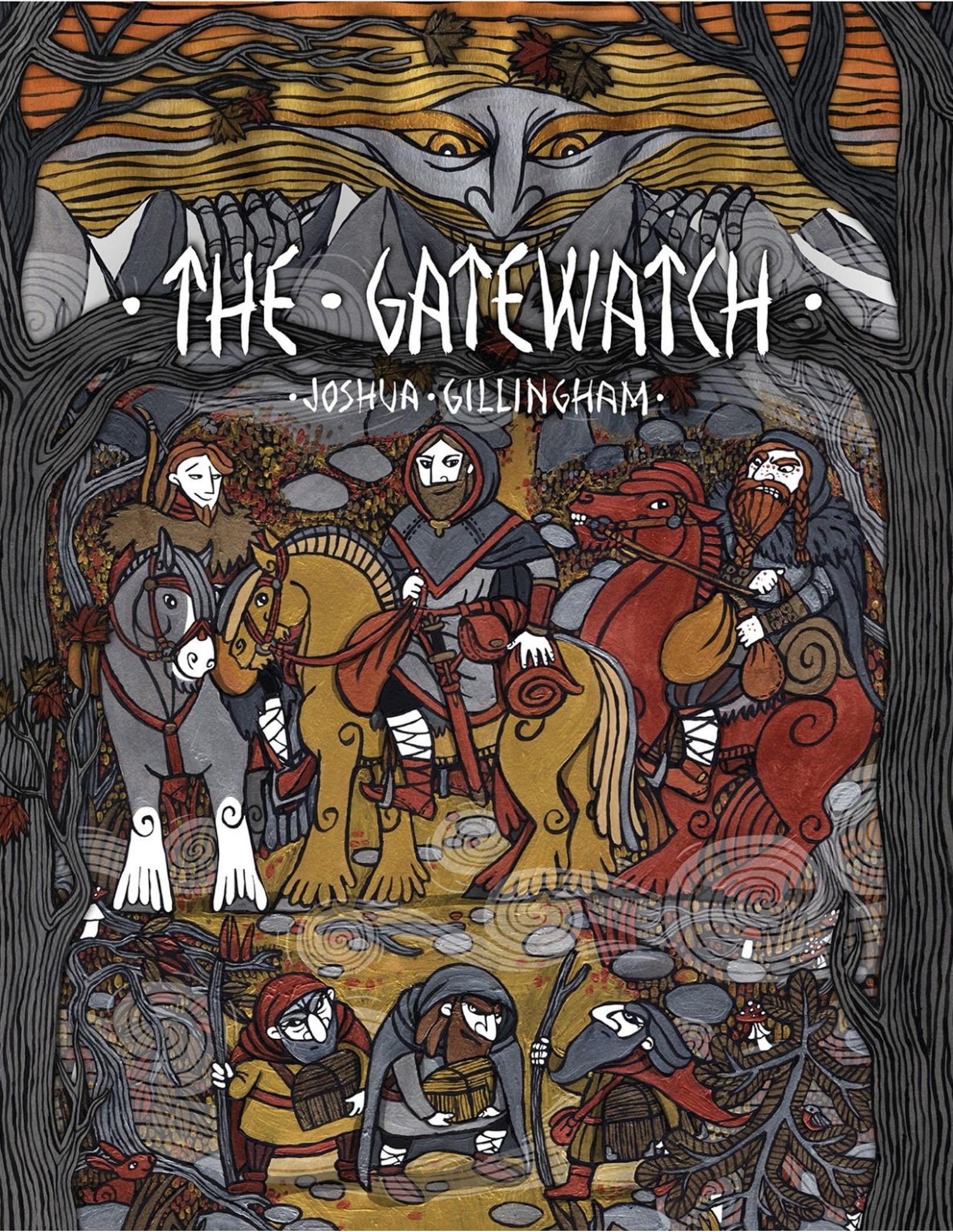


THE GATEWATCH

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Chapter 1: Ascent



The mist on the mountain settled low as the damp morning chill turned to drizzling rain. Through the fog three companions made their way up a narrow mountain pass on horseback. From under the hood of his dew-drenched, coal-grey cloak, each one watched his white breath swirl and rise before it joined the surrounding mist.

The second companion coughed violently and yanked his horse to a halt. With frozen fingers he fumbled for a sip of firemead. Finding his flask empty, he tore it off the strap and hurled it far into the mist. “Damn this cold.”

“Damn this fog,” said the third. He stopped shortly behind the second, drew out his own flask, and tossed it to him. “And damn these stinking horses.”

The leading companion, now twenty paces ahead, tugged gently the reins. As his horse turned to face the others a swirl of fog danced around its ankles. He lifted his hood and squinted. Even from such a short distance they were hardly visible. However, despite the foul weather he could hear the click of every buckle, clasp, and hoof beat echo between the flat rock faces.

“As for the cold and the fog, I’m afraid there isn’t much I can do about that. However, as far as horses go, you are certainly welcome to walk.”

The second companion gargled the last of the firemead and gulped it down. “And damn you Torin Ten-Trees!” The third companion laughed as he passed the second and soon they all were on their weary way once again.

The airy cliffs of Norhaven were far behind them now. The soft rush of wind over the fields around Jarl Einar Ten-Tree’s wood-fired hall had long since given way to the towering trees of Stagwood Forest. Then came the river Noros which cut through the hills, its rushing waters as quick and strong as a rugged stallion. For a few days they had followed the river, often stopping to rest at shanty inns and thatched-roof villages. Now it had been two days since they

had left those rushing waters to start the slow, steady ascent up Shadowstone Pass. Every hour since the air had grown colder, the rocks rougher, and the trees more scarce.

Torin passed both reins to his right hand so that he could draw his cloak together with his left. As he did a trickle of water rushed down the front of his hood and splashed onto his exposed hand. The back of his cloak had long since soaked through and now weighed on his shoulders, icy cold and as heavy as chain mail. His woven pants stuck to his skin and both his boots were beginning to fill up with frigid mountain rain.

He and his two companions had spent the previous night in a shallow cave at the bottom of Shadowstone Pass. Now he fondly recalled the roar of the fire, the last great chunk of salted pork, and the bitter malted ale. These were all luxuries whose weight they could not afford on the steep ascent. In just a few short hours, those comforts seemed as far off as his father's hall.

As the path levelled off Torin hoped they had reached the crest but soon it began to climb again, this time much steeper than before, up and up into the mist. The jagged stones grew sharper and at times the path became so narrow that Torin's boots would scrape against rocks along the edge. Even the horses, sure-footed as any, started to slip and stumble.

The companion who trailed farthest behind now coughed again then cleared his throat. "It's a wonder any survive the journey up Shadowstone Pass to defend Gatewatch. Who would have the strength to fight trolls after this ascent?"

The second companion laughed. "Grimsa, it seems we should have asked your mother to pack along some warm milk and sugar to soothe you. Though, lacking her, perhaps you could play the part Torin?"

"Honestly Bryn, I don't envy his mother," Torin said, "nor do I envy his horse. If that steed's spine isn't crooked from his weight its ears must soon be deaf from his whining."

"By Orr and all the gods Torin Ten-Trees, I'll knock your brains out if we ever make it over these damn mountains!"

"Though wit has long abandoned you, your brawn is never in short supply Grimsa. I'll give you that," said Bryn.

"Bryn, you twig-legged, spindly, sparrow-minded twat, remember that I'll have to bash my way through you to get to Torin on this narrow path."

“I give you the last of my firemead and this is what I get in return? I suppose to lend to a bear and expect honey in return is a fool’s mistake.”

Grimsa sighed and growled as he often did whenever he had exhausted his best insults. “Aye, fools you are. Both of you. Soaked from head to toe and still giggling like a pair of tavern maids. How I have offended the gods to deserve friends like you I can’t say.” Bryn and Torin laughed as they continued up the winding trail.

At midday the air was thinner and the glittering frost that glazed the dark rock faces started to melt. Though the fog was heavy they could faintly see the sun, now at its pinnacle in the sky above. Patches of snow beside the path shone when the dim light broke through while the rest of the light fell into the empty spaces between the black boulders. Off the side of the trail, Torin thought he saw shapes like snakes sliding through the stones. He shook his head and kept his eyes fixed on the path ahead.

Torin could hear Bryn’s teeth chatter behind him. He turned in his saddle and saw Bryn’s long slender nose sticking out from under his hood. Despite the cold his companion still smiled a devilish grin, his teeth eerily white. It seemed they all needed some distraction from the miserable trail.

Torin called back to his companions. “Which of us do you think will be the first to slay a troll?”

“I’ll be the first, no doubt,” Grimsa said, “Though that should hardly be a surprise. We Jarnskalds are born trollhunters. My father slew eight during his time in The Gatewatch and my older brother five.”

Torin chuckled and shouted through the mist. “You need more than strength to kill a troll. You need a keen eye and a quick wit.”

Bryn whistled and pretended to pull a bowstring. “A keen eye have I and a sharper arrow. While you two are being smashed to bits I’ll be up in a tree raining fire from above.”

Grimsa snorted and shook his head. “Arrows won’t pierce a troll’s hide. It is as thick as mail. Nothing but a long, sturdy, goose-necked axe will do. I doubt you can even lift one!”

“Ha! We’ll see about that,” Bryn said. “What I know is that accuracy is more important than force. My grandfather used to say that every troll had a weak spot. If you can find it, and you’re quick, you need only a knife.”

“Well my uncle, who, mind you, has killed no less than ten trolls single-handedly, has told me plenty of stories and none of them involved killing a troll with the prick of a pin.”

Torin looked back at Grimsa and grinned. “Ten trolls? When you talked about your uncle last night it was eight trolls, same as your father. He must have been busy to have slain two more in that time.”

Grimsa’s face flushed red and he threw up his hands. “Eight, ten, what does it matter? The point is that trolls are thick-skinned, stone-headed, bloodthirsty beasts.”

Bryn twisted around in his saddle and smirked at Grimsa. “Now that you say that it occurs to me that perhaps you are descended from a troll. That would explain a lot!”

Torin laughed. “None of us have even seen a troll! But enough banter, let’s put some weight on this. I propose that we three agree to a pact: whoever kills a troll first the other two shall keep him *two drinks in hand til he can no longer stand*. Agreed?”

Grimsa perked up for the first time that morning. The thought of mead, ale, or wine always cheered him up. “Agreed!”

“Of course!” Bryn said, “If you two are really feeling so generous towards me how can I refuse?”

Another gust of wind brought with it soaking sheets of mountain rain and the mood soured again. With this turn came memories of relatives and friends who had been killed fighting trolls and morbid thoughts of how they too could soon be troll fodder. For a long while they continued to climb in miserable silence.

“Stop,” Bryn said. He yanked on his reins and held up his hand. “Listen.”

Grimsa’s horse sputtered and clicked its hooves against the stone for a moment more before there was silence. All three companions felt a swell of tension in their shoulders and each strained his ears for any sound. Dancing across the icy rocks came a melody, quick and haunting, which chilled their already icy bones. A gang of voices, low and terse, filled the empty air.

*Ruby rare with blood-red gleam
Amethyst and emerald green
Ammolite with rainbow swirl
Obsidian the night-black pearl*

*Gold all fair with sun-bright hue
Silver just like drops of dew
Copper filled with fiery glow
And iron to dig deep below*

*Bleed the earth as dry as bone
Til we've broken every stone
Til the secret depths are known
And every treasure's safe at home*

Fifty paces ahead the singing band stopped abruptly. A low rumble followed by a sudden silence signalled that they had been spotted. Bryn and Grimsa looked to Torin and he nodded sternly.

Torin called out into the mist. "Hail dwarves, *nidavel* of the mountain! We bring greetings from the House of Einar Ten-Trees, Jarl of Norhaven and kin to King Araldof Greyraven."

For a moment Torin's words hung unanswered in the cloud of fog. Then a low grunting voice replied. "Hail *madur*, kinfolk of the mighty king! We are servants of Mastersmith Ognir. Approach!"

Grimsa growled. "Cave-dwellers. Just our luck."

Bryn motioned him to hush. "Quiet Grimsa! Let's not offend needlessly." He raised his hand over his brow and squinted at the figures far out in the mist. "How many times have I dreamed of meeting the *nidavel* of the mountain?"

Torin shook his head at both of them, then flicked his reins and moved forward. Byrn and Grimsa followed, the latter with a hand over the hilt of his axe.

Soon the troupe came into view: six dwarves, or *nidavel* as they called themselves. In pairs they bore long wooden chests which were each supported by two wooden poles that rested on the shoulders. Each of the *nidavel* smoked a long pipe through his bristled grey or black beard and wore a dark blue cloak coated in wax to shield against the rain. None spoke, but each one eyed the three companions intently.

“Greetings,” Torin said. “My name is Torin, son of Jarl Einar Ten-Trees. This is Grimsa son of Gungnir Jarnskald and this Byrn of Clan Foxfoot. We are on our way to Gatewatch.”

The *nidavel* that led the troupe chuckled, his voice thick with a rich baritone timbre. “We know your business young Ten-Trees. Why else would young *madur* wander these forsaken paths?” The rest of the troupe laughed among themselves which sent puffs of pipe-smoke swirling into the air.

“Very well. By what name should I call you?”

“Call me Drombir, young Ten-Trees.”

“And your business?”

“Does our business concern you, young Ten-Trees?”

Grimsa’s red beard bristled and his nostrils flared. “We are men of The Gatewatch! The business of all who travel through Shadowstone Pass is ours, cave-dweller!”

Torin feared that Grimsa had caused offence but once again the troupe snickered. Grimsa’s face flushed nearly as flame red as his beard when Drombir continued. “Not a member of The Gatewatch yet young bear-cub. But you may be soon and there is no harm where there is no secret. We are merchants travelling to the city of your cunning king, Araldof Greyraven.”

Bryn eyes widened and he took a step towards the *nidavel*. “Chests full of jewels?”

Now uproarious laughter rose from the troupe and one *nidavel* almost dropped his pipe. “No young *madur*, jewels and precious stones are the pursuits of idle men. What use would Araldof the Greyraven have for these? No, these are all fine weapons and artifacts forged by Mastersmith Ognir himself.”

“Very well,” Torin said, “We are weary of the road. How far to the top of the pass?”

“Not far at all young Ten-Trees, not if you walk.” Drombir furrowed his brow and shook his head. “But those horses might never make it.” The other *nidavel* said nothing but nodded with enthusiastic agreement.

Byrn frowned and narrowed his eyes. “What do you mean by that, Master Drombir?”

“It is well known to all those in Gatewatch that rockslides often make the way impassable for horses. Why, just this morning we traversed a fall which no horse could navigate. Even we, *nidavel* of the mountain, found it a nuisance to cross.” Again the *nidavel* nodded to each other with vigor.

Torin shifted uneasily in his saddle. “Speak your mind, Drombir.”

“It seems to me that your horses will soon be nothing but a hindrance. We, on the other hand, could make use of such strong beasts to haul our heavy chests down the mountain.”

Grimsa laughed. “Ha! A *nidavel* trick. I’d expect as much from these jewel-hoarding mushroom munchers.”

Byrn scratched his chin and tilted his head. “Perhaps. Or perhaps not.”

Torin sighed. Since they stopped moving his joints had stiffened and now a monstrous hunger clawed at his stomach. A fog like that around the horse's hooves began to fill his mind. Worse still, the sun was now clearly past its highest point and would soon descend towards the horizon. According to his father’s description they should be very close to the top of Shadowstone Pass. Besides, he knew full well what a hinderance the horses would be if there really was a fall.

“Very well Drombir, but I should expect you mean to trade.”

“Of course Master Ten-Trees,” Drombir said, “And fairly no less. The Gatewatch protects all who live east of the mountains, not just *madur*.”

Grimsa leaned towards Torin. “You don’t mean to strike a deal with these *nidavel*?”

Byrn shook his head and threw up his arms. “Grimsa, you blustering oaf! What use will our horses be if the trail is blocked? We’ll have to leave them behind and then they are completely useless to us.”

Torin eyed each of his companions for a moment, narrowed his eyes, and then leapt off his horse. Bryn and Grimsa also dismounted. He walked up to the *nidavel* whose long nose came up only to his elbows. “What sort of trade do you propose, Drombir?”

Drombir stroked his beard slowly then glanced up. He fingered an old leather coin purse as he inspected each horse. His eyes moved back and forth as he made his calculation. At last the *nidavel* shook his head and threw up his hands. “No, no, that would never do.” Then he paused and held up a single finger. “Wait, what about our wares?”

At this Drombir’s whole company erupted in a flurry of strange words, *nidavellish* as far as Torin could tell. Some nodded with such eagerness that their hoods fell back exposing long braids of coal-black hair. Others shook their heads with utter indignance, wet beards wagging with fury. Torin, Grimsa, and Bryn all took a large step back as the *nidavel* squabbled.

“Quiet! Quiet!” Drombir said, “I have made my decision.” Immediately the troupe stood silent. “We will give to you and your companions one item each from our chests so that they stay evenly weighted.”

“A slimy mold-ridden trinket for a horse? I’d have to be three days into the firemead to act such a fool,” Grimsa said. “Besides, the sun is not getting any lower in the sky. Torin, enough of this. Let’s go!”

Torin saw Bryn’s wide eyes fixed on the chests. “*Nidavel* crafted wares forged by a mastersmith? That is a kingly prize.” He turned towards Grimsa and punched the hulking man in the arm. “You could buy a stable full of horses for even one of these treasures you barrel-headed boar!” Grimsa, neither moved nor afflicted by the blow, simply growled.

Torin looked at Bryn and Grimsa then shrugged. “Well, it’s the old way then.”

“You know my vote,” said Grimsa.

Bryn nodded. “Mine as well.”

Torin eyed the chests then scanned the eyes of each *nidavel*. Drombir and those in favor looked him squarely in the eye with an unblinking gaze as hollow as a cavern. Those opposed pulled their hoods down over their noses and smoked their long wooden pipes with angry puffs. Torin’s looked back to the chests, intricately decorated with inlaid silver and ornately carved.

“Drombir, we accept your offer.”

Bryn grinned, sighed, and shook out his arms. Beside him Grimsa groaned and sneered then turned back towards the horses. With quick, angry movements the huge man untied his gear.

Drombir motioned to his companions and they promptly brought the three chests forward. “Very well young Ten-Trees, very well. Which of you shall choose first?”

Bryn stepped forward and inspected each chest thoroughly. “I had a book once on *nidavelish* inscription. I wore the pages thin until I had memorized each word. I believe the word on the lock here is ‘River’.”

Drombir chuckled and his thick eyebrows shot up in surprise. “Very good! Few are the *madur* that can read our language.”

“And this one,” Bryn said, “This inscription either says ‘Mountain’ or ‘Sky’.”

“In our language they are the same word young *madur*. The jewelled heights of our caverns are the sky and stars above us.”

Grimsa rolled his eyes.

“And this last chest, I do not recognize the inscription on the lock.”

“This is the inscription for ‘Peak’ or for ‘Spear’,” Drombir said, “It is told that long ago giants in a realm beneath the earth, below even the *nidavel*, threw spears at the sky for sport. Where their spear-heads stuck is where we see mountains today.”

“Peak or Spear.” Bryn mouthed the words silently and committed it to memory.

Grimsa heaved his belongings over his back with a grunt. “Are you done drooling over those moldy old chests? Choose one already and let’s be off.”

“Assuming no one else has a preference I’ll choose Mountain,” said Bryn, “Which is also Sky.” He tilted his head towards Drombir who smiled and nodded back.

Torin turned to his disgruntled companion. “Which one do you want Grimsa?” Grimsa spat over his shoulder. Torin shook his head and sighed. “Alright, then I’ll choose River.”

“And that leaves you with Peak or Spear, Grimsa,” Bryn said, “Enough waiting. Let’s open the chests!”

From deep within the folds of his cloak Drombir drew out a chain with three keys, each as ornately decorated as the chests and with matching inscriptions. One by one he opened the chests. Each one glowed with an eerie golden light in the wisps of fog.

Any hesitation that Torin felt before melted away when he approached the chest. Inside the carved wooden walls lay all manner of weapons and finery. A gold-hilted dagger, a curved sword, a thin axe-head, a silver arrow, a jewelled pendant on a chain, a glistening ring, an eagle-crested armband, a shining helm, a coat of thin chain-mail, and a long, jagged spearhead.

“You would trade one of these items for a horse? Each of these looks like a king’s treasure. Surely you are not telling the whole truth.”

Drombir laughed from deep in his belly. “These? Ha! They are as common to us as moldy boots. Mastersmith Ognir’s forge never cools. In a constant churn of burning coals, swirls of grit-black greasy smoke, he crafts such tools and weapons as no *madur* ever could. He knows the secrets of the fire, how to stoke the embers, how to make the metal sing, and how to weave with ancient tricks the properties known to only few. He knows ancient runes and spells by heart, he even sings them in his sleep! Choose wisely young *madur*, for you will find no such things made in your humble smithies.”

Torin’s eyes wandered from the sword to the helm to the spearhead. With each treasure his eyes wandered along the ornate lines of inlaid gold and silver which formed *nidavellish* inscriptions or other-worldly figures.

From his chest Bryn drew out a knife with a braided leather grip inlaid with swirls of silver. He tested it in his grip. “It is as light as a blade of grass.”

“That blade is called *Isnif*, or Ice-Blade in your tongue,” Drombir said. “A peculiar item this one. It must be bound by blood, a few drops on the base of the blade should do. Once bound it can never be turned on you in battle or harm you in any way. If the blade is thrust into you or slashed at your skin it will simply melt leaving nothing but a splash of water. However, to your foes it is as sharp and as deadly as the keenest blade.”

“And that’s why it is called Ice-Blade? Because it melts?”

Drombir seemed pleased at Bryn’s enthusiasm. “Precisely. Is this your choice then, Master Bryn?”

“Yes, Master Drombir, I will take *Isnif*.”

“A very good selection. May it strike faster than a serpent!”

Torin continued to gaze at all the items in the chest before him. He did not usually take an interest in trinkets of gold and silver but these were distinctly beautiful pieces. He had heard of the entrancing goldlust, or *gulthra*, in songs and tales but it did not come to his mind just then. With vivid detail he imagined cutting swaths through the troll-horde with the curved sword, or wearing the golden helm as he entered his father's hall, or launching the spearhead into a frenzied battle. Each object seemed to inspire another fantasy in his mind, each more spectacular than the one before.

“Tell me Drombir, what is the name of this spearhead?”

Drombir peered into the chest. “That spearhead is called *Skrar*, or Screamer. Like a hawk it soars over the sea of swords and screams a war cry that shakes the stoutest foes. Its jagged tooth strikes like the sharp talons of an eagle.”

Grimsa laughed. “Ha! Such fools. He must be making this all up.”

Bryn was too enamoured with his blade to take any notice of Grimsa's scoffing and Torin was entranced. “Then I will take *Skrar*.”

“It is yours. May it strike a troll-king dead.” Drombir bowed ceremoniously as Torin picked up *Skrar*. Torin tucked it in his cloak.

Grimsa pounded his head with his fists. “What fools! Have neither of you ever heard of *gulthra*, the gold lust? It has you both sick as star-struck lovers!” Both Torin and Bryn ignored his ranting and inspected their treasures. “Bah! Your eyes oggle and you are practically drooling. But I am not as feeble-minded as that. I will take this! For if I have fools for friends then what comfort can I have but drink?” He reached for Drombir's sash and ripped off a plain looking cup of dull metal.

Before the shattered metal links which had held Drombir's cup hit the rocky path five small but sturdy bows had been cocked and drawn. Each one, held in stone-still silence, was aimed directly at Grimsa's head.

Torin started out of his stupor then jumped in between Grimsa and the cocked arrows. He could see from Grimsa's broad stance that he would not surrender the cup. “Everyone stay calm! Master Drombir, please forgive our friend. He is a stubborn fool.”

Drombir crossed his arms. His eyes were wide and his lips tight. For brief moment Torin thought the *nidavel* might give the order to fire. However, Drombir looked once again at the horses and shook out his shoulders. “Very well you brazen bear, if you are such a fool to take a common cup over a kingly prize so be it.” The *nidavel* lowered their bows then muttered and grumbled among themselves as they rushed to grab the horses. Drombir hushed them and soon each of the horses was loaded with one of the chests.

“To you Torin Ten-Trees and Byrn Foxfoot, may many caverns rich with wonder open wide before you. To you, bear cub, may many rocks fall down upon your stubborn head!”

With that Drombir was off and the *nidavel* began their song again, the tempo increased as they were no longer laden with the chests.

*Drops of honeyed amber find
And diamonds of the rarest kind
To Ognir then the treasure bring
And watch him forge a magic ring*

*Coats of mail and axes broad
Steel plate and iron rod
Helms in forms of dragons cast
Spears and arrows sharp as glass*

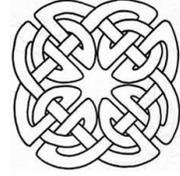
*Bleed the earth as dry as bone
Til we've broken every stone
Til the secret depths are known
And every treasure's safe at home*

As soon as the *nidavel* were out of sight Bryn heaved a sigh of relief. “Well Grimsa, thanks to you we were nearly slain before we even reached the top of Shadowstone Pass! What a story that would have made.” Grimsa stuffed the cup inside his cloak and grinned.

For some time each companion was content with silence for weariness of the others. Once again, though it seemed impossible, the path steepened. As they walked Torin watched for that fall of rock and rubble but found none. He fingered *Skrar*, concealed in the folds of his cloak. If he could ever bring himself to sell it, he might get twenty good horses for the price it would fetch. Over and over in his mind he imagined casting it into a horde of trolls, striking one dead and scattering the others. Grimsa's words about *gulthra*, the goldlust, came to his mind but he dismissed them. Surely such glory was worth trading a few old horses for. So on they climbed for what seemed to be a very long time as the shouldered packs weighed heavy upon their aching backs.



Chapter 2: Arrival



Out of the mist two pale peaks emerged, sharp and jagged like gigantic teeth. Between them lay a field of ash-black rubble full of awful stone faces, troll faces, which emerged then disappeared under each wave of sweeping fog. Grimaces and sneers framed by broken sets of uneven teeth littered the yawning gap between the mountains. And bones, a terrible number of bones. Many of these were scattered among the dark rubble and few were not either splintered or snapped clean in half. It was hardly safe to step, Torin thought, except on the narrow path that snaked around the larger mounds of rock and bone. Soon the shivering companions could see nothing of what lay ahead or behind, just the mountain peaks above the haunting debris.

In the eerie light of dusk Torin stopped and, with a reverent shudder, recited a verse. On hearing the first line both Bryn and Grimsa joined the song with the steady pulsing rhythm of much-practiced recitation.

Over rivers raging

Through rugged forest trod

Mighty host most valiant

All, for war, made ready

To Gatewatch through the pass

There in between pale peaks

Arrived to drive at last

All threat of trolls from home

*Sunset done, dusk settled
Dark shapes stirred, rocks shifted
In gloom loomed figures great
Long grey silence breaking*

*Horrid Troll-King howling
All his dread host calling
Trolls like thunder rolling
Grim-faced rushed to maul them*

*Beoric he stood bravely
Gathering scattered brothers
Shield sisters yielding
Soon all round him rallied*

*Slashing, Bashing, Breaking
Battered white bone shattered
Screaming, red blood streaming
All night sharp steel edge sang*

*Dawn drew near to breaking
Troll-King desperate fighting
Saw first light bright shining
All trolls turned to hard stone*

*Eyes by red rays blinded
Troll-King reeling stumbled
Quick leapt Beoric boldly
Bearing wrathful death strokes*

*This he then swore sternly
No troll shall thereafter
Between pale peaks be seen
If kin of his prove brave*

*Long sang they mourning songs
Vict'ry, sweet yet bitter
Still longer did that throng
Linger as their dead burned*

They held last note as long as they could. Even after the last bit of breath had gone out from their lungs the note hung in the air as it echoed off the rocks then faded to nothing. The tale of the origins of The Gatewatch lifted their dampened spirits and the sight of Shadowstone Pass left their eyes open wide in awe.

“How many men and women have walked through Shadowstone Pass never to return?” said Bryn.

Torin swallowed, his throat dry. “Too many. It is a great and terrible thing to behold.”

Grimsa itched his arms at a nervous pace. “The presence of the dead is strong here.”

“To think, no troll has passed through here in over one hundred years.”

“And by my life that won’t change on my watch,” Torin said.

“And mine.”

“And on mine.”

Byrn reached into his cloak. “I saved a little something for when we reached the top of Shadowstone.” He produced a small flask of firemead and uncorked the top. “Gods willing we’ll

all pass by here again someday. But if not, here's to you Torin Ten-Trees, my finest friend. And to you Grimsa, the most loyal and stubborn man I've ever known."

Grimsa was pleased, in part because of the flattering toast but more because of the firemead. "Aha! And to you Bryn. You're the slyest Foxfoot I've ever met."

Torin nodded. "I think of you two as brothers. Let's keep watch for each other and never let any one of us fall in battle against the trolls if by life we can help it."

"If by life we can help it," Bryn and Grimsa said together.

Just as Bryn raised the flask to take a draught Grimsa stopped him. "Wait Bryn, let's have this toast in a more appropriate vessel." From his pack, he pulled out Drombir's goblet. It was plain except for a few crude etchings but was large enough to feel weighty as any toast to health and brotherhood should be. Bryn nodded and poured the firemead into the flask.

With the goblet raised Bryn hailed them. "Brothers!" With that he took a sip and passed it on to Grimsa.

"Brothers!" Grimsa said. He took a somewhat larger gulp. Torin did the same.

As the goblet was still not empty they passed it around and toasted again. Still it held more firemead. They toasted a third time.

Torin wiped his lips and felt a bit of lightness in his head. "I am impressed that you hauled all this firemead up the mountain."

Bryn took another gulp, much larger than the last one. "It did not seem this heavy. As I think of it now, the flask did not seem so big."

Grimsa, cup in hand, stopped before taking another sip. He looked inside with squinted eyes then opened them wide. "By the gods, it doesn't look like we've had even a sip!"

Torin and Bryn both leaned over to see. It was as Grimsa had said. A devilish grin lit up Grimsa's face before he gulped down as much firemead as his belly could hold. His companions watched him, their jaws open wide, take gulp after gulp. When he finally stopped to catch his breath all three of them looked in the cup. It had barely gone down at all.

Grimsa's laugh rumbled over the field. "Ha! Treasure of treasures! Who would have known? It is just like the legends! An ocean of firemead held here in my hands."

Bryn shook his head in disbelief. “A bottomless vessel? Then there really is magic in the *nidavel* crafts. The gods keep Mastersmith Ognir and dutiful Drombir!”

Torin chuckled and took another sip. “No wonder Drombir was so foul-faced at losing this crude cup. My father used to say that that the *nidavel* hid their rarest magic in their plainest wares. It seems you were the sharp stick and we were the blunt ends Grimsa!” By that time Bryn had taken another healthy swig and Grimsa once again guzzled the firemead as fast as he could.

Grimsa’s words slurred together and a little tear welled up in his eye. “This has been both the most miserable and the most joyous day of my life! Now I wish I had snatched Drombir’s food satchel as well. Ha!”

All three companions stood there some time laughing and passing the goblet. The carved stone faces they found so haunting before now became almost comical, caricatures of people they had known.

“That fat, howling face! It’s just like my cousin Leif!” Grimsa said, “He was always whining at the slightest bump or bruise. And there! That scolding grimace of my grandmother. Mighty Fyr keep her. If she were here she would beat me black and blue with her old tree-root cane.”

Torin pointed a ways up the field. “That one with the ears! Yes, those big flapping ears. Do you see it?”

Bryn shrieked when he saw it. “Erik the nightwatchman! It is a perfect portrait! How many times did we try to sneak out at night only to be heard by those bat-like ears?”

“A hundred times my friend, a hundred times.”

Torin and Bryn toppled over in laughter while Grimsa swayed precariously. The great man took the final sip in several large gulps before he himself crashed down beside them. It was some time before their laughter faded and they fell silent.

Now the sky had cleared and the sun had almost set. On the horizon, stars appeared and below them were all the forested hills they had so arduously crossed. The river Noros snaked all the way back to the glistening ocean which could just be seen on the edge of the orange horizon. A warm breeze from down in the valley wafted over the companions and for a moment the trials of their ascent were forgotten. One by one, Torin identified the constellations, just as his father

had taught him. The heady firemead, the soft breeze, and the comforting splay of colours on the horizon as the sun set filled his senses to the brim.

“Just a moment’s rest,” Torin said, “I’ll just close my eyes for a minute then we’ll be off.” And with that they all fell fast asleep with no roof but the stars overhead.

Torin woke to the sound of a scream.

He sat up with a gasp and felt his heart beat hard in his throat. The piercing sound still rang in his ears. He leapt to his feet but fell over, still too intoxicated to stand. A terrible dry rasp clung to his throat and his vision swirled. He stood again and then tumbled over, this time onto a shard of bone which scraped his hand. He rolled over, away from the jagged bone, only to bash his ribs on a sharp rock beside him.

He muffled a groan then quit his scrambling and lay perfectly still. With long, careful breaths Torin slowed the white swirls of vapour that rose up from his parched lips and listened. He heard nothing.

After a few quiet moments he rose, careful to steady himself on one knee. He still felt dizzy from the mead but by then the world had stopped spinning and he could make out the field of bones and rubble before him. Bryn and Grimsa were still asleep nearby.

The shrill noise, that awful shriek, had sounded very close. By the ringing in his ears Torin thought some awful creature might have actually screamed right into them but he could not hear or see anything close by. He thought of *Skrar*, the spearhead, which lay tucked inside his cloak. It was unnaturally warm against his chest.

“Grimsa. Bryn. Wake up.” Neither stirred. Torin scrambled over the rocks. He shook Bryn who woke with a start.

“What?”

“Quiet! Did you hear a scream?”

“A scream? When? Where?”

“Just a moment ago.”

Bryn rubbed his eyes. “By the gods, asleep in Shadowstone Pass. No, I didn’t hear anything. But what a foul place to be sleeping, this field of bones. Dread spirits haunt this place no doubt.”

Torin’s stomach turned. He wondered if he had dreamed the scream, if it had come from *Skrar*, or if it had come from something worse. Grimsa gave a violent twitch and shouted some incoherent phrase in sleepy, slurred syllables.

“Wake up, wake up!”

Torin grabbed one of the great man’s legs as it flailed. Grimsa sat up with a jolt, eyes wide and face flushed red.

“Torin! Thank the gods it is you. I was in a terrible dream.”

“Spirits,” Bryn said, “There must be spirits about. What fools we are. We’re lucky not to have been strangled in our sleep or dragged into some moldy barrow. Let’s get out of here.” Just as Torin had done a moment ago, Bryn rose to his feet then toppled over onto the rocks.

Grimsa bellowed with laughter but Torin elbowed him quiet. “I heard a scream a moment ago, muffled, but not too far off. It may have been a creature, or worse.”

Bryn pointed at the fold in Torin’s cloak where *Skrar* lay. “Or perhaps it was *Skrar*? Didn’t Drombir say it meant ‘Screamer’? If there was magic in that plain cup how much more must be in a finely crafted weapon?”

Grimsa’s face went pale and his eyes widened. Silence fell over the company and they waited. Though they strained their ears they caught no sound except the lonely whistle of wind between the peaks.

“Let’s get moving,” Torin said, “Before anything in this foul place finds us.” Both Grimsa and Bryn each gave a single nod. They slung their heavy packs over their shoulders and wasted no time as they hastened down the shadowed path.

The moon was out and all the constellations they had counted earlier shone clear and bright. Now every bone in the field around them glowed an eerie bluish white in the moonlight. Gnarled stone faces, which at sunset had been menacing, now appeared entirely malicious. The sharp midnight shadows cast over the path by the moonlight seemed to cut empty voids in the

trail, cracks of utter darkness. The three companions hurried along the snaking path through the field of bones and monstrous stone trolls.

As they rushed along a bitterly cold wind came up and with it another hazy fog. Torin tried to keep his eyes on the path ahead but noticed that the rippling mist along the ground was unusually thick. It did not flow or disperse with the rising gusts and it crept up his leg to the knees. As he looked down at the strange fog, the sound of his companion's footsteps ceased. Then Torin turned around saw them. All of them.

One hundred pairs of eyes glared at him, eerie red embers sunk in hulking, wispy forms. Their translucent bodies swayed slowly from side to side, stiff and rhythmic like dead men hanging. In subtle swirls, contours of massive arms and legs faded in and out of the misty forms revealing grossly misshapen limbs. Across the forsaken valley more figures rose from the mist, more ember eyes lit in the grey gloom. The grisly host was great in number but none made any move towards them.

Torin ducked down behind a rock nearby. Still the red eyes stared. He rushed back a few paces to where his dumbstruck companions stood. Torin grabbed one with each hand and them a vigorous shake. "Run! Run!"

With all the strength they could muster they sprinted down the path though each stumbled and tottered violently from left to right. Near the edge of the field of bones and stone, Torin saw the path descend steeply. The host of red ember eyes bored into his back, pushing him forward, so he leapt down into the darkness with Bryn and Grimsa close behind.

The host of red eyes flickered as each empty smoldering stare trailed off into the darkness where the three intruders had disappeared. It was a scream that had roused them, sharp and cold and laced with magic. Now all was still again. One by one each smoky form dissolved into the howling wind. Each pair of dying embers, black with ash, dropped down between the jagged, broken bones.

The fall was shorter than Torin had expected and so he fouled his landing and tripped. Bryn, sure-footed as always, nearly landed straight on top of him and would have steadied himself if Grimsa hadn't come barreling down the path behind them at full speed. In a contorted mass of legs and arms and packs they tumbled off the path and down a steep hill. The loose scree

crumbled and carried them down at an alarming speed. It was, they would later recount, quite fortunate not only because it cushioned their fall but because they were also spared a grueling set of switchbacks down the other side of Shadowstone Pass. So down the hill they tumbled into the dim green valley below.

Partway down the scree slope, though still sliding, Torin turned himself around so his pack cushioned his back from the rushing gravel underneath him. The slope leveled out at the bottom of the hill which was far below the place they had started. In a manner that could almost be called graceful, Torin slid to a stop, covered in dust and knee-deep in loose rock.

Bryn had already reached the bottom by that time. He lay there for a moment as he wheezed and coughed then pulled himself up to his feet. A short distance away they saw a pair of legs wriggled furiously out of the side of the hill. Torin and Bryn ran to grab one leg each and pulled Grimsa out from the side of the hill. The dusty figure shook his head and gasped, then coughed up a lungful of loose dirt. As he rubbed the rest from his eyes, he looked up to the sight of his two companions. For a moment no one said a word. Then, all at once, they burst out into such laughter that each was almost in tears. Torin and Bryn fell down beside Grimsa and each fought to catch a breath.

Bryn wiped a tear from his eye. “Surely wise old Odd and all the gods are smiling or else we should all be dead. And not even for the first time today!”

Grimsa licked his parched lips. “Can I ask one more favor of the gods tonight? A drink to wet my parched throat? Unless they are saving us for some other grisly fate.”

Torin narrowed his eyes and cupped his hand to his ear. “It seems you can. Listen.”

Through the nearby trees they heard the unmistakable twinkle of trickling water. They waded through the thick, dark brush, then fell flat on their stomachs beside the creek and slurped up the cold, fresh water as fast as they could.

In time the ache of Torin’s parched throat stopped and the hammer pounding inside his head ceased to strike his temples. Though his arms and legs were bruised and stiff he forced himself to his feet.

Bryn sat back on his heels and looked over at Torin. “You don’t think that *SkRAR* woke those awful things, do you?”

Torin shivered. “I think it might have.”

“I told you,” said Grimsa, “Dealing with the *nidavel* is nothing but trouble.”

Torin nodded. “I’m afraid I have to agree.” He drew *Skrar* out of his cloak and fingered the swirling patterns etched into the blade. “I think we should hide the *nidavellish* treasures here and retrieve them once we find a way to sell them. Otherwise I think they may turn out to be more trouble than they are worth.”

Bryn’s face soured as he fingered *Isnif* on his belt. “I am hard pressed to part with this fine blade.”

Grimsa searched his bag but could not find Drombir’s cup. “By the gods, I think I dropped it!”

“In Shadowstone Pass?”

Grimsa nodded, his eyebrows furled and the corners of his mouth turned downward.

None of them had any mind to climb back up to Shadowstone Pass to retrieve that precious cup, at least not at night. Torin found a hollow crook in an old oak tree and marked it with his axe before placing *Skrar* inside.

“Drombir said that *Isnif* must be bound with blood,” Bryn said, “At least let me bind the weapon before we hide it away.” He took out his axe and drew his finger along the blade with a quick motion. A few drops of crimson blood dripped down, first on to the ground and then onto the base of the blade as Drombir had instructed.

As soon as the first drop hit the blade the metal evaporated with a hiss. Bryn let out a yelp and tossed away the hilt which, from his reaction, was as red-hot as an iron rod in the fire. He cursed and stamped his foot on the hilt as he shook out his hand.

Grimsa slapped his knees and wheezed. “The trickster has been tricked! Swindled by a crafty old *nidavel*.”

Bryn sighed and shook his head. “If I ever run into that Drombir again he’ll be sorry.” He kicked a bit of loose scree over the red-hot, bladeless hilt and spat on it.

Torin pointed downstream. “This stream should lead us down the valley and, if not to the road, then to Gatewatch itself.” Each companion, though sore, was no longer thirsty and had no mind to sleep any more that night. The creek was small and the water near frozen, but they

trekked on despite the low hanging branches, the slippery wet stones, and the haunting image of that red-eyed legion of phantoms.

The sun broke over the crest of the mountain range just as the three companions stumbled out of the forest. They looked like vagabonds, each with muddied boots, a tattered cloak, and a mess of leaves, moss, and broken twigs in his hair and beard. Grimsa didn't seem to care much but Bryn could not help but pluck out every leaf and bit of twig. Torin brushed out his hair and beard as best he could then straightened the tree-ring crest pinned at the corner of his cloak. As the warmth of the sun hit their backs, they continued to follow the winding mountain creek out into the meadow with high hopes of reaching Gatewatch soon.

In the open meadow, tufts of long grasses danced around trickling creeks with every rush of wind. All around them wildflowers bloomed in brilliant reds, soft purples, deep-sea blues, and egg-yolk yellows which contrasted sharply with the streaks of copper and grey in the mountains behind them. Their destination lay close ahead.

Eventually the valley narrowed and they rediscovered the well worn path. Around the next bend in the trail they spotted the town of Gatewatch, minute in the distance, but visible now with green banners that fluttered from crooked, crumbling towers. The town stretched wide across the valley's narrowest point so that neither man nor beast could pass. To Torin's knowledge, and to any other than perhaps the mysterious *nidavel*, this was the only way over the mountains.

Grimsa clapped. "At last, a meal in sight!"

Bryn shook his head. "Is there a brain in your skull or a second stomach?" Grimsa, too hungry and tired to care, simply continued to trudge along.

"Those towers look decrepit." Torin said. His grin sagged. "The walls are barely more than rubble from what I can see."

"What did you expect Torin Ten-Trees?" said Grimsa, "The Great Tower of Noros? The fortress of Stagwood Vale? Or perhaps a homely wood-fired hall surrounded by lush green fields like that of your kindly father?"

Torin shook his head and raised his hand over his eyes to block the morning sun. “I heard it was ancient, but I thought it would at least be formidable. This place looks unprepared for even a raid by roadside bandits. And we are supposed to fight trolls from behind those rubble heaps?”

Bryn stopped, squinted, and frowned. “I’m afraid I have to agree with Torin’s on this.”

Grimsa laughed. “Ha! How little do you know of The Gatewatch? Weren’t we told the same stories around the fire in your father’s hall? Did we not grow up dreaming of the same heros and singing the same songs? This is no place for men and women who hide behind walls. Stones have not kept this pass clear, steel and blood have.”

Bryn winced and tilted his head. “Let’s hope more steel and less blood, at least on our account.”

Grimsa chuckled as the three companions continued towards the small town in the distance. The thought of a bowl of steaming stew and a cup of brown ale spurred them forward.

Around noon they came to a rough stone wall about ten feet tall. At its center stood a gate of hefty timbers bound with straps of iron. A gatehouse tower rose up another fifteen feet beside the gate itself and a frayed green banner embroidered with a silver-grey raven hung down loosely from the top.

Torin looked up. “Hail, watchman! Open the gate!”

A hulking man with a wild beard of blazing red appeared atop the tower. He rested two enormous hairy arms on the wooden rail and stared down at the ragged company. A coat of rusted mail lay beneath his heavy grey cloak and he had a huge bow slung across his shoulder. The watchman’s two dark eyes were hardly visible between his beard and his eyebrows which twitched and bristled a moment before he replied.

“Are you recruits or bandits? You look like men of the bush.”

“I am Torin Ten-Trees, son of Jarl Einar Ten-Trees.”

“Ten-Trees. Hmm,” the giant man said, “And I’d bet my beard that’s a Jarnskald.”

“Yes,” said Grimsa, “Grimsa, son of Gungnir Jarnskald!”

“Who’s the third?”

“Hail watchman, I am Bryn!” He stopped to draw a breath and shout over a sudden gust of wind. “Bryn of Clan Foxfoot.”

“Foxfoot?” said the watchman. Torin thought he caught him utter something obscene below his breath but it did not appear to reach Bryn’s ear. The watchman stared and squinted a moment more before he disappeared from view. Then, from inside the tower, great grinds and creaks were heard as the oak beams rose.

When the rugged door had opened, they saw the watchman himself turning the giant gate winch. Taller than Grimsa by half a head and a good deal wider, his burly form nearly filled the entire frame of the gate. The thick, wiry strands of his beard bristled straight out in streaks of red and orange and his eyebrows were thick as briar bushes. As the gatekeeper turned from the winch to face them, Torin thought that it was as if a tree, and not a man, were standing before them.

The watchman cleared his throat and crossed his arms. “I am Gavring, master of the East Gate. Now let’s have a look at you.”

He swung his arms out and grabbed Torin and Bryn by the hair, one hand for each, and pulled them so close that his beard brushed their noses. Before either of them knew what was happening, Gavring let go of them and inspected Grimsa the same way. Then the giant man released Grimsa and took a step back.

Gavring cleared his throat and frowned. “My sight may not be all that it used to be but I can’t see any yellow in your eyes so you’re free to enter.”

Torin was still dazed and more than disgruntled. “Yellow in the eyes? By thunderous Orr and all the gods, what are you talking about?”

“Yes, yes, yellow in the eyes. Rat fever. Some get it on their way over Shadowstone Pass. Rodents stowaway in the packs, you know? Not deadly, no, but miserable business. And contagious. Anyhow, come on in so I can shut up the gate.”

The three companions needed no encouragement. Gavring lowered the gate behind them and each took in the view. A cozy cluster of stone houses with tall wood-framed roofs crowded the crooked street that ran away from the gate entrance through the town. At the end of the road was a rough sort of barracks or keep, short, sturdy, and made entirely of stone. Along the wall to either side ran a winding path that led up to the cliffs that walled either side of the valley.

“I assume you’ll be needing a bed and a hot meal,” Gavring said, “And by the way you smell, a bath as well! You’ll find all three at Fjellhall, just down the road here and to the left. Signy is the Keymaster, and the best there is if you ask me. If you come upon Stonering Keep you’ve gone too far.”

Grimsa’s eyes widened. “Fjellhall? Just like the tales!”

“Is that Stonering Keep there at the end of the road?” Bryn asked, pointing at the pile of stones down the street.

Gavring’s eyebrows twitched and then scrunched together in a frown. “Yes young Foxfoot, that is it. Were you expecting the Great Tower of Noros?”

Grimsa laughed out loud. “That’s exactly what I said!” He grinned like a devil and Bryn’s face flushed red.

Torin stepped in between his companions. “Thank you for your warm welcome Gatemaster Gavring. Please forgive my companions. I think we all need something to eat.” The thought of a warm meal was distraction enough to diffuse the quarrel.

“Gatemaster,” said Grimsa, “Is Keymaster Signy a maker of brews?”

Gavring sighed. “You lot are brim-full of questions! Yes young Jarnskald, she is. In fact, not only is she a maker of brews, but she is a master brewer! She collects honey, herbs, and flowers from this side of the mountains. Didn’t you see the wildflowers on your way through the valley? What wondrous blooms. And the bees? Far larger than any on the other side of the mountains I reckon.”

Torin did recall seeing a buzzing bee floating over the sea of wildflowers earlier that morning, a rather large one he thought. In his mind he again saw the fields, felt the breeze, and smelled the nectar on the wind.

Gavring continued, “The nectar is sweeter here and the flavors sharper. No doubt your first sip of Signy’s honey mead will melt away all memory of the weary road over Shadowstone Pass. And after that you must sample the collection from her cellar: floral ciders and spiced wines, earthy stouts and well-oaked ales, fruit brandy and pine-scented spirits.”

Gavring’s eyes lit with a touch of fire. “And that is not nearly the whole of it! I have not yet mentioned the food!” He paused for effect, then lowered his voice to a whisper. “Do you

know where Signy gets her meats? Those on patrol return with all kinds of game, wild stags and boars and pheasants and hares, then bring them straight to her. On this side of the mountain wild game grows to such a size as you would not believe until you've seen it with your own eyes. On Fjellhall's hearthfire there is always a mighty roast rubbed with herbs and salt. In her cellars all manner of dried meats cure the whole year round. Her tavern hands collect nuts and fruit and honey from the valley for her youngest daughter Signa who bakes the bread and cakes each morning. They also work the rows of carrots and onions and potatoes that are kept by her son Siggam here outside the East Gate. Most legendary of all is Signy's mighty cauldron *Thaegindi*, a gift from King Araldof Greyraven. Some say it was forged by *nidavelish* Mastersmith Ognir himself. In it there is a stew boiling day and night."

Before Gavring had finished speaking, Grimsa had already started down the winding street. The gate master laughed, his voice a deep rolling rumble like the distant thunder. "If ever I met a Jarnskald, that is one. Fate willing, perhaps I will come down to Fjellhall to share a pint of ale with you tonight master Ten-trees and young Foxfoot."

Torin's spirit swelled as he and Bryn rushed to follow Grimsa who was nearly sprinting. The misery of their ascent, the horrors seen in the night, and the hunger clawing at their ribs would soon all be far behind them. The weight of Torin's cloak and pack seemed to blow away like smoke as he felt the cool mountain air rush by his face and ears.

Grimsa breathed heavily with his hands on his knees as Torin and Bryn caught up with him. One hundred paces more would have brought them to the iron gate of Stonering Keep. Its rounded wall of uncut stone rose up high behind them.

But not one of them had much more than a thought for the keep. Before Torin stood a wide stone hall with a high-vaulted roof, a hundred carvings of trolls and stags and warriors hewn into the aged rooftop timbers. Out from the rugged stone-framed door wafted odours, both savory and sweet, such as Torin had never smelled before. Not to say that the scents weren't familiar, indeed for a second Torin thought of his father's hall, but somehow the aroma was keener, sharper, and altogether more full in richness than anything he had experienced before.

Grimsa wheezed. "Fjellhall! By the gods, we've made it." Torin thought he could see the glint of a tear welling up in the big man's eyes.

“Torin, I think our dear Grimsa is in love. You’d think he trekked up here to eat instead of fight trolls.”

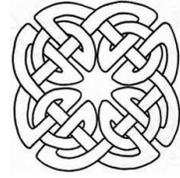
“Ha,” said Grimsa, “I will be killing plenty of trolls once I have had my fill!”

Torin stepped forward and breathed deep through his nose, his eyes closed and his sore shoulders loose. The savoury smell of roasting meat, the heady aroma of ale, and the sweet scent of honey washed over his body like warm sunshine.

With a lurch, he grabbed Bryn and Grimsa around the neck and pulled them together. “Come on then, the first round is on me!” Then they walked, shoulder to shoulder, through the wide open door of that ancient hall.



Chapter 3: A Feast in Fjellhall



Torin, Byrn and Grimsa gazed up at the vaulted ceiling of framed timbers which sat perched high above them on thick walls of stone. Torin thought a dozen spears stacked end on end might not reach the top. Rough-hewn timber tables stretched all the way along either side of the hall and a raised stone hearth ran down the middle. In the hearth here were embers which glowed and crackled orange and red. Along the fire stood an enormous steaming cauldron and four giant spits with meat roasting on them.

A scant gathering of rugged men and women, a dozen or so, sat at the benches idly eating cakes or bread with honey and drinking ale. Torin wondered how many the hall could hold, well over one hundred in his estimation.

“Look,” Bryn said, “*Thaegindi*, the enchanted stew-pot.”

A tavern hand stood high up on a chair so he could stir the giant cauldron. Two others carried in copper trays from the scullery full of chopped carrots and onions and tossed them into the stew. Each of the iron roasting spits required two people to turn. Between them a young man scurried about with a bucket of gold-brown sauce that he painted onto each roast with a large brush. At the far end of the hall, a dozen loaves sat steaming with golden brown crusts. Others hall hands were wiping tables, sweeping floors, and stoking the long bed of embers.

Grimsa licked his lips and took a step forward, but as soon as he did a voice shouted at them. “Stop there!”

All three turned towards the shrill sound. To their right stood an old woman with twin braids of silver-white hair that hung down over her shoulders. Her dress was dark blue and embroidered with yellow thread in swirling knotwork patterns. From her waist hung a fine silver chain with a collection of keys both large and small, some simple and some ornate. Though she was short and round in stature, she had a fierce look in her stone-grey eyes and held her spine as straight and stiff as an arrow.

“Now you can’t be trudging through my hall in that condition,” she said, “But we’ll remedy that soon enough. I am Signy, daughter of Silja, keeper of the key of Fjellhall and Master of Brews.”

“At your service,” said the three companions. Each took a step back towards the threshold, suddenly aware of their tattered cloaks and muddy boots, and gave a slight bow.

Signy’s tense shoulders relaxed when she saw her guests were well-mannered after all. Her tight-lipped stare melted into a radiant smile. “Well, don’t I have a group of fine young men here, surely not the rabble I usually must put up with. Let me have a look at you.” As she stepped up to Grimsa she wrinkled her nose then chuckled. “Ha, I did not even need to look! I can tell by the smell, this is a Jarnskald. But which one?”

Grimsa smiled wide and puffed out his chest. “I am Grimsa, son of Gungnir Jarnskald and brother to Gunnar.”

“Well Grimsa, you are welcome in my hall. I know more than anyone, save perhaps your mother, that a Jarnskald is hard to keep fed. However, you are all practically bred for troll-slaying. And you,” she said as she turned towards Bryn, “You are a Foxfoot if I ever saw one. You have your father’s mischievous eyes.”

“Greetings Keymaster Signy,” Bryn said, bowing low. “He spoke often of your warm halls, your radiant smile, and, of course, your excellent brews.”

“And a charmer as well? What a spitting image of your father. A troublesome fellow but damn good with a bow. I roasted many a catch of his on my hearth. He would be proud to see you here.”

“And you young Ten-Trees,” said Signy. A soft glow of sadness encircled her steel-grey eyes. “My, I am getting old.” For a moment Torin had in mind to say something but before he could gather a thought she cut in, shaking her head and waving her arms. “But enough of an old woman’s rambling. Let’s get you clean and then we’ll get you fed. Gunnhild! Aslief!” A young woman and a young man who were wiping tables dropped their rags and ran up to the group. “A splash of mead for each of these fine young men. And a honey cake each to tide them over until dinner.” She looked again at Grimsa. “Make that two for him. Then find a place for their belongings and see them off to the baths.” She spun back towards the ragged company. “I will

see you all again at dinner, much refreshed I think.” And with that she was off to inspect the sizzling roasts.

Before they knew it each one was sitting on a wooden bench with a glass of floral mead in one hand and honey cake in the other. Gunnhild directed a few of the young men from the kitchens to haul the packs up to the lofts then returned to her duties.

Aslief was a nervous young man, long-limbed and fair featured. A thick cloak of black wool he pulled tight around his neck with one hand, in the other arm he held a stack of fresh tunics for the ragged trio. He barely let them finish their meal before rushing them out of Fjellhall towards the baths. Aslief knew the city well and the tired companions, Grimsa in particular, were hard-pressed to keep up with his quick, light steps.

The cloistered stone streets of Gatewatch had been worn smooth from one hundred years of heavy feet. Down a hidden alley and left around a sharp corner they came to the base of Frostridge, the mountain that ran along the entire southern edge of the city. A small set of steps carved into the stone led down a tunnel into the mountain. From it rose a steady stream of billowing steam, silver against the orange lichens and green moss which covered rocks around the entrance like a mantle.

Aslief stopped abruptly. “Master Ten-Trees, Master Foxfoot, and Master Jarnskald, leave your clothes here at the bath entrance and we’ll see to it that they are cleaned and dried for tomorrow. Here are some dry tunics and woolen pants for tonight. Enjoy the baths in the meantime. Keymaster Signy expects you for the evening meal.” He turned to leave.

“You’re a free man aren’t you Aslief?” Grimsa said, “Why not join us? It seems you too could use a moment of rest.”

Aslief twirled back towards the company, smiled, and lifted a waving finger, “None of us are free now Master Jarnskald. We are all in the service of King Araldof Greyraven. While we at Fjellhall may not slay trolls, we do feed troll slayers and that is busy work.” He let his shoulders down for a brief moment and chuckled. “But your offer is kind, Master Jarnskald and I am sad to refuse it. Another time perhaps. Farewell.” And just as quickly as he had rushed them to the baths Aslief hurried away.

“Just as well,” Grimsa said, “Besides, as my uncle always said: *Busy men poor company make.*”

Bryn smirked as he pulled off his sweat-stained tunic. “But do they not also say *Idle men court fortune ill?*”

“A bath, a meal, and a good night’s rest,” said Torin, “is fortune enough for me.”

Grimsa laughed. “Well said! Now let’s get down to these baths so we won’t miss dinner.”

Each muscle along Torin’s spine seemed to groan with pain as he peeled the damp shirt off his back. Sparks of pain shot up through his ankles as he stood on the hard stone and his legs felt weak. As he kicked off his pants he noticed a rip in the knee that would have to be mended. For a moment he let the cool breeze flow like salve over his bruised body, then turned to follow Bryn and Grimsa down the steps towards the hot baths. He noticed their stink, previously muted by clothing, now rose in rankness severely.

The stone stairway that tunneled deep down into the mountain was lit by flickering torches which cast shadows that danced on the walls. The constant flow of steam warmed the steps but also made them slippery, especially where patches of yellow moss or orange lichens grew. At times the passage was uncomfortably narrow; at times three or four men could stand shoulder to shoulder. Still down and down they went, perhaps a hundred stairs.

Then, like a giant yawning wide, the tunnel opened up into an underground cavern which arched up higher than even the timbers of Fjellhall. A misty darkness filled the upper reaches of the cavern like dark storm clouds hanging overhead. Along all the crevasses in the walls mosses and lichens and mushrooms grew, some which glowed just enough to light the room dimly.

In the center of the cavern was a large pool of steaming crystal-blue water which bubbled up from the center and swirled around the edges. Encircling the pool was a layer of hardened silt, silk smooth and white as marble. Similar deposits smoothed the pool floor. Clusters of luminescent mushrooms grew thick around the edge and lit the bubbling water with an eerie blue light. As Torin’s eyes adjusted he could see dark shadows, two or three dozen, all men and women either wading deeper in or sitting near the shallow edge. The water gurgling up from the natural spring and the waterfalls deeper within the cavern created a soft wash of sound that made the whole place seem very peaceful.

Bryn sighed as he stretched out his stiff limbs. “By the gods, I’ve never felt anything so glorious. Torin, Grimsa, you can take care of the trolls. I am never leaving this sacred place.”

Torin closed his eyes and breathed in deep through his nose, the hum of the deep cavern waterfalls in his ears as they dipped below the water. “I’d be inclined to keep you company but I couldn’t stand the thought of Grimsa having all that mead in Fjellhall to himself.”

Grimsa sputtered with his head half-submerged in the bath. “Ha! I would gladly take all the mead and meat and breads and cakes and pies. Not to mention all the glory of slaying the trolls myself while you two turn into old prunes here in the baths.”

Torin sat up and found a groove in the hardened silt to sit in. “I would not deny that you could, in fact, eat all the mead and all the food with room to spare. However, I would be worried about your safety without Bryn and me there to defend you.”

Grimsa nearly choked on a gulp of water as he gasped, his eyes wide in disbelief. “Against the trolls? Don’t forget that I am a Jarnskald, a born troll slayer! It comes to me most naturally.”

“Not against the trolls,” Torin said, “But against the troll slayers. If Bryn and I are hidden away down in the baths, who will tell the good folk of Gatewatch that this monstrous being eating all their food and drinking all their mead is a man and not a troll himself?”

Grimsa swung his arm and soaked Torin with a great splash of steaming water. Then he laughed and his booming voice echoed through the cavern. This drew the attention of some of the others in the pool. Three young women in an adjacent pool peered over the rocks and whispered to each other. When Bryn smiled at them they ducked back behind the rocks and giggled.

“And then we have you to worry about,” Torin said. “What if some monstrous creature, a witch or a giantess, falls under your charm and tries to whisk you off? Then Grimsa and I will have to crash your own wedding to rescue you.”

Grimsa nodded. “After we plunder the banquet table, of course.”

Bryn winked. “I can go unnoticed when I want to. Remind me again who snuck into your father’s cellar years ago and secured a full cask of ale for us to drink at the fall festival?”

“I remember my father finding the cask half empty in his cellar the next week and giving us all a sound beating with a willow branch.”

“And I remember when you tried to steal those pork bits from the larder when we were children,” said Grimsa, “And old Thorgrid chased you round and round Ten-Tree Hall with a ladle!”

“Hold on now, I was stealing those for you Grimsa.”

“In exchange for the name of my fair cousin.”

“Which you never did tell me.”

Grimsa grunted. “You got caught. What’s worse, I didn’t get any pork bits.” A rumble came from Grimsa’s stomach. A few small waves rippled out from his hairy, half-submerged belly.

Torin sighed and stretched out his bruised arms. “Speaking of pork bits, it must nearly be time for the evening meal.” Bryn and Grimsa agreed so they were soon on their way back to Fjellhall.

The sun had dropped behind the mountains while they were in the baths and now the chill they had felt the night before swept over the clustered town. The green linen tunics and brown wool pants Aslief had given them were soft on the skin but too thin to keep out the mountain cold. Twice they took a wrong turn and met a dead end, but when the wind changed direction the smell of meat and spiced ale on the breeze helped guide them back to Fjellhall.

Torin felt as if he had been reborn as he entered the hall for the second time that day. No pack sagged on his shoulders, no damp clothes clung to his skin, and no stench of sweat and mud and horses choked him. Now the earthy aroma of the mineral baths had soaked into his hair and beard and his limbs felt as light and as limber as rabbits in spring. Just as the tunic had let in the cold outside, now the heat that radiated from the long stone hearth flowed right to the center of his chest.

Torin’s impression of the hall was not at all diminished. In fact, now Torin could fully take it in. With loosened shoulders he could tilt his head back to see the topmost rafters stretched out like eagles soaring on gusts of wind. Where the walls met the roof, long green banners hung down which depicted all manner of lore: ravens and wolves and trolls. A border of intricately

embroidered silver-thread knotwork ran around each one and the colours of the figures depicted were as striking as those of the alpine flowers he had seen that morning. A few feet below the banners was a crowd of men and women that filled the rough wooden benches.

It was not the largest gathering Torin had ever seen, but it was by far the most ragged and hardy. His father hosted perhaps a dozen retainers of such caliber, but here warrior women and gruff men packed the benches end to end. Some women had wild hair tied back with a leather strap, others had twisted braids, and still others sported shaved heads with swirling designs tattooed in dull black ink. Beards were common among the men and most wore their hair long, though some also had shaved heads and had similar black-ink patterns. Few wore cloaks because of the radiating hearth, but many wore rusted chainmail shirts under light tunics or sleeveless leather tops. Though they did not look friendly, each one certainly seemed pleased to be sitting there among hardy comrades.

Most potent was the aroma of well spiced meat, smoky and savoury, which wafted through the air. It was this smell and a grumble in his stomach that shook Torin from his awe-filled stupor. As he looked towards the tables he saw Keymaster Signy shuffling towards them.

Keymaster Signy approached them with brisk steps. “Well good evening Master Ten-Trees, Master Jarnskald, and Master Foxfoot. I was beginning to think you had all drowned in the baths. Let’s have a look at you.” A quick inspection and a hesitant sniff assured her that they had been cleansed of the road. “Come with me, quickly now because we’ve already started serving the ale.”

They followed her around the crowded hall. They saw two women step up onto the end of the table. Each had a cask of ale under her left arm and, in her right hand, a tool that looked like a hammer except that it was pointed instead of flat. With a well-practiced swing each cracked the cask open with the tool and walked down the boards of the broad timber table. Those seated along the bench cleared the table as the two cask-bearers approached. Then those on either side took turns catching the stream of ale in their mead-horns. Each hailed the cask-bearer with a toast to good health as she passed. The companions reached their place at the far end just ahead of the flowing casks.

As Keymaster Signy pointed to their seats a booming voice rang out from across the table. “The young cubs arrive at last! I thought perhaps you’d left me to finish off the cask by myself. Now it seems I’ll have to share!”

“Gatemaster Gavring!” said Torin, “By the gods, it is good to see a friendly face among such fierce company.” Each sat down just in time to pick up the horn laid out for them and fill it with ale from the passing casks.

“I’ll leave you here with Gatemaster Gavring for now,” Signy said, “But don’t believe too much of what this red giant says once he finishes off the rest of that cask.”

Gavring smirked. “But that’s when I tell my best stories!”

Signy raised an eyebrow. “The best stories,” she said, “are rarely true. Now, enjoy the meal and I shall see to it that you are set up with lodging at the end of the night.” With that she was off shouting orders to the young men from the kitchen who were bearing the roast platter down the table, the keys around her waist jingling wherever she went.

The four of them seated at the end of the table had the distinct pleasure of finishing off the last of the cask. It was a dark brown ale, rich and foamy, with hints of honey and cedar. Torin remarked that it was far stronger than the dry yellow ale brewed by old Thorgrid in his father’s hall and, as Grimsa pointed out, far less cloudy. Torin himself swallowed three full horns before the last drip signalled the cask was dry. After that, the cask was whisked away and each man, horn brim-full, could drink at his leisure.

By then the steaming roast platters had been hauled down the table and a generous chunk of hard white cheese had been given to each one seated on the bench. Small loaves of dark rye bread were split between pairs up and down both tables, though somehow Grimsa and Gavring each managed to get a whole loaf to themselves. Last to come down the middle of the table was a steaming bowl of thick stew; its savory scent made Torin’s eyes water. In short order, each companion had stuffed himself full.

Certainly Grimsa had not been so contented since their departure feast at Ten-Tree Hall and now recounted each stage of their journey to Gavring with vigor. He told of the fair fields and towering trees along the mighty rushing Noros. He praised the bacon and the goat-stew and the roasted chicken offered at the shanty inns along the road. Then he told of a particularly foul

batch of *skog* they had purchased from a vagrant brewer. Bryn fondly recalled two sisters who had swooned over a few of his recently composed verses and Torin showed Gavring a silver serpent ring he had won from a tavern-keep in a game of Kings Table. At last, Grimsa described the roaring fire they had made at the bottom of Shadowstone Pass the night before.

“And then began the ascent,” Grimsa said, “What miserable business! First the fog, then icy rain, and at last frosty flakes of snow. Up and up and up we went, ever steeper, ever colder. Even worse, we had finished the last of our firemead before noontime so there was not even any drink to fire our spirits.”

“Then,” Bryn said, “Through the fog we heard voices.”

At this Gavring perked up, leaned forwards, and furled his wiry orange eyebrows. “Voices?”

“Yes, deep and haunting voices all chanting a melody. I can recall the verse: *Bleed the earth dry as bone, till we’ve broken every stone, Til the secret depths are known, and every treasure’s safe at home.*”

“Ah, the *nidavel!*” Gavring said, perhaps a bit louder than necessary because of the ale. He leaned even further towards the companions, narrowing his eyes and tilting his head. “Nothing good can come from dealing with those mushroom-munching merchants.”

Grimsa pounded both fists on the table and spilled a bit of ale into his lap. “That’s what I said!”

“Nevertheless, we won great treasures from them.”

“Bryn, you oaf,” said Grimsa, “You won nothing. You were swindled!”

“What do you mean? Did they attack?”

Torin shook his head. “No. They offered to trade horses for *nidavel* wares.”

Grimsa snickered. “And these two oggled the treasures, sick with the *gulthra* and blind to all reason. They told us of a rock fall ahead that our horses could never cross. These two believed him. I knew it was a *nidavel* trick all along.”

Gavring sighed, dropped his shoulders, and lifted a gigantic hand to scratch his thick beard. “This is a tale too common lately. Tell me, was it a troop of six *nidavel*?”

The three companions exchanged a glance before any of them answered.

“Yes,” Torin said, “The leader called himself Drombir.”

“Did they pretend to squabble like a rabble of bandits?”

Torin felt his heart sink inside his chest. “Yes.”

“I’ll need to speak with Captain Calder about this. This Drombir fellow, along with his company, has been swindling travelers out of their goods and livestock for a few months now.”

“What use would cave dwelling *nidavel* have for horses if not to haul their wares?”

A morbid expression came over Gavring’s face and he leaned in towards the companions. With bared teeth he whispered. “They cook them and eat them! Some grow tired of mushrooms and glowfish, and I can’t say I blame them for that.” He shook his head and shivered, “But eating a horse! I reckon, brings the worst of luck.”

All three companions got a bit pale in the face and Torin felt a twinge of nausea. He would have to explain all this to his father when he returned home. At the sight of their worried faces Gavring laughed, his huge belly shaking the table and rattling the plates. “Don’t be too hard on yourself. You three are surely not the first to fall victim to their tricks.” With a wicked grin he raised his horn. “Welcome to Gatewatch!”

At this they could not do much else but join in the toast and let the ale soothe their bruised pride. The huge red-bearded man could see their spirits were dampened at this discovery but he soon had them laughing again with stories of other unfortunates who had been swindled by the crafty *nidavel*.

“A girl here in town once traded a chicken for a magic egg which, she was promised, contained a hen who would lay golden eggs! It turned out to be nothing but polished stone, but by sweet Fyr and all the gods she sat on it for a full week before she realized the trick. Her rump must have been bruised purple and blue!”

A few others down the bench began to listen and laugh at Gavring’s tales which got louder and more elaborate with each successive story. “Another time I met a smith who traded a donkey for a fine golden hammer. I saw him strike it at the forge and it bent in half like a twig, nothing but gilded copper. A fine hammer indeed!”

These and many other *nidavel* deceptions he divulged, each drawing more laughter and more listeners. Soon the whole company at the end of the bench was laughing, toasting, and

chanting for more tales. By then Gavring swaggered about even as he sat. Around the table the roasted meat, the hardened cheese, and the steaming bread had all been eaten up and now a final cup of ale was being poured.

“The best of all,” Gavring said, “Was the son of a jarl named Hamar who rode a fine steed named Faxi. He met the *nidavel* in the pass late one foggy night and they asked him if he had seen their lost companion. He declared that he had seen no soul upon the road all the way up, but just as he spoke a chilling cry came from up ahead. Faxi was spooked and would not go forward so Hamar went on ahead with the *nidavel* to investigate the harrowing sound. All they found there was a splash of blood on the rocks. At this all the *nidavel* put on a show of consternation such as Hamar had never seen. *Trolls, trolls*, they bellowed, *the trolls have eaten our dear companion*. Hamar was quite unnerved by the commotion and the thought of trolls had him running back towards Faxi. *Wait*, cried the *nidavel* as they ran after him, *don't leave us alone with the trolls about!*”

Gavring gulped down the last of his ale, wiped the froth from his beard, and continued. “When Hamar returned to the place where his horse had been he found it was gone and in its place was a tiny horse carved out of stone, small enough to be kept in his pocket. At the sight of this the *nidavel* screamed with renewed vigor and ran about crying, *Troll magic! Troll magic! It has turned the steed to stone!* Hamar, horrified at this, snatched up the stone figure and grabbed one of the *nidavel* by the cloak. He shook him harshly and demanded to know how to unwork the magic that had been done to his steed. The *nidavel* just cried, *Let me go! Let me go!* Finally one of the older *nidavel*, quite short of breath, ran up to Hamar and began to shout. *The sun! The fiery sun! At dawn trolls' magic all undone!* At this, Hamar dropped the squirming *nidavel* and began to run up Shadowstone Pass as fast as his quivering legs would take him in hopes of catching the first rays of daylight.” Then Gavring was laughing so hard that he could not speak, and all three companions were doubled over on the benches.

Gavring wiped tears from his eyes. “What a sight he was! I remember he arrived at the East Gate at dawn and wouldn't stop babbling about troll magic for three whole days. *The sun*, he would say, *the fiery sun!* Ha!”

The company that had gathered at the end of the table emptied their horns in one last toast to Gavring and then dispersed in twos and threes back to the barracks or to their stone-wall homes. Soon no one was left in the hall but a few hall hands and the four of them at the end of the table. Torin remembered his offer to buy the first round and purchased a round of spiced wine.

Torin lowered his voice and leaned in towards Gavring. “The *nidavel* were not our last encounter.”

Gavring narrowed his glossy eyes. “Not the last encounter?”

“We arrived at Shadowstone Pass at dusk. Weary from the ascent and without horses, we stopped to rest and fell asleep.” He thought about mentioning Drombir’s cup, the bottomless vessel, but then thought it better not to.

Gavring’s face grew dark at the thought of Shadowstone Pass at night and the three companions could only guess what he was thinking. Torin shuddered as he wondered what horrors Gavring had seen during his time on this side of the mountains.

“Then I woke to the sound of a shrill scream, though only I heard it. I woke Bryn and Grimsa and we made haste through the field of bones by moonlight.”

Gavring’s jolly manner had been extinguished. Now he leaned his enormous face in towards them, grim and flushed red. “And?”

“Soon a swirling fog gathered in the field. It moved unnaturally and seemed to cling to our boots. Then we saw them.”

“Ten-Trees, what did you see?”

“Before us there was a host of white phantoms rising out of the fog. Each had a pair of burning red embers for eyes. There were at first perhaps a few dozen, then well over one hundred. They made no move towards us; they all just stared. We ran and they did not pursue us.”

Gavring’s eyes were wide and his jaw hung slack. “By great Orr and the gods! The Watchers.”

“The Watchers?” said Bryn, “What are they?”

Gavring slurped his spiced wine and shook his head. “No one can say for sure. I myself have never seen them, and thank the gods for that. Some say they are the stranded spirits of warriors who fell fighting the trolls, others say that they are evil apparitions which feed on the scent of death. It has been many years since they have been sighted and, for my part, I had hoped they had moved on or disappeared.” He stroked his beard then sighed. “I’ll need to inform Captain Calder about this as well.”

At that moment Keymaster Signy walked up to the table and addressed them all. “I hope you’ve all had your fill, and by the look in each of your eyes it seems you’ve sampled quite a enough of my stock.” She smiled and all the companions thanked her for her hospitality. “Now from what I’ve overheard it seems you three have earned your rest. There are three beds set up for you in the loft. Will you be needing a bed as well Master Gavring? You’ve had quite a lot of ale and wine tonight.”

Gavring protested. “No, no, no. I am just down the road.” He stood up quickly but then had to brace himself against the bench. He wobbled again and placed both hands on the table in front of him.

Gavring nodded to the three companions and burped. “Good night young masters. And Keymaster Signy, always a pleasure.” He dipped at the hips in what appeared to be a bow of sorts then swaggered out of the hall humming a lively tune.

Torin climbed up to the loft and looked out over Fjellhall with its long empty tables and glowing hearth. The banners had been taken down and the torches doused. All was quiet and the loft was warm in the dim red light. He had hardly laid down in his bed before he fell into a deep, deep sleep.



Thank You for Reading!



I hope you enjoyed the first three chapters of *The Gatewatch*! The full novel is complete and currently under review for publication. To learn what sort of trouble Torin, Bryn, and Grimsa stumble into next, join my [fan mailing list](#), follow me on [Twitter](#), or like [The Gatewatch Facebook page](#). Skal!

-Joshua Gillingham

