wide-eyed expression on her face.

"I rang the bell," Bitrig explained as if the answer was obvious to the casual observer. Before she had time to respond, Bitrig walked forward into the wall and vanished from sight. Almost at once, he reappeared, well, half of him did anyway. "Don't stand their gawking, come on, before the door closes." Once again he disappeared into what seemed like a solid wall of rock. Slipstream when first, evaporating into a mass of granite.

Wheellock looked to Vera. "Ah, what the hell. You only live once right?" He too vanished.

Dwarves have a built-in distrust of magic. Vera viewed it in the same way as she viewed snake-oil merchants, sneak-thieves and insurance salesmen. But Vera also had a deep distrust of being alone in a room full of goblins, so she took a step forward. It was more of a leap if you want to get technical. She emerged into a cavernous room which had obviously been hollowed out by hand. It was filled with gold and silver coins. A veritable mountain of both. In the other room were goblin dressed in rags. Yet in this room, there was enough wealth to feed and clothe several kingdoms for years.

Slipstream and Wheellock stood with their mouths gaping open as Bitrig clambered up one of the nearest piles.

“Quite a collection, isn’t it?” Bitrig snorted, throwing his hands out to display the stash.

Slipstream finally snapped out of it. “Community property, you say? Where can I apply to become a member of the Grexx clan?”

Bitrig showed no signs of being impressed. “Sorry, you exceed the maximum height requirements for membership in the clan.”

“What did he say?” Wheellock asked his partner.

“He says we’re too tall.” Slipstream replied.

“Why, if I may be so bold as to ask,” Slipstream suggested quietly. “If the clan possesses such wealth, why would you dress in rags? You have enough here ... well, you have enough here to do rather well.”

“What?” Bitrig spat as if he swallowed a lemon. “Let everyone in on the fact we have this hoard? Didn’t you pay attention to what I’ve been telling you? We have enough trouble with murderous interlopers as it is. Take your own presence as an example. You want us to put up a sign saying: First Bank of the Overly Wealthy?”

“You may have a point,” agreed Slipstream.

Bitrig started crawling over piles of wealth which were considerably taller than he was. Several times he slipped down the slope creating a cascade of coins in the process. “I would imagine ...” he commented in a stoic tone “... all this would be greatly simplified if I could recall where we put it.”

The goblin took a leap from the top of one pile of coins to another. Only to cause another coin-slide and end up halfway down the pile he’d jumped on. When he finally returned to the top, he took a nose dive straight into an adjacent pile and disappeared. To Vera, it appeared the small green creature had passed through yet another magical doorway. But, he popped up again shortly, scattering coins as he broke the surface. “Here we go ...”



In his hand, he held the queen’s crown. It was not what you would imagine as the classical crown. Most crowns being in the form of a metal ring or wreath fashioned in such a way as to appear to be decorated by gilded flowers, oak leaves, or thorns. The dwarfish queen’s crown, instead, appeared as a sort of golden cone-shaped head covering. It was adorned with multiple symbols of dwarfish lords and noble houses. It had been the early history of the dwarfs to be without a royal house, ruled instead by a council of notable nobles and thinkers. However, in times when their leaders needed to display a certain amount of marshal leadership ... well ... an arguing circus of contentious nobles rarely makes

for inspired military leadership in the field. To say nothing of the catastrophes such leadership tended to spawn.

Thus, many of the noble houses decided to invest their power in a single entity of royal power. As a result, the queen’s crown was wrapped in the noble seals of the houses which had supported the ascension of the royal family. This turned out to be significant, as the result of the division led to the first civil war among dwarfishkind. Vera services had, in fact, been paid for by some of the noble houses. The same houses who, while the queen was wearing it, enjoyed pointing out to their sons and daughters

which part of the crown displayed the seal of their house. There had even been a rumor floating around the royal family had even arranged for the crown to be stolen by the goblins in an effort to distance themselves from the controlling noble houses. But no one believes those rumors – much.

Bitrig handed Vera the crown. “There. Would you say our agreement was concluded to your satisfaction?”

“No,” Vera response was casual, almost an anti-climax.

“No?” Bitrig screamed like a schoolgirl having a tantrum. “Why you two-faced little dwarfish b...” he was about to say something rude when he remarkably regained control. “I thought you claimed you had no interest in recovering these trinkets? Please enlighten me, which part of ‘I only want the crown’ did I misinterpret?” His voice rose at the end as if it were a tidal wave about to crash upon the beach.

“I have, as we previously agreed, no interest in these trinkets as you call them,” Vera was almost matter-of-fact. “However, I do expect you to escort us back out of here before we can agree our arrangement has been concluded.”

Bitrig grinned a tooth-filled smirk. “You understand, as a rule, such safe passage is not inherent in any dealings with goblins?”

“I do,” Vera replied, tucking the crown under one arm.

Bitrig paced across the floor between two piles of coins. He looked down at his feet, rubbing the end of his chin with a slow, determined motion. “I suppose any more killing would dampen the holiday spirit. All right then. You drive a hard bargain, missy. Safe passage out again it is.”

Now it was Vera’s turn to smile. She handed Bitrig her hammer.

“What’s this for?” he asked in an incredulous voice.

“So you can ring the doorbell again.” Vera glanced at the wall behind her. “I’m getting a bit tired of you taking it without asking my permission. If you do it again, I’ll be forced to judge it to be rude.”

“Sorry,” Bitrig muttered. “I was ... well, I wanted to determine if the first time had been a fluke. You ... never mind. Let’s get out of here.” He slammed the wall with the hammer and disappeared into the rockface. Slipstream followed, but before Wheellock could join him, Vera grabbed him by the neck collar.

“Do I have to strip you myself or are you going to fix this problem?” she asked.

Wheellock glanced at her, displaying a sheepish look to his countenance. “Right.” He emptied his pockets. Gold coins rained to the floor. Vera shook the man and out came a sound, resembling the rattling of a purse. “Almost forgot,” he commented. He took off his hat. Coins rained down over his head as if a bucket of water had been spilled on his hair.

“Are we finished?” Vera asked.

“One second.” Wheellock took off his left boot and yet a third rain of coins splash across the floor.

“How were you expecting to get out of here without limping on all those coins?” Vera didn’t expect him to answer. She wanted him to be aware he wasn’t getting away with anything.

“You be surprised to learn how easy it is to step on gold coins without noticing anything more than a warm feeling you’re leaving a place with a profit.” Wheellock explained. Vera pushed him through the wall and followed soon after.

In the main hall, the goblins were bowing and scraping before him. “You’ll have to excuse them. Some of my men have been telling them the story of how I became Warmaster. Did I mention it’s a big thing since we hadn’t had one in a while?” Bitrig handed Vera back her hammer.

“I believe it came up in the conversation once or twice,” Vera remarked.

Bitrig gathered his men and started everyone in the direction of the front entrance. It wasn’t long before they were off route, taking a different path than they had used to get to the main room.

Still keeping one arm wrapped around the crown, she tickled the grip on one her pistols. “What treachery is this faithless goblin?”

“No treachery, I assure you.” Bitrig blustered. “Now word has gotten out, I need to take a slight detour to make my new appointment stick. I hope you’ll pardon the delay, but there is a certain time factor here which must be observed.”

“Where, may I ask are we going?” Vera slowly lowered her hand from before her pistol holster.

“The crypts,” Bitrig announced.

It was a short detour. At first glance, the crypts seemed to be nothing more a section of hallway slightly wider than the previous section. However, the walls were filled, floor to ceiling, in what appeared to Vera to be small bread ovens. The space was quiet as ... well as they say ... death. One of the lesser goblins stood forward and after unrolling a scroll, began to read. The first section was a discussion of Bitrig’s ancestry which came close to putting her to sleep.

When he recited the word Warmaster, dust began to form in a cloud as if the walls themselves were on fire. Skeletons shambled out of the holes. To Vera, they resembled overlarge rat skeletons. When they stood up and walked before the others, they could be seen for what they were, former goblins. One moved out before the others.

“Are you kidding me?” the skeleton was both snide and dismissive. “Bitrig!”

Bitrig put his hand on his dagger and Vera rested her hand on his shoulder. He spun around to face her in anger. “What?”

Vera held out her hammer. “Here, use this ... it’s more effective where breaking bones is the objective.”

Bitrig calmed himself down. He had always wished for the goblins and the other races to come to an understanding. Yet centuries of distrust rose in a way to confront him like a wall which no rope could hope to overcome. Now, at last, he was not so sure. No one had looked for an accommodation with the other races for centuries, perhaps this was why there had been no Warmasters. The time for change

was here. It was time to change tactics before the race of goblins became too few for a change of tactics to mean anything. He rose up to his full height and took the hammer with determination.

Bitrig did an about face to stare down the abusive skeleton. "Yea, me. What are you going to do about it?"

"What am I going to do about it?"

"Yea! What are you going to do about it Bonehide?"

At the mention of his name, the skeleton backed down. "What I'm going to do about it is say this ... it's about damn time."

"You ... what?"

"I said, it's about damn time."

"That's what I thought you said."

The skeletons all began to stumble back to their alcoves. "Where are you going?" Bitrig demanded.

"I can't speak for them," the skeleton leader proclaimed. "But I'm going back to bed. If you are looking for us to bow and scrape, you've come to the wrong crowd." The leader started following the others when he turned around. "Don't screw this up."

In moments everything was back to the state it had been before the group had arrived. Without turning around, Bitrig handed the hammer back to Vera. "Thanks." He murmured. "You probably aren't aware of this about goblins. We don't forget our friends. You suppose dogs are loyal? We make dogs look like treacherous backstabbers."

He did a second about-face. "Come on. Let's get you folks back up to the surface."

He led them to a spiral staircase at the end of the corridor. Proceeding up the narrow steps, Bitrig pulled on an unconcealed handle on the wall. A rock slid out of the way and sunlight streamed down from the surface. The goblins blinked and shielded their eyes from the bright light. When they climbed out onto the surface they were only a few feet from the wagon they had left hidden off the trail.

Slipstream and Wheellock ran over to the wagon at once and threw off the oiled leather cover. "It's all still here," Slipstream said in amazement.

"Of course, it is," Bitrig announced, "I told you weapons are considered personal property." He whistled. Several goblins rose out of the bushes. Each was armed to the teeth with bows, knives, and spears. "I set a few guards out here to ensure no one removed your property."

"Bitrig, Warmaster of the Grexx," Vera declared with pride, "Our contract is honorably concluded." She held out her hand.

"Forget it, lady," He spat. "We're not even close to concluded."

"What?"

“Bitrig, Warmaster of the Grexx is in your debt. The great Clan of Grexx is at your disposal. If ever you have need of us, the Clan of Grexx is at your disposal.”

“Damn,” Vera protested, “I’ve got to stop doing people favors.” The assembled crowd snickered.

“Bitrig,” Vera put her arms around the goblin’s shoulders, “You believe it would be a waste to spend mountains of gold on clothes and food for you people, right?”

“Food we can grow, Clothes we can sew. Goblins aren’t afraid of arduous work ...” Bitrig looked down at the ground, kicking the soil with his toe. “We don’t like it much, but we’ll do it. No, it’s safety we require. Safety from those who would happily mount out heads in their hunting halls.”

Vera called over at the two gun runners. “Boys, it’s my considered opinion we have a customer for your wagon over there. Yes, sir, I believe we have a customer.”