

## REVENGE

### I

*Dwarves!*

The word repeated itself in Rebekha's mind like some horrible mantra as she kneeled in the dust, rocking back and forth, cradling the mangled remains of what had once been her only son Danyl. Slowly, with determination, she lowered her dead son's body to the ground, then raised her hands to the heavens, feeling the blood trickle down her arms to her waist, where it soaked into her girdle. She shook her fists at the skies, rage spilling over her face in the form of tears which ran freely down her cheeks.

"Dwarves!" she screamed. "You shall pay for this crime! Do you hear me?! I shall have my revenge!" She raised her voice, shaking her hands. "I SHALL HAVE MY REVENGE!"

### II

Inside the house, Rebekha set herself to the burial of her only son. She gently placed the body on the table in her kitchen, then began looking for a shroud to wrap the body in, finally settling on the tablecloth, which by this time had soaked up a fair amount of her son's blood. She straightened what was left of the body out as best she could, then wrapped the cloth around it. Biting her lip to hold back tears, she shouldered the bundle, then left the house again, stopping to pick up a shovel from her front porch. She walked around behind the house and began to dig a hole. After about half an hour's work, she threw the shovel down and picked up her son, then gently placed him in the hole. Still straining to keep from crying, she began to shovel the dirt back into the hole.

When the first shovelfull of dirt hit the blood-soaked tablecloth, however, her resistance broke, and she fell to the ground, crying. "Oh gods," she moaned between sobs. "Oh gods, oh gods, gods, why? Why my boy? Why my only Danyl? First my husband, now my boy! Why them? Why not me? Why? WHY?!" This last was broken by a sob. After that, she had no more energy for words, and just lay there on the ground, crying, holding herself tightly, her body heaving with each sob. After some minutes, her grief was exhausted. She lay there quietly, then picked up the shovel and finished burying her thirteen-year-old son.

When she had finished, she went back into her house, dropping the spade in the middle of the yard. She closed the door behind her and went to the back room--Danyl's room. She cast her eyes around the room, taking in

the unmade bed, the open chest of drawers, the cluttered desk, the closet with old clothes heaped all over the floor, in spite of the basket which she had told him a thousand times to use. . . she smiled faintly. Her Danyl. Never neat, always cluttered, even though she would yell at him to clean up after himself. . . She began tidying up his messy room, heaping clothes into the basket, straightening the mess on the desk, making the bed. It was while making the bed that she made the discovery.

Buried under the sheets was a brightly wrapped package with a tag that said, in Danyl's familiar scrawl, "To my Mommy. Happy Birthday." Birthday? When was that? Soon, she supposed. She really couldn't think of it. Didn't want to. Birthdays were times of joy. What did she have to be joyful about anymore? Without even realizing what she was doing, Rebekha tore at the wrapping. The gift was a homemade porcelain statuette of a human hunter--her. It had been hand crafted and hand-painted with painstaking detail, with oak-brown hair, deep blue eyes, a little wooden bow, brown pants and tunic, and even a silver quiver strapped to the figure's back. In every detail, it looked exactly like she did when she went hunting. He had made this. . . by hand. . . for her. . .

Her resolve broke, and she fell on the bed, clutching the figurine to her chest and sobbing. There were no tears--those had been spent long ago--but there was still plenty of pain and misery. *Damned, cursed Dwarves! You will pay for the death of my son! I swear I shall have my revenge!* With that thought flowing through her mind over and over, like the churning of some engine, the emotionally shattered woman fell asleep.

### III

After what seemed an eternity, she awoke. At first she wasn't sure where she was or what had happened, but one look at the small statuette in her hands brought the horror of the previous day's discovery rushing back. But the memory did not bring grief--that had all been spent yesterday. All she felt now was a clod pit in her heart, an empty black space which used to be filled by Danyl.

She rose from the small boy's bed and crossed her home, going to her own room. After placing the statuette on her mantle, she went into her bathroom. She stripped off her clothes and stood in front of the mirror, naked, scrutinizing her body. It was in good shape--fortunately. For what she had in mind, she needed to be in good shape. She picked up the large metal bucket which was used to fill the bathtub. There was water in it--she had filled it yesterday, while waiting for Danyl to return. . . she banished the thoughts before they had a chance to form. There was no time for grief. Now was the time for action. She emptied the bucket into the tub, without

bothering to heat the water over a fire. The cold would do her some good, bring her back to her senses. She sat down in the water and washed her body and, as best she could, her dress. After a while, she climbed out of the tub and dried herself off, then went over to her closet and began taking out clothing, tossing it on the floor. After a thorough search, she finally found what she was looking for, and held it up with a cry of triumph--her brown hunting tunic. She tossed it on the bed and returned to her search, eventually retrieving a pair of green pants and brown leather boots, then a brownish-red vest and cap. When she had found all that she was looking for, she dressed herself, then left the house, stopping only long enough to grab her crossbow and shortsword. She walked out of her front yard and turned towards town. Walking away a few steps, she stopped, turned, blew a kiss towards her house, then continued on.

#### IV

"Hello, Jake."

Jakub Nortaar, the town weaponsmith, looked up from his work and smiled. Silhouetted in his doorway was a familiar figure--Rebekha. She was leaning against the doorjamb, one arm upraised. "'Bekha! So good to see you! What brings you to this part of town?'"

She walked into the shop and threw her arms around him, kissing his mouth. "Mmm! Like I needed a special reason?" She looked at him and smiled.

He returned the smile. Rebekha had always held a special place in his heart. He remembered the first time he had ever seen her walk into his shop. He'd been curious--the only people to ever enter his shop were hunters or warriors, and this frail thing didn't look like much of either. But she had surprised him with her knowledge of weaponry. After fifteen minutes, he was totally enamored of her. He'd even asked her out to dinner--then she'd told him that she was married. But the two had remained good friends, and after her husband had died--murdered by an elven raiding party--the two had grown closer. Considerably closer. Lately he had been thinking of asking her to marry him and had been waiting for the right moment.

And now she was here, dressed for hunting. This could be the moment he wanted, but business first. He knew what she needed. "Number Seven bolts, right?" Seven was the size for deer hunting, which was 'Bekha's favorite hunt, he knew.

"Not this time, Jake. I need something a bit heavier. Number Twelve."

Jakub whistled. Twelve! Number Twelve bolts were used by the King's Army for defensive purposes--they were the only crossbow bolts which had proven reliable to slay minotaurs. "Twelve? Are you serious?" She looked at him intently, then nodded her head. He whistled again. She was serious! "Look. . . only people who've ever asked me for Twelve's are members of His Majesty's Army. Them, I know what the bolts will be used for. You. . . I need to ask. What are you hunting?"

She stepped back for a moment, regarding him critically. Then she shrugged. "Dwarves."

"WHAT?!" Jakub stared at her, mouth open, all thoughts of proposing flying out of his head. "DWARVES!?"

"Shhh!" Rebekha glanced out the door. Though the street was empty, she closed the door, barred it, and drew the blinds on the windows, then took Jakub by the hand and led him to the back room, closing that door behind her as well. She directed Jakub to sit in his chair, then sat on his desk, leaning forward. "Danyl's dead."

"What?"

"You heard me. Danyl is dead. He was out playing a day or so ago and didn't come home. I was a little worried, but not much. He's his mother's son, I thought, he'll get back okay. Then, yesterday afternoon, I found his body on my front porch. He'd been murdered, Jake. By dwarves."

Her resolve broke, and she slumped forward, shoulders shaking. Jakub sprang up from his chair and cradled her in his arms, rocking back and forth. She grabbed him, held him tightly. "They left hardly anything, Jake! His whole body. . . mutilated. . . he was my only son! My only son!" She let the tears flow freely for a while. Jakub just stood there, slowly rocking her back and forth, making soothing noises deep in his chest, stroking her long, brown hair. After a minute or so, she pulled away and looked at his face, meeting his eyes with her tear-streaked own. "I buried him, Jake. Buried my thirteen-year-old son in the backyard. Then I came in and fell asleep. When I woke up, I showered, dressed, and came here." She brushed a lock of tear-soaked hair out of her eyes, then wiped her runny nose on a sleeve. "I have to go out there, Jake. Have to find the bastards that did this to my boy. And make them pay."

"Are you mad?" Jakub couldn't believe he'd just heard this. "Go hunting? For dwarves? Dwarves aren't like deer, 'Bekha! For one thing, they're insane! For another, they have a tendency to fight back! You could be kill-

-” He stopped. He could tell from the look in her eyes that death would be a welcome event. It made sense--her husband dead, her son dead, the only person she had to live for was him, and he wasn't sure if that was enough. He took a deep breath. “All right. You don't fear your dying. But I do! ‘Bekha, look.’ Now was the time. He licked his lips, then got down on one knee, holding her hands in his own. “I love you. I know I say that all the time, and it's true. I've loved you from the first time I met you. Even when I knew you were married, I still loved you. And when Reon died, and you came to me for support. . . that was the most touching thing I'd ever experienced. And we've been together. . . and. . . look, I don't know how you feel about me, but ever since we. . . what I'm trying to say is. . . look, I want to marry you.” There! It was said. He drew in a deep breath and waited for her reaction, eyes squeezed shut. After a moment of silence, he looked up. Rebekha was looking at him with. . . what? He couldn't tell, her expression kept shifting. One moment horror, then confusion, then admiration, then. . . he stood up slowly. “ ‘Bekha? Are y--” He didn't finish; he couldn't.

“You. . . oh, Jake! I love you too, and I want to marry you! I was afraid to ask, because. . . I don't know why.” Jakub smiled. “But first, I have to do this.” Jakub's smile faded. “I don't know how I can make you understand, Jake. I. . . swore a vow, before the gods, that I would have my revenge. I will not allow that vow to go unfulfilled. I will marry you, yes, but only after I have had my revenge. They took my son, Jake! First I lost Reon to the elves, then I lost Danyl to the dwarves! Can I make you understand? This isn't right, it isn't fair! I have no one left! I love you, and while you have a special place in my heart, its presence there cannot make up for the emptiness left by Reon and Danyl! Can you understand?”

She looked at him with tears in her eyes, tears and a longing for understanding. Those eyes pleaded with him for understanding. He closed his own and let out a breath. “All right. I understand. I will supply you with whatever you need. But,” and here he held up a hand and looked at her, hard. “I insist that I go with you. Traipsing off into dwarven territory is no job for a single huntress, even one so accomplished as yourself. Therefore, I insist that you allow me to join you. If not, you won't get what you want from me, and I guarantee that there is no weapon shop in our King's land that will supply you with Number Twelve bolts. Well? What do you say?”

Rebekha was momentarily angry. This was her fight, and her fight alone! How dare he? He was her lover, not her father! Not her husband, at least not yet! He had no right to. . . but then she stopped herself. He wanted to come. He was right; his was the only shop that she'd be able to get what she needed. Besides, he was a pretty good shot himself. She looked deep into his eyes and smiled. “Thank you.”

He smiled back. "Of course. Thank you." He reached for her, drew her into an embrace, and kissed her mouth, briefly. "Besides," he said, bringing his hands around and undoing her tunic, "having me around will make your nights considerably more fun, too."

## V

After a few hours' preparation, Rebekha and Jakub were ready to leave town. Jakub had at first protested the immediate start to his lover's quest, but she had explained that the sooner they left, the sooner they'd return, and, consequentially, the sooner they'd be wed. That had persuaded him, and the two had begun gathering the supplies they'd need--Jakub poured his stock of Number Twelve crossbow bolts into a knapsack while Rebekha went to the store a few doors down and purchased a three-week supply of army ration, totally ignoring the quizzical looks of the shop's proprietor and patrons. The two made sure that they had food and weapons--each had a crossbow and shortsword, and Jakub also sported a large hunting battle axe taken from a Minotaur that he had slain a few months back--and, after Jakub made a hasty sign for his front door which said "On Vacation, Back Soon", the two left town and headed north, towards the mountainous dwarven territories.

As they walked, they made general small talk, each unwilling to touch on the subject or purpose of the hunt. After some time, however, Jakub felt that he needed to broach the subject. He drew in a deep breath, and asked, " 'Bekha? How do you know that it was... dwarves?"

For nearly three minutes Rebekha did not answer. Concerned, Jakub looked over to her, to see if anything was the matter. There was no sign that Rebekha had been hurt by his words, or upset--in fact, there was no visible reaction to his words. She was staring resolutely ahead, unblinking.

" 'Bekha? Are--" she cut him off.

"When I was a child, my father used to take me hunting with him. That's what got me into the hunt--spending time with him, hunting elk, or bear, or whatever. One day we were hunting... some animal, I forget what. I was what, fourteen? Fifteen? Full of passion and eager to show off my hunting abilities. I ran ahead of my dad, following the trail. Then, just to the side of the trail, I saw a human body. It was an elven male, not much older than I was at the time. He was dressed for hunting. And he was dead." Rebekha drew in a deep breath, shook her head. "It was terrible. I could only look for a second before I had to run to another bush and throw up. I didn't

want to look any more, but dad made me. He took me by the hand and brought me over to that dead body.

“Look, Rebekha. Look and learn, for these are things that you will doubtless see in the future. A good hunter must always be able to recognize signs. This is a sign. Look closely.’ He showed me the body and described what I was seeing. It was terrible! The right hand had been cut off at the wrist, and the skin flayed from the left hand. It was hanging near the wrist—the skin, just waving there in the breeze. The left eye had been burned, the right eye had a slender stick through it that stuck out about three inches from the head. His throat had been cut, and his tongue pulled through the slit. His mouth had been forced open and crammed with feces. He’d been disemboweled, and his intestines wrapped around his legs.

“Dwarves did this, Rebekha,’ my father told me. ‘Filthy dwarves with their love for mutilation. There’s probably more damage done, but this is enough. Always remember this, Rebekha, so that you will be able to identify victims of dwarven attacks in the future.”

She stopped speaking for a moment. During this entire narrative, she had never once flinched, never stopped, and her voice had never lost its evenness. Jakub was about to comment when she suddenly drew in a sharp breath and said, “After that I lived in fear of ever seeing a dwarf’s victim, or, worse yet, becoming one. But after a while the shock and horror faded away. I even forgot exactly what the signs of dwarven mutilation were  
—it all faded and became old memories.”

“After a while I just forgot about what I’d seen. I never saw another body so mutilated, on any of my hunts, so I never really thought about it.” She sucked in a deep breath and let it out with a whoosh! “Then I saw Danyl.”

She stopped, gripped Jakub’s arm and looked pleadingly into his eyes. “It was just like the elf! His right hand gone, his left one skinned, ripped open and tied in his own entrails, his eyes. . .” She started to cry, the horrible memories bringing back her anguish and despair. Jakub held her close, whispering words of comfort in her ear, holding her tightly. She collapsed against him, crying freely for some time as he rocked her slowly back and forth. After a while her crying diminished, but she did not pull away. She reached up slowly and pulled his head down to hers, kissing his mouth. “Thank you,” she said quietly. “Thank you.” He smiled.

As it was growing dark, they decided to make camp. Jakub offered to keep the first watch, telling Rebekha "As much as you've been through, you really need some rest." She agreed readily enough and was asleep almost before her body was comfortably nestled in her bag.

She awoke to find Jakub preparing a quick breakfast of cold water from a nearby creek and dry bread. "Glad to see you up," he said when she had disentangled herself from her sleeping bag. Running a hand through her hair, she looked around her. "It's morning," she said dumbly. "Why didn't you wake me up? Let me take the second watch?"

Jakub shrugged. "No need. Night was quiet enough, and you needed rest. I was fine." Rebekha looked at him. How this man loved her! Here he had requested--no, demanded--that he be allowed to join her, to protect her, and he had even sacrificed his night's sleep so that she could rest in safety! A warm flush spread over her cheeks. "Um . . ." she began. "I'm going to go to the creek and wash up. Be back in a second. Pack up--we'll move on once I've eaten." Shouldering a towel, she turned her back on him and walked over to the creek..

After a refreshing dip in the ice-cold water, Rebekha was wide awake and ready to face whatever lay ahead--and she had no idea just what she would be facing. As she'd told Jakub, she had only the one experience of dwarves, such as it was, and had since put the matter out of her mind. She'd never researched dwarven civilization or battle tactics or anything--there simply was no need for it. Consequently, she hadn't the first clue what sort of dangers she might be facing. She could only hope that Jakub, an experienced hunter of many years who had, years ago, been a Captain in the Royal Army, would be able to identify signs of a dwarven kingdom.

He looked up as she approached. "Everything's set to go," he said. "There's some breakfast over there for you," he indicated a rock near the fire ring, "and once you've eaten up we'll be ready to move on." Wordlessly she walked over to the food and began eating, trying to ignore the fact that the food tasted like dirt in her mouth. When she'd finished, she stood up, brushing the crumbs off her trousers, and nodded at Jakub. "All set? Then let's go."

The two set off on their way, still heading north. They walked until the mountains began to grow around them. When they had immersed themselves deep in the foothills, Rebekha stopped. It was midday. "Lunch," she declared in a voice which she hoped did not betray her exhaustion.

Grunting his agreement, Jakub let his heavy pack fall to the ground. He fished around in his pack until he came up with one of the food ration packets, which he handed to Rebekha before digging around for another for himself. They ate silently, Jakub letting his eyes wander around their surroundings, observing, scanning, searching. Rebekha directed her gaze at him, unwavering. Eventually the attention began to unnerve Jakub, who turned to look at her, asking in a joking voice, “What are you staring at?”

In answer, she drew in a deep breath and forced it out. “Jakub,” she began in a hesitating voice. “Jakub, I have a confession to make.” She stopped, trying to think of the best way to express her ignorance. Finally deciding on the direct approach, she said, “I really have no idea what I’m looking for. I don’t know how to hunt dwarves, I don’t know how to fight them.” She closed her eyes, holding her breath, waiting for his response. After a moment, confused, she looked up at him. She was amazed to see his shoulders shaking in silent laughter. Indignantly, she said, “I don’t see what’s so terribly funny about it!”

“My dear,” said Jakub through his laughter, which refused to remain silent any longer, “that’s simply because you don’t see yourself as I see you!” He stopped laughing, looked her right in the eye. “I *know* you have no experience hunting dwarves. I *know* you have absolutely no idea what to do! I *know* that if I hadn’t insisted I come along, you would have asked me, tried to persuaded me!” He raised an eyebrow inquisitively.

She was taken aback, confused. Deep inside, she knew that he was right, that she’d wanted him to come along from the beginning. Shamefacedly, she nodded. Jakub continued.

“But you needn’t worry, my dearest. I’m not mad at you. You hunt animals. You’re good, I’ll grant you that, you’re one of the best I’ve met at deer hunting, but you know nothing about hunting higher life forms. But I don’t hold that against you. You came to me because of my experience, partly. And rest assured, we’re okay, we’re safe. I’ve been paying attention to our surroundings all this time, and would know if we were in any danger from dwarves. But we’re going to have to start being careful,” he finished in a more serious tone. He pointed along their path. “We’re going to have to evacuate the path pretty soon, start walking through the scrub. From here I can tell we’re very close to a dwarven city. You won’t see it for quite some time, but I can tell that there are structures ahead, houses very cleverly disguised in the mountain faces--being the craftsmen that they are, dwarves are by nature very good at that sort of camouflage.

“And I can see traps in the road--nothing fatal, I bet, but certainly some devices designed to, shall we say, discourage would-be trespassers? And

undoubtedly more than one lookout post concealed in there somewhere. Why, for all we know, there could be a network of tunnels running throughout the mountain and even under the ground, connecting lookout nests to the center of the kingdom! We'll have to be very careful from now on." Narrowing his eyes, he pointed at Rebekha. "From this point forward, you do exactly as I tell you, when I tell you. Step exactly where I step. Do not speak unless I tell you to, and then do so only in a whisper. Tread carefully and quietly. No matter that my instructions may seem ridiculous, or even counterproductive, you must obey me without question. It is our only chance for survival. Understood?" Only slightly taken aback, she nodded. "Good. Then let's pack up and move on."

## VII

They left the trail then, Jakub in the lead, walking very slowly, very carefully, very quietly. He'd move forward a few steps, then look all around him. Tense, expecting a rock to come hurtling down on them any second, Rebekha followed his every movement exactly, holding her breath for fear of disturbing the atmosphere by breathing.

As they progressed, Rebekha began to notice subtle changes in the surrounding rocks. Where before she had only seen stone, seemingly shaped by nature over thousands of years, she now saw constructions-- doors and windows of buildings, cleverly and carefully disguised to look like nothing more than shadows. Jakub nodded. We're very close to the city now, he mouthed. Be very quiet! Walk very slowly and carefully. For all we know there could be a thousand axes ready to cut us to pieces at a moment's notice. She swallowed, nodded. She had yet to see any sign of life at all--so far she'd only seen what looked like houses, but, after all, Jakub was the one with the hunting experience, not her.

They moved onward. Suddenly Jakub stopped, held up a hand. Turning back to Rebekha, he mouthed, *Listen!*

She cocked her head to one side. In the distance, she could barely make out the sound of... was that laughter? She closed her eyes, concentrating. Yes, yes it was! Children's laughter, no less! A sudden vision of Danyl floated across her mind's eye. Her heart broke, and, before she could stop herself, she let out a sob.

Jakub whirled around, prepared to reprimand her. But on seeing her face, his heart softened. He stepped closer. "There, there," he whispered. "It's all right." He took her in his arms, comforting her. "Shh, it's okay. I know it hurts, hurts terribly, but you have to be strong now, my love. You must be strong, so you may face the dwarves with pride. Shh, there, there."

**She sniffled her tears down, coughed lightly, then pushed Jakub away. "I'm all right now," she whispered. "Let's go on." Jakub nodded, then continued along. "Incidentally," he whispered over his shoulder. "Just how did you plan on going about your revenge?"**

**She stopped short. She hadn't really considered this part, she realized. She supposed that she had partly imagined strolling into the castle of a dwarven king and demanding retribution, and partly seen herself concealed in the mountains, picking off dwarves with her bow as they came within range. She really wasn't sure what she'd had planned.**

**She opened her mouth to answer, but her answer turned to a scream as, seemingly from nowhere, two dozen short, squat humanoid figures suddenly appeared, brandishing hammers and clubs and shields and swords and battle axes. Jakub cursed aloud and drew his own axe. The blade shone brilliantly in the sunlight, and seemed to hum with anticipation at the coming attack. Terror and adrenaline coursing through her veins, Rebekha struggled to free her shortsword from its scabbard. Finally succeeding, she faced her enemies grimly, ready to die but determined not to go down without one hell of a fight.**

**A tense moment of silence followed, which the two humans and the twenty-four dwarves spent sizing each other up. Jakub adjusted his grip on his battle axe, his powerful hands whitening from the strain of his grip. He smiled a challenge at the dwarves. Had Rebekha looked at him just then, she would have seen quite a different person than the Jakub Nortaar she had grown to know and love. That Jakub had been a gentle, kind, loving soul with the spirit of an adventurer. The man next to her was a machine; a living, breathing mechanism with only one purpose, to slaughter anything in its path. His eyes were alight with a fire that certain animals have just before they begin an attack. His teeth were bared in a manner similar to that of the lion's just before the kill. His breathing was quick and shallow.**

**A similar change had overtaken Rebekha. Here, at last, were representatives of the race which had caused the brutal murder of her only son. Here, at last, in front of here, were members of that hated class of persons who were directly responsible for her pain, her grief, her anguish. Here, at last, was a way to make it feel better. She braced herself for the fight, arms slightly raised, weapon pointed at the dwarves, head held defiantly high. The blood poured through her veins faster and faster. Her own breathing quickened to a pace even faster than her companion's. The adrenaline in her body convinced her she was indestructible. She smelled blood, and could taste it too. She wanted to kill.**

The dwarves looked from her to Jakub, scowling, then glanced at each other. As one, they stepped forward, raising their weapons. Together, they were an impressive sight. Their dull grey armor made them nearly indistinguishable as individuals; and only their long, curly beards gave any of them character. Even their weapons were uniform--sharp, cold, and deadly. Finally one of them raised his weapon and gave a fearsome cry; at this signal, the others all surged forward, swinging their weapons, murder in their eyes and their hearts. The two of them were quickly surrounded by rings of dwarves, hissing and spitting and screaming for their blood.

Jakub's long arms and soldier's training served him well in the battle. Broad, sweeping strokes of his axe blade were at first sufficient to keep the dwarves back far enough that they did not pose too great a threat. His backpack assisted in keeping them back, too; with his battle axe in one hand Jakub was able to swing the pack back and forth with his other arm. Then, with a mighty heave, he threw the pack into a thick cluster of oncoming dwarves with such force that the dwarves were knocked backwards a good three feet. Jakub took this opportunity to draw a large dagger with a slim blade from his boot. Thus armed with axe and dagger, it was easier for Jakub to defend himself. The axe still served to keep the dwarves at bay; however, since there were so many dwarves, it was inevitable that some of them would slip past Jakub's defense. Any dwarf lucky enough to avoid the deadly axe blade and get in close enough to draw blood wound up with Jakub's long thin dagger in his throat. Even so, the strain of taking on so many dwarves at once eventually began to take its toll on Jakub. His axe swings became less accurate and less deadly, and also less of a deterrent. His aim with his dagger suffered also, and a few thrusts which should have slid neatly between breastplate and helmet instead reflected harmlessly off of the armor.

Rebekha, for her part, also fared well against her attackers at first. Though she was not so tall as Jakub, and thus unable to keep all of her attackers at bay in a similar fashion, her years of acrobatic training which her mother had insisted on during her youth were most helpful now in keeping her away from her dwarven attackers. Every time one of them would swing his axe at her head, thinking to remove it at the neck, he would instead lose his balance as his axe blade cleaved harmlessly through empty air. Rebekha responded by either slashing such dwarves in the face with her sword, or kicking them, knocking them to the ground. Her attacks were punctuated with loud cries of anger. She, too, used her backpack as a counterweight, sending three dwarves sprawling. Once in a while a blade would swing too close, shivering her skin with its deadly proximity, but such close calls merely served to heighten her adrenaline.

After a while, however her ducking and weaving began to take its toll--it became more and more difficult to avoid the deadly dwarven weapons. And as for attacking, taking an offensive. . . it was all she could do to fend off their advances; soon she had no energy to take a swing herself.

Then it happened. One dwarf swung his axe at her legs, intending to cripple her. She brought her sword down on the dwarf's axe, driving it into the ground. But before she could recover, pull her arm back, the dwarf had grabbed it in a viselike grip, twisting his hands around her arm as though it were a wind-up toy. The unexpected force, combined with her already weary muscles' anguish, caused her to cry out in pain, try to free her arm with her other hand. This left her other side unguarded. One of the other dwarves took this opportunity to attack. He charged, swinging his axe and uttering a loud barbaric war cry. Rebekha saw him coming and kicked out at the last second, catching the dwarf just under his chin with her knee. He fumbled with his axe, but his forward momentum was not slowed and he plowed into her hip headfirst, driving his helmet into her ribcage. Rebekha heard more than felt bone crunch, and an excruciating pain made her gasp for breath. The dwarf which had been twisting her arm let the limb go, then doubled his hand into a fist and reared back. Dazed, half blinded by rage and pain, Rebekha watched the large, gauntleted fist close fast on her face, then the world faded into blissful darkness.

## VIII

A hard slap of water on her face brought her back to reality. Sputtering, swearing, she opened her eyes and tried to sit up. She found she could not mover her arms, and after a moment she realized why: they were tied behind her. She heard a grating laugh.

"A't's right, dearie, struggle all ye wants. Ye'll no' be gettin' out o' those bindin's easily, I'll wager." Searching for the source of the voice, Rebekha rolled over and found herself nose to kneecap with a squat dwarf, heavily armored and carrying a large axe and hammer--the traditional weapons of the dwarven race. In fury, she spit on his boots. The dwarf scowled and reared back, as though to kick this insolent human in the face. But another voice called out in a foreign language, and the dwarf stopped.

Two hands roughly grabbed her shoulders and forced her onto her back once more. She found herself looking into the eyes of another dwarf--presumably the owner of the second voice. Deep black eyes stared intently at her from beneath bushy eyebrows. A long, black beard with streaks of grey tickled her throat. The dwarf smiled, revealing all of five teeth. When he spoke, the redolent air of dwarven ale threatened to suffocate Rebekha.

"Now what 'n the name uv Arak is a ting like yu doin' in ahr mountains?" he asked, using crude Common heavily accented with his own native tongue.  
"Ave ye no brains atall? Surely ye knows bein' caught 'ere is a dith sintince!"

"You bastards killed my son! My only reason for living! What do I care if I live or die?" she spat.

The dwarf laughed appreciatively, looked up at his friend, and said something in dwarven. The armored dwarf laughed. Then, with a grin, the prisonkeeper said, "Shirly ye canna mean that? Shirly there mus' be sum'thin' warth livin' fer in yer world--some lover, p'raps?"

*Lover!* Rebekha thought of Jakub. Was he all right? Was he here? Twisting frantically, Rebekha tried to see him, see if he was here. She thought she saw . . . there! Over in the far corner! Was that him? Or some other prisoner of the dwarves? She called out to him.

"Jake!" The body stirred, moaned. Nearly insane with relief, Rebekha tried to roll herself over to where he was laying on the ground. But the dwarves stopped her.

"Not s'fast, dearie," said the prisonkeeper. "Ye'll get chance enuff t' tend t'yer man's needs later. Right now, yer wanted up in 'Is Majistie's main throne room. C'mon, Dareg, gimme a han', willya?" So saying, the prisonkeeper reached down and grabbed Rebekha's armpits, lifting her in the air with an audible moan. At the same time, the other dwarf grabbed her legs at the knees and lifted. The two carried her over to what looked like a wheelbarrow, into which they unceremoniously dumped her. Then Dareg said something in dwarven and the prisonkeeper opened the cell door. Dareg grabbed the wheelbarrow handles and pushed Rebekha out of the prison and away from her beloved Jakub.

## IX

Rebekha found herself being wheeled along twisted, winding, ill-lit passages hewn through solid rock. Even as she cursed the dwarves for what they had done to her, part of her could not help admiring them. That they were able to create such a maze--no human or elf could possibly walk through these tunnels without becoming completely disoriented, and yet Dareg seemed to know exactly where he was going and what he was doing--spoke well of their heritage as shapers of stone and wood.

After what seemed an endless journey, they finally arrived at their destination--or so Rebekha, who was still lying in the wheelbarrow, eyes

towards the ceiling, assumed by the sudden increase in noise. Apparently His Majesty was in the middle of an audience. She bit her lip. What was going to happen to her? And, perhaps more importantly . . . what was going to happen to Jakub?

She heard Dareg conversing in dwarven with an unseen dwarf--the royal guard, she guessed. The conversation was brief, spoken in the guttural language of the dwarves, a language which brought to mind images of rocks crushing bone. Then she heard a loud cry of rusted metal as the doors slowly swung open and the hinges screamed in protest. Dareg wheeled her into a large, brightly lit (for dwarves, whose eyes are light-sensitive), airy (again, for dwarves, who are comfortable in enclosures which most humans would find disturbingly claustrophobic) chamber. From her vantage point of the bottom of a wheelbarrow, she could barely make out what appeared to be hundreds of dwarves seated in bleachers carved out of the stone, lining the walls of the chamber. The smell was nearly suffocating, the dwarven race not being marked for its cleanliness, and the sounds were positively deafening. As she was wheeled in, however the sounds--if it were possible--grew even louder, and the atmosphere in the chamber became decidedly more hostile. Rebekha squeezed her eyes shut, bit her lip, and prepared to meet her gods.

“SILENCE!” came a roaring voice from somewhere in the chamber--the walls being made of stone, sounds reverberated quite easily. But as this voice was raised, so all the other voices in the room died down. Rebekha opened one eye hesitantly, unsure what she would see. The voice continued, in dwarven, asking a question, it sounded like.

Dareg answered, in crude Common. “All pardon fer interruptin’, Yer Most Gracious Majistie, but this ‘uman woman was found on th’ outskirts of Yer Majistie’s city, an’ Yer Majistie ’ad requested that any and all trespassers be brought b’fore Yer Majistie with due ‘aste.”

The king grunted. He started to speak dwarven, but caught himself and spoke instead in a cultured, educated Common. “This is true. You’ve done well, Dareg Rockwelder. Take her out of that wheelbarrow, and let’s see what we’re dealing with.” Rebekha tensed as she felt Dareg lift the wheelbarrow and felt herself slide down to the cold, stone floor. She struggled to her knees, hands still bound behind her, facing the dwarven king. She could feel the anger burning in her face, along with the humiliation and terror at being caught. She tossed her head, trying in vain to get her long brown hair out of her eyes. Breathing harshly, she fixed the dwarven king with a venomous stare. He returned her gaze coolly, one hand tapping the armrest of his magnificent golden throne while the other

hand stroked his long grey beard, which, were he standing, would have reached the floor and, probably, trailed a good three feet beyond.

"Indeed," said the king. "Truly a beautiful specimen--if you like that sort of thing," he added, glancing sideways with a grin. The chamber rang with appreciative laughter. Holding up a hand to silence the sound, the king hopped out of his throne and walked towards Rebekha. He placed a hand under her chin, lifted her face to the light. Eyes closed, body trembling, resisting the urge to scream, to attack, to do anything, Rebekha submitted to the inspection. The king tilted her head to the left, to the right, up, and down, examining it from all angles; then, letting her head drop, he began to walk around her. She could feel his eyes boring into her flesh, sizing her up.

"Clearly a skilled huntress," he said under his breath. "But of lower animals, not of dwarves, I wager." Suddenly his hand was in her hair, yanking her head up. She could not hold back the cry of pain. She opened her eyes and saw, through her tears, the dwarf's face, very close to her own, creased with rage. "Why are you here? Who sent you? Which human kingdom dares to challenge me? Do they want another war?! Why, damn you! WHY?!" With each word, the king yanked Rebekha's hair, whipping her head back and forth. She was crying now. Through her sobs of fear and pain, she forced herself to say, "You... bastards... killed... my only... son!"

"Pah!" The king spit in her face, then flung her head down towards the ground, releasing her and walking away. He stalked back to his throne and threw himself in it, then spit on the floor again. "Pah!" he repeated.

"Killed your son? It's possible. Likely, even. If your son was foolish enough to come down here, then yes, we probably did kill him. But so what? You humans have been killing my kind since time out of mind, just as the cursed elves have." There was grumbling at this from the other assembled dwarves. The king held up a hand, and the grumbles ceased.

Breathing deeply, both to keep herself in control and to keep her mind off the pain in her hair, Rebekha continued, "But you brought his body back, mutilated till I could hardly recognize it, and left it on my doorstep!!"

The king raised his eyebrows at this. He looked to his side, at another dwarf dressed in splendid armor. The second dwarf coughed and leaned towards his king, whispering in his ear for a moment. The king listened, nodded, and looked at Rebekha again.

“My general tells me that your young lad had been seen with one of our young lasses.” The crowd began to murmur. “He’d been seen down by the riverbed at the outskirts of my kingdom.” The murmurs grew in volume, and a few voices cried out in indignation. “He’d been seen taking advantage of her!” At this, the entire assembly rose to its feet, screaming for blood. The king held up his hand and waited for silence. It was a long time in coming.

Through the cries of “Kill the human!” and worse, Rebekha tried to understand what she had just heard. Danyl? Raping a dwarf? Not only was the idea itself, even in the abstract ludicrous (not to mention distasteful to the extreme), but the idea that her Danyl--a boy of thirteen, a boy of her blood!--would do such a thing . . . Rebekha could not speak for her anger. On top of murder these dwarves add dishonesty!?

“How dare you!?” she screamed. “Not only do your. . . lackeys kidnap and murder my son, they bring him back to my home brutally mutilated and destroyed! And, on top of that, you make up this pathetic, obviously falsified story to. . . to justify. . .” Words failed her.

“ENOUGH!” The king leapt from his throne and strode over to her, slapping her hard, knocking her over. “You dare to question me??!! I have spoken! Your son was caught and murdered for his crime! He deserved no less!” The king drew in a deep breath. “And you. . . what should we do with you? Clearly you came here with the idea of killing dwarves--at least one, doubtless more. It seems to me that the course of action is clear. You must be killed. Guards!” The king waved his hand, and three dwarven soldiers advanced on Rebekha, grabbing her by the arms and dragging her, kicking and screaming, back to the wheelbarrow. The king, meanwhile, had returned his attention to the guard at his side. Through the shouting of the crowd and her own screaming, Rebekha heard him ask, “What of the other prisoner?”

*Jakub!* Gods have mercy, she had all but forgotten! Before she could stop herself, she had cried out, “No!”

The king whipped around to stare at her. “What?” He held up his hand, and the guards stopped loading her into the wheelbarrow. The king walked quickly over to her, stared deep into her eyes. “Y-e-e-e-s, you know this man, don’t you? But of course; you were caught together, you must have come together, no?” Heart pounding in fear, terrified lest the dwarf should see the truth, Rebekha frantically shook her head no. But the king smiled; he had seen the truth in her eyes--knew that this other human meant more to this woman than the world. “No, you do know him! And know him well,

if I'm not mistaken." The king stepped back, stroking his beard, in deep thought for a moment. "Interesting," he muttered.

"Yer Majistie?" prompted one of the guards.

"Hm? Oh, yes. Take her away, back to the prison. Have her await my judgment in her cell. Oh, don't worry, my beauty," said the king mockingly to Rebekha. "Your fate is sealed, I'm sure. But I wouldn't want you to miss your friend's... sentencing."

The king waved a hand dismissively and walked back to his throne. The guards loaded Rebekha back into the wheelbarrow and drove her back to the prison.

The prisonkeeper smiled at her return, opening the door with much ceremony. The guards wheeled her into the cell and dumped her--with no ceremony whatever--onto the hard, stone floor. The prisonkeeper scuttled forward and cut the ropes binding her wrists, then backed quickly out of the cell, slamming the door and locking it.

Rebekha took only a moment to rub the circulation back into her wrists, then she was crawling over to where Jakub still lay. She reached out and rolled him onto his back, to see him, and could not repress a gasp.

Jakub's once handsome, rugged face was swollen and raw from beating. Caked blood covered one eye, and both lips were cracked and torn. His cheek was heavily bruised, and a deep gash marred his forehead. Whispering his name frantically, Rebekha tried to bring him back to consciousness, kissing his wounds and caressing his face ever so gently. Slowly, he responded, moaning in pain at first but gradually becoming aware of his surroundings and his company. As he grew more lucid, Rebekha could not keep herself from crying, and he soon found himself soothing her, stroking her hair. "Shh, shh," he said, "there, there, it's all right, my darling. I'm okay, just very sore." Crying tears of gratitude, she cradled him to her chest. "Where are we? What's going on? Last I remember is being attacked by dwarves."

Sitting him up, still cradling his head against her breast, she quietly told him of what had happened--how they'd been ambushed and captured, brought to the jail, and of her meeting with the king. Her voice strained, her eyes red, and her face flushed, she told him of what the dwarves had said about her son. Jakub closed his eyes in anger, spit out an epithet.

"It's not true, Rebekha, you must know that."

"Of course I know it, beloved," she said. "My Danyl just would not do such a thing! But the fact that they had to use that story... that they could not just say the truth, that they had brutally murdered him as a sport..." she could not go on. Now it was Jakub's turn to cradle Rebekha, to console her, to comfort her.

"But the worst of it was when the king asked of you," she said through her tears. "I didn't know what to do, what to say." She looked up into his eyes, and he could see the fear in her own. "What will they do to us... to you? I could bear to die, but to see you killed... to know that I was responsible for your death... that would be unbearable."

"Shh, shh, there, it's okay," said Jakub. "You're not going to die. I have no intention of dying." Closing his eyes, he rocked her back and forth, slowly, caressing her long hair. "We'll figure a way out of this, my love," he said. "We'll figure a way out."

## X

But there was nothing they could do. Jakub tested the prison bars time and time again, each time hoping that by some unforeseen miracle the steel had transformed into jelly within the past half hour, perhaps. Each time he strained at the bars, the guard outside laughed and called down the hall to another, unseen dwarf. Answering guffaws could be heard floating back towards the cell.

After the eight such attempt, as Jakub walked dejectedly away from the bars, Rebekha's patience snapped. "Gods' sake, Jake," she snapped at him. "Give it up. There's no way to escape. We're stuck here, like it or not, till they decide what they're going to do to us. So quit trying. Even if you did break the bars, where would you go? What would you do?" She sat back, snarling.

"At least I'm trying something dammit!" Jakub shot back. "I don't like it any more than you do, but if I just sit here, I'll go mad! I have to do something! What are you doing to help us escape?" Breathing hotly, he glared at Rebekha.

She sat there, staring at him, deeply hurt. It was the first time the two of them had ever snapped at each other like that. His hard expression softened at seeing the pain in her eyes, and he went to her immediately. "Oh, 'Bekha,'" he said, reaching out to her. "Oh, 'Bekha, I'm so sorry. I really am. I didn't mean to snap, I just..." She put two fingers on his lips to silence him. "Shh, it's okay," she said. "I understand. I know you didn't

mean it. It's the waiting. It's getting to us. It's all right." She moved her hand away and smiled slightly. "Our first fight."

Jakub smiled too. "Does that mean we get to make up now?" She laughed. He leaned in and kissed her gently, his hands sliding up her back. She pulled away, a slight smile playing on her lips. "But darling," she said, "what about the guards?"

"What guards?" he asked, pulling her towards him, laying her back on the ground, his hands unfastening her tunic. She sighed deeply and lost herself to his touch, her anguish forgotten, her pain forgotten, the guards forgotten.

## XI

Some hours later, the cell door banged open and seven heavily armed dwarven guards entered. Two kept Rebekha at bay while the other five set about tying Jakub up like some slain animal. The whole time, their eyes never broke contact. Jakub was forced on his back on a wheelbarrow, much like the one she'd been forced onto, and wheeled out. As the seven left the cell, slamming the door behind them, Rebekha crawled over to the bars, staring after her lover until they'd wheeled him out of sight.

"Where are they taking him?" she whispered sadly to herself.

"T' th' audience chamber," said the prisonkeeper, stroking his chin. He faced Rebekha and smiled a gap-toothed smile and emitted a wheezing laugh. "I woudna count 'n seein' me lover agin, if I was ye, dearie." He wheezed again and returned his attention to his whittling.

"Oh, Jake," she whispered. She leaned against a wall, her arms folded across her chest, eyes closed, remembering their last contact, hours ago, on the prison floor. Her body ached. "Jake, how did I ever let you get involved in this?"

## XII

Hours passed. Rebekha slept for a while, and dreamed of her son as he had been in life--young, vibrant, rambunctious, lovable. She awoke with tears running down her face.

A sound from the outer hall made her look up. The dwarven guards were returning with the wheelbarrow. It was empty.

“Where is he?” In a moment she was on her feet, shouting at the dwarves.  
“What have you done with him?”

Ignoring her questions, the dwarves set about unlocking the cell door. Rebekha tensed. As soon as the door was opened, as one of the guards attempted to enter, she lashed out with a foot. She caught the dwarf right on the throat, below the neck, sending him sprawling back. He crashed into a companion; both dwarves fell to the ground.

Rebekha spared only the briefest instant to congratulate herself--she had not expected that to work--before she jumped over the two bodies sprawled at the cell door. She quickly took stock of her situation--there were two more armed dwarves, as well as the grizzled old prisonkeeper. She reached out and grabbed the prisonkeeper by the scruff of his neck, twisting his arm behind his back in a move Jakub had taught her. She let go his neck for only a moment, just long enough to grab one of the guard's knife, which she pressed against her prisoner's throat. “Move and I'll kill him.”

“Ballocks!” said one of the guards. “Y'aven't th' guts t' kill another dwarf, gell. Now, be res'nable, let 'im go now, an' come wi' us like a good gell, eh? What d'ye sye t' that? Ye're in enough trouble as 'tis, where's th' sense in makin' things worse fer ye'self?” Arms spread wide, the speaker stepped towards her.

She took a compensatory step backwards, pulled the dwarf's arm up, and pressed the blade of the dagger hard against his skin. “I tell you, take one more step and I'll kill him.”

“An I tells ye, y'aven't the guts f'r it,” replied the guard with a snarl. Drawing his own knife, he stepped forward again. The other three followed suit, fanning out, intending, she was sure, to surround her. She stepped back again, pressing the dagger against her prisoner.

“Stay back!” The dwarves stepped forward again. Gritting her teeth, Rebekha adjusted her grip on the dagger and drew it quickly across the dwarf's throat. He called out in one last scream of agony, which turned to a gurgle. A warm liquid sprayed over her arm. She pushed the body forward, into the other four dwarves, and turned and ran down the corridor.

### XIII

*What have I done? Oh gods in heaven what have I done?*

The full horror of it had finally sunken in, as Rebekha ran mindlessly down the cramped, twisting passageways, the blood of the slain dwarf still wet on her forearms. All her talk, all her bravado in front of Jake--her vocalized intentions to murder the dwarves in revenge for her slain son Danyl--that's all it had been, really, talk. She knew that now. She knew it the moment she'd felt the first drop of life as it sprayed from the dwarf's neck. She had killed a dwarf, and it had brought no pleasure! Only horror. No relief, only agony. And so she ran, blinded by her own terror, not knowing where she was going, not caring.

She stopped and leaned against the wall, catching her breath, trying desperately to get her thoughts in order. She squeezed her hands into fists, trying to regain control of her wild emotions. A sharp pain in her palms did the trick. She looked down and saw that she still held the knife, still wet with the dwarf's blood; mingled, now, with her own. The sight of the bloody dagger cleared her mind, made it obvious what she had to do. Her mouth opened, lips forming one word: "Escape."

It wouldn't be that easy, she knew; in fact it wouldn't be easy at all. Not only had she, a prisoner, escaped the dwarven prisons, she had killed a dwarf! That can't make me very popular, she realized with a wry grin. She cocked her head, listening for a moment, trying to ascertain if any dwarves were looking for her. She couldn't hear any. She exhaled a sigh of relief. Good. With any luck it will be a while before any real alarm is raised. By then. . . she shook her head.

She looked around, trying to see if there was something--anything--which might give a hint as to her location relative to the nearest way out. Remembering that most of her travels in here had been on her back in a wheelbarrow, she arched her back and looked at the ceiling. She stopped short. In a way she could not describe, this felt familiar. She walked down the hall a bit more, in the direction she'd been coming originally, stopping now and then to gaze at the ceiling. Yes, this was definitely familiar. More excited now, she ran down the hall--or at least, moved in as close to a run as she could given the low roof.

As she ran, she grew conscious of a sudden increase in the noise. She ignored it, however; in her desire to escape she felt it was of little importance. Until she saw the large iron door.

Suddenly she realized why this had seemed so familiar. On the other side of that door, was the king and his main audience chamber.

*But where are the guards?* she thought, looking frantically around. She was sure the dwarf who'd brought her down here the first time had spoken with some guards before they'd entered. But where were they?

Suddenly she heard noise behind her. It was a distant, quiet noise, but it was getting louder. Guards! her mind screamed. And they were gaining fast, from the sound of it.

What was she to do? It was either stand and fight against assuredly suicidal odds, or enter the chamber and. . . what? Plead for her and Jakub's lives? She snorted. Not after killing a dwarf, she knew. She sighed, adjusted her grip on the dagger. The fight it was, then.

Ready for battle, she waited, listening to the sounds of the guards draw closer, determined to die fighting.

## XV

The battle didn't last long. Rebekha found herself facing no less than eight stocky dwarves, each armed to the teeth and scowling with hatred. She fended off their attacks as long as she could, but her physical exhaustion, combined with the little shock that remained following her first ever cold-blooded murder (not to mention her concern about the welfare of her beloved Jakub), severely limited her fighting ability. The dwarves overpowered her within moments, and before she knew it, she was being forced, at swordpoint, to enter the chamber of the dwarven king. Part of her mind screamed at her, told her to just stay there and let them kill her, but she resisted the urge--she had to be sure that Jakub was okay.

And so she found herself, once again, at the feet of the king of the dwarves, only this time tied up and surrounded by dozens of sharp swordblades and literally thousands of angry dwarves, all screaming for her blood. The king sat on his throne, stroking his beard, as before, only this time his eyes were alight with an evil glow, and his face was twisted in a deep scowl. He sat there, staring at Rebekha (who returned his glare with a proud, if somewhat exhausted, scowl of her own), and allowed the curses and shouts to continue for a few moments before raising his hand.

As the hand went up, the voices died down, and so in moments the chamber was silent, except for the breathing of the assembled dwarves, their king, and their prisoner. The king stared at Rebekha a while longer before speaking. When he did so, his voice was deep and cold, like the caverns themselves.

“So, my dear, you tried to escape, did you? And killed one of my guards in the process.” He shook his head. “Tsk, tsk. Better to have waited in your cell like a good girl. This only makes things more difficult than they needed to be.” He blew out a breath, shook his head. “Bring him out.”

At the king’s command, several dwarves near the throne began dragging a cage out into the open, placing it in the center of the audience chamber. Rebekha let out a low moan of defeat.

Inside the cage was Jakub, his wrists and ankles tied to four posts set in the corners of the cage. His body was held up a foot off the ground by a small silver pole which was set in the middle of the cage, pressed against his lower back. His head was pulled back, hair tied to a ring in the bottom of the cage. From where she knelt, surrounded by dwarven swords, she could see his face, twisted in agony and terror. From the roof of the cage were suspended two battle axes, ingeniously connected to each other and a long pole extending out of the roof of the cage by a single twine. If the twine were to break, Rebekha saw, the blades would swing down and neatly sever Jakub’s head from his body. She shook her head, moaned aloud. Oh, Jakub, she thought. Oh, my beloved Jakub. I never intended this, I swear it. Please, please forgive me. Almost as though he’d heard her thoughts, Jakub suddenly opened his eyes and stared at Rebekha, hard. But there was no anger in those eyes, no resentment towards her, only love. Deep, pure, beautiful love. It broke Rebekha’s heart to see it. Suddenly she knew what she had to do. She stood up, ignoring the threatening glances the guards gave her, and raised her manacled arms in supplication to the king.

“Please, your majesty, let him go. He is only here because I persuaded him to come along. He bears you no ill will, means you no harm. You have me, and rightly so—I have killed one of your kind. I deserve your punishment, no less. But not him. He is a good man, and should not be punished for my crimes. Please, I beg of you, let him go.” There! Exhausted, she sank back down to her knees.

The king stroked his beard a few more times, a contemplative look on his face. At length he hopped down from his throne and walked towards Rebekha, stopping just next to her. He looked from Jakub to Rebekha, back to Jakub again, and settled his eyes finally on Rebekha. He stroked his beard again and said:

“Your pleas have not fallen on deaf ears, my girl, be sure of that.” He grasped her chin in his fingers, raising her head till it was on a level with his own. He smiled an evil smile, and spoke into her face. His breath was rank, and it was all Rebekha could do to keep herself from retching. “Not

deaf, but not sympathetic, either.” He looked at Jakub again. “You see, it matters not to me why this young man is here. I care not whether you dragged him or whether he came freely. The point is, he is trespassing, as are you. That alone merits some punishment.

“But more than that, my guards tell me that this man is one of the human kingdom’s chief guards. And human guards hunt dwarves! So, he too has killed dwarves in his time, and deserves a strict punishment.” He turned away from her, looked at a guard standing next to Jakub’s cage, nodded. “Do it.”

The guard lifted a large battle axe and swung at the rope holding the two blades inside the cage. The two axes fell down, carved through Jakub’s neck like a hot knife through butter. His head fell to the ground with a wet plop, his sightless eyes staring at Rebekha beseechingly.

“NOOOOOO!!” No longer caring what happened to her, Rebekha stood up and threw herself as best she could at the king, who had moved away from her and now stood several feet away, stroking his infernal beard. Tied up as she was, she didn’t even make half the distance between them. She fell to the ground, bashing her knees hard against the stone. Ignoring the pain, she stood up again and leapt again, landing a little closer to her target, who still stood there, some eight feet away, looking at her with an expression of utter contempt.

She struggled to her feet, gathered her strength for one last leap at her target, manacled arms outstretched, fingers set to claw his face to shreds. She tensed her legs, leapt high in the air, forcing herself forward . . .

A dwarven guard drew his sword and positioned himself just in her path. She felt herself tackle him, felt the cold steel carve into her abdomen, felt a sickening sensation as her intestines were carved in two. She closed her eyes, felt a cold blackness wash over her. . .

. . . She was floating down a long tunnel. The tunnel itself was black as pitch, but she could see, in the distance, a brilliant white light. . .

. . . She knew that on the other side of that light was a paradise, a place where she could rest. . .

. . . And she knew that on the other side of that light, a little boy was waiting, arms outstretched, waiting for his mommy to come find him at last.