



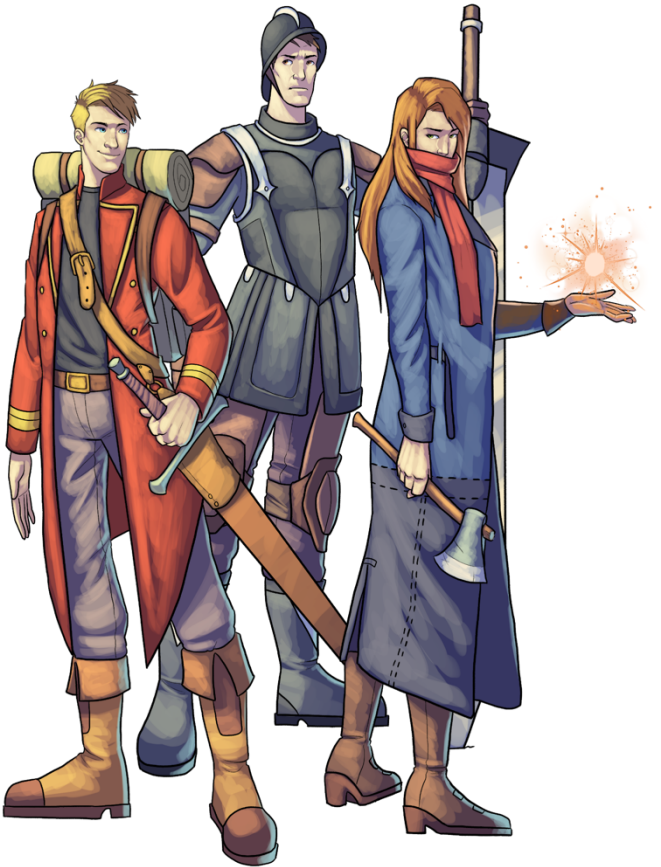
Tales of Mithrym

Den of Thieves

Jimmy Clephane

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A Tale of Mithrym



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Den of Thieves

<i>Random Encounter</i>	6
<i>Give and Take</i>	13
<i>Investigation</i>	21
<i>Storyteller</i>	30
<i>Stealth</i>	39
<i>Stand Off</i>	47
<i>Dash</i>	57
<i>Lore Master</i>	66
<i>Direction</i>	73
<i>Bog and Brier</i>	82
<i>The Other Way</i>	90
<i>Attack of Opportunity</i>	99
<i>Grandad</i>	107
<i>Said and Done</i>	116

Random Encounter

Derville Anyth sat by the stream, cleaning the blade of her hatchet. Her shoulder ached from a heavy bruising that was settling in with the promise of a hard night's sleep ahead. Beside her, her two companions were busily shouting at one another.

“It was practice!” Dukki roared as he sat cleaning his armour.

The water of the stream babbled as the three of them worked busily to patch up their equipment and bind their wounds. The linen wrapped around Dukki's arm was already showing patches of fresh blood seeping through.

“It was a bear!” Shouted Elvin beside him. He was dressed in a long berry-red coat and had one arm wrapped in a fresh bandage. He checked his

sword and re-sheaved it. He then began to look over their various supplies. The beast had ripped its way through several bags, spilling out various rations across the grass.

Derville pocketed her small axe and joined Elvin in his work. Much of the sacking had had to be used to bind their wounds and there was not much left in the way of storage. Her heart fell as she realised that this was not much of an issue in and of itself as there was precious little in the way of food that had been undamaged and not lost to the river.

The two of them filled the one remaining bag with what little they could scavenge then set about tearing the remaining linens and stowing them away for future use.

As they worked, Dukki finished cleaning his armour and began buckling it back on again. The enormous man then stood straight and stretched, wincing as he did so from the pain in his arm.

“I could do with something to numb the pain.” He said. “Preferably served in pints.”

“We haven’t passed an inn for at least the last two days.” Derville sighed. “But we’d better find one by nightfall if we can. We’ve not got enough food to go more than about another day.”

Elvin looked over the three of them. “I am not so much worried about food as about rest. I expect we could forage if it came to it but I would not want to sleep out of doors with fresh blood calling out to any passing beast. That bear may not have lived alone. There could be another out looking for it and I am sure it would not think twice about trying to make a meal of us.”

“Well come on then,” Derville said, shouldering the bag, “off on the road again!”

The three of them made their way back to the path. The dry ground threw up dust with every step.

“That was a quick bit of thinking back there by the way.” Elvin said to Derville as they walked along.

“It would have worked better if Dukki hadn’t barged into me.”

“Hey! I got the killing blow, didn’t I?” Dukki protested.

“Only because I was distracting it!”
Broke in Derville.

“The important thing is that we stopped it.” Elvin interjected. “Still, I would much rather have not faced it at all.”

“It was going to go after our food!”
Dukki roared. “I had to do something. It was protection.”

“I thought it was practice.” Derville said with a wink.

Elvin laughed.

“That too.” The big man smiled a broad smile.

“Well, anyway. I will be very happy if we can find some proper beds for

tonight." Elvin said as he strained his eyes to look further down the road. The track was broad now and beginning to slope downhill. With any luck he would soon be able to make out where they were heading for.

Just as the horizon began to dip though they all leapt to the side as the rattling of a large cart approached as if from nowhere. The horses' hooves beat hard on the ground and the driver cracked a whip as the cart rolled past. The man seemed to be in a great hurry to get to wherever he was going. As it drew past them though, the three could make out great piles of food on the back.

Loaves of bread, baskets of fruits and wheels of cheese were stacked carefully. Beside them, the sound of clinking bottles in wooden crates could be heard from under a heavy canvas.

Derville's stomach turned as she looked at it all.

"Now, now," Elvin smiled, "no falling back on your old tricks.

"Don't you trust me?" Derville winked.

The cart sped off down the road.

"Besides," she added, "even I can't jump on a cart going that fast!"

As the dust cleared, all three felt their spirits rise as down the road they could make out the shapes of buildings. Some way away but well within an afternoon's march they could make out a town, surrounded by a high stone wall and filled with narrow houses with high, gabled rooves. Even from this distance, they could make out a busy movement of people within the streets and then, background to it all ... the sea!

"Come on!" Elvin said with a smile as he began heading down the road. The other two quickly made to follow him. "I warrant that cart must be

heading to an inn or tavern somewhere down there! If we can keep a good pace we should be there by nightfall.”

Happy as they were at the thought of a hot meal, they soon found they could not keep a strong walking pace, stopping several times to rest their aching muscles and re-dress their wounds. It was well past nightfall by the time they arrived at the outskirts of the town and there was little sound coming from inside the high walls.

The huge gates were propped open and a large sign beside them declared the town to be Linngan. Through the gates they could see a long cobbled street. A smell of freshly caught fish and salty air was coming up to greet them.

Some way ahead, they could make out the flickering torches of an inn. The three stumbled forwards, happy to have found an end to their journey.

Give and Take

The three of them made their way through the gates. They almost leapt out of their skins though as a sharp voice called out from the shadows to their left.

“Who goes there?”

They all froze and looked around. A man, dressed in a leather jerkin and holding a pole-axe, stepped out of the darkness towards them. He looked the three of them up and down with a heavy suspicion.

“Well, come on then. What’s your business?”

“I am Lieutenant Elvin Ranlee, “ Elvin stepped forward holding up his hands and smiling, “and these are my companions, Dukki Reptan and Derville Anyth.” He gestured to the two. Derville did not feel much like joining in the pleasantries as she began eyeing up the road back out of town again.

“Lieutenant?” The guard looked slightly puzzled. “Recruiting officer, are you? We don’t want no one shipping out shilling-takers from this port. You can try that sort of thing somewhere else!”

Elvin looked somewhat taken aback.

“No, no, no, nothing like that! I say ‘Lieutenant’ Late,” he emphasised the word, “of his majesty’s men of foot. Retired for some time now, I promise. My friends and I are just travelling.” He smiled what he hoped was a friendly smile. “We were hoping to have a look around your town.”

The guard held a stern gaze.

“Especially at your inns. I’m parched.” Dukki called from behind.

“We have money,” Derville added, “we need somewhere for the night.”

The guard brought his pole-axe up and placed the butt of it on the cobbled road beside him.

“Very well then,” he said, “there’s an inn down the way.”

The three untensed together as relief rolled over them.

“But if you’ll take my advice you’ll head strait there and stay there ‘til morning. There’s been a lot of strange folk about recently and we don’t like strangers ‘looking round’ after night fall. Understand?”

“Absolutely!” Elvin bowed then led the other two away down the road. “Thank you, warden!” He called out as they hurried along. The guard seemed to shout something back but they were too focussed on the idea of hot food and soft beds to worry now.

The street was wide but the buildings either side jutted out with each floor. They were very tall and their uppermost stories almost touched one-another over the heads of the group as they made their way along. The path continued to slope downwards and in-between the buildings they could make out the

docks at the furthest end of the town. Several large boats were moored up to the jetty but there seemed to be almost no-one out and about.

The windows of the houses they passed were all heavily shuttered with iron hooks holding them firmly into place and little noise seemed to be coming from them.

“If it weren’t for the welcome I’d have said we’d found a ghost town.” Dukki said with a sniff as he took it all in. “Don’t seem a friendly bunch, do they?”

“Lay off it, Dukki. It has got to be midnight at least. I cannot blame anyone for being in bed at this time of the night.” Elvin yawned. “A pass time I fully intend to join them in as soon as may be.”

At the end of the road there was indeed an inn. Its doors were ajar and orange lamp light spilled out onto the cobbles. The road itself split around the enormous building and continued in diagonals towards the

docks. Faint sounds could be heard from inside but there did not seem to be much activity at all.

The three made their way in.

They found themselves in a large room with a deep fireplace set in to one wall. Embers were smouldering and giving off some small warmth. At the far end a counter ran across with high shelves set into the wall behind it. The whole place seemed entirely empty of people.

They made their way up to the counter and Dukki slammed his fist down upon it.

Elvin winced.

“Oy!” Dukki called out.

Footsteps could be heard from somewhere further back and moments later a door opened and a woman walked through.

“Who’s causing a racket at this time of ... oh, hullo! Can I help you?”

Elvin stepped in front of Dukki.

“Yes,” he smiled, “please. We were looking for some rooms for the night. It has been a long march, I must say, and we were hoping to get a good rest as soon as possible.”

The woman smiled.

“Of course!” She said, pulling down a ledger from one of the shelves. “I take it the young lady will want her own room. Will you and the,” she looked at Dukki, “gentleman be sharing or would that be three rooms?”

“I’m not topping and tailing,” Dukki said with a smirk, “if we’re sharing then you’re on the floor.”

“That will be three rooms.” Elvin reached into his bag and pulled out several coins.

“Suits me, we could do with the business!” She grabbed at a nearby quill and scratched at the page. “That’ll be three gold for the night. Breakfast included, of course.”

“Of course.” Elvin smiled and handed over the coins.

The three of them made their way through the door and the woman showed them each to their rooms. The friends said good night to each other and settled in.

Derville shut the door to her room and sat down on the bed.

A candle was burning on the nightstand. The room felt gloomy in the dull light. She lay down for a moment on the bed and tried to settle. It just did not feel right though. She felt penned in. Standing up and looking at the window, she moved quietly over and pulled the sash up. The frame shifted and the window opened. With a bit of work she was then able to release the shutters. They swung back with a gentle creak that echoed down the street outside.

The warm night air came in to meet her and she breathed a sigh of relief.

Just then though, a scream came up from the floor below. In the street outside, Derville saw light spill out on to the road and a small figure seemed to fall out and scramble to dash away.

She made her way out to the hall. Elvin and Dukki had apparently come to see what the noise was too. Rushing down the stairs they found the woman that had served them standing with a number of other people around a heap of smashed plates and glasses.

“I told you not to leave the doors open!” One called out.

“That’s all well and good but how were we to get any business if we didn’t?”

Elvin stepped forwards. The group fell silent as they turned on him.

“What seems to be the matter?” He asked.

“Thieves.”

Investigation

The sun rose slowly over the port and the streets soon filled with people. It had been a long night with very little sleep for anyone at the inn. Dukki and Derville were sat at a table eating breakfast while Elvin spoke with the landlady.

“What do you suppose he’s asking?” Derville said, grabbing some more bread.

“No idea,” Dukki replied, “I’m about done with his talk of ‘duty’ though.” He yawned a long, deep yawn and stretched his arms wide, almost knocking over one of the waiters.

Just then, they heard footsteps as Elvin walked over and sat down with them. He picked up a sausage and bit it as he leaned in conspiratorially.

“Well, that was illuminating.” He said with a sly smile. “It turns out that there has been a lot of this sort of thing going on recently.

Apparently, aside from the damages, it was the silverware that was actually stolen last night. Ms Green, the landlady, says she knows it must have been the Grocer, Mr Smith.” Elvin leaned back in his chair. “Apparently he accused her,” he pointed with the sausage as he spoke, “of stealing his, which went missing a couple of nights back. But apparently, she reckons that his was stolen by the Widow Tamerlane who accused him of stealing her ...”

“That’s ridiculous.” Derville broke in.

“I know! And that’s not even the half of it! Apparently, Mr ...”

“No, I mean, it couldn’t have been him!”

Elvin looked puzzled.

“What do you mean?” He asked.

“I mean, well Mr Smith is that broad man that was in here earlier, shouting at her, right?”

“Oh yeah! I heard that!” Dukki laughed. “Hell of a show!”

Derville glowered at him.

“Well look,” she continued, “he’s got to be at least 6 foot tall, right?”

“About that, I would say,” Elvin agreed, “but where are you going with this?”

“I saw the thief running away last night. I wanted some air. I saw them scramble down the street. They couldn’t have been more than about 4 foot high or so.”

“Are you sure about that?” Elvin leaned in, his face a picture of curiosity.

“Absolutely!” Derville went on. “I couldn’t see their face.” She thought for a moment. “Or much of their body at all for that matter. They were dressed in baggy clothes and a hood.”

“So what ... a child?” Dukki gave in and joined in the questions.

“If it was then it could not have been Mr Smith.” Elvin stroked his chin. “I spoke to him earlier. Not exactly a pleasant man but he answered enough. Anyway, he has no children. As far as I am aware there are only him and his brother that run that shop together.”

They all sat quietly for a while as they finished their food.

“Which way did they go?” Elvin asked.

“Who?” Dukki looked around.

“No, I mean the thief. Last night.”

“Down towards the docks.” Derville pointed.

“Maybe one of the families down there could place them.” Elvin got up. “Come on, you two! Duty calls.”

Dukki growled.

The sun was well on its way to noon when the three of them finally made their way into the dockyards. Several large ships were moored up along

the jetty. Their tall masts stood like trees against the clear blue sky. The waters of the sea lapped against the coast with a gentle swishing sound and a large number of gulls flew overhead as teams hauled boxes, bags and bottles onto and off of the ships.

Dukki looked enthralled as he watched the busy lines of workers move this way and that. Elvin began hunting for someone to talk to. Just then though, a cry came up from the mass of people as a large crate began to slip. Dukki ran forward and, wedging himself between the box and the ground, drew it back up. There was a small round of applause during which he bowed with a smile.

A tall, stocky man stepped forward.

“Quick work there!” He said to Dukki. “You may have just saved us a fortune in lost whiskey.” Dukki’s eyes gleamed.

Elvin stepped between them.

“Hello,” he said, reaching out a hand, “I am Lieutenant Elvin Ranlee. My friends and I are investigating a burglary and I was hoping you might be able to help answer some questions.”

The tall man’s face broke into a frown.

“Hmm,” he said with a growl, “I can’t say as I’m all too fond of questions. He looked back over at the crate of whiskey being carried away. “But seeing as you’ve just saved us a pay-out, make them quick.”

He gestured to a few barrels and sat down. Elvin sat down opposite and the other two soon joined them.

The man continued. “We don’t like interference round here. We’re a busy dock and his majesty’s generally seen fit to leave us be. We rarely get a warden,” he looked Elvin up and down, “let alone a military man like yourself.” He sighed and shook his head. “But perhaps it was inevitable. What with all the thefts

these past few months. This used to be a good town, you know.”

“When did that change?” Elvin asked.

“Can’t say as I could really tell you. I’ve been foreman of these docks for about thirty years now. We don’t get much trouble down this way. We keeps the ships locked down at night and there’s a few lads on guard back up the way.” He pointed up towards the road then chuckled. “I tell you, they saw your bodyguard coming! Big chap like that! Had one of them run down here to warn me just before you showed up.”

“Do they keep a watch all night?” Elvin asked.

“Of course!” The foreman answered. “We’re not wizards, you know. There’s not many thieves as can’t work their way through an honest-to-Een lock and bolt. We keep a watch all through the night.”

“Did anyway come down here last night?”

“Why? You in pursuit?”

“Sort of,” Elvin gestured up towards the inn, “there was a child seen running away down the road towards the docks here.”

“What, a kid?”

“Yes.”

The foreman laughed. “Ain’t no kids allowed down this way. There’s a watch kept just past the inn. Everything from there onwards is working ground. Adults only, you understand. Who was it as saw them? Old Frank? He sees all sorts of things after he’s had a few.” The foreman winked. “Like I say, used to be a nice town.” He sighed. “Thieves and drunkards the lot of them now.”

“It was definitely a child.” Derville broke in. “And we’re quite sure they came this way.” She thought for a moment. “Or at least that they started to.”

The foreman stood up and dusted himself off. “I don’t know what your witness thinks they saw but there ain’t no kids round here and that’s a fact. Now if you’ll excuse me, we’ve got a lot to get done today.”

“But ...” Elvin started.

“If you’re after arresting a kid, you’re best off trying up at the schoolhouse.”

The foreman walked away and began shouting at the workers.

Elvin sighed.

“It sounds as though we are done here then. Come on.”

Storyteller

The three of them made their way up through the town towards the schoolhouse. Outside it they could see a large number of children running about and playing while two adults were watching them and occasionally intervening in disputes.

“Excuse me!” Elvin called out as they got near.

One of the teachers made their way over. “Can I help you?”

“This may sound a bit odd, but we are looking into last night’s burglary. We noticed a child running away at the time, I was wondering if I could ask you some questions.”

“A child? What? In the middle of the night? Come on in, I don’t know what you think you saw but none of us lets our children out after dark round here. It’s not safe! But go ahead and ask your questions ...”

Elvin and Derville followed the teacher inside.

Dukki made to follow but as he did, he noticed that a lot of the children had run over and were eyeing up the sword slung across his back. He smiled his broad smile.

“Hello there!” he called to them. Then, with a flourish he drew the blade. The children whooped and cheered. He spun it high to more cheering and a round of applause. The other teacher looked somewhat disapprovingly at him. “Sorry!” He said with a slight grimace and re-sheaved his sword. The children all moaned and began to sulk as they turned back to their play.

Dukki thought for a moment. He was not enjoying playing detective and felt much happier with an audience. Let the others ask the questions. “Tell you what,” he said with a smile, the children turned back to look at him, “if your teacher doesn’t mind, how about I tell you all a story!”

The children cheered and ran other to him. Dukki sat down. The teacher came over and stood near as he began.

“This is one my granny used to tell me. She was good at stories was my granny. Let’s see if I can get it right.”

He put on the air of a storyteller and continued.

“In the beginning, Mother Immu was jealous, she was angry because Een had given his children so many wonderful things, things that Immu had thought were hers, and she wanted them back. She could not take them back though, for Een had blessed his children. So Immu vowed to cause trouble for the Children of Een and she became Mother to all sorts of strange Monsters. She made them all to look like the Children of Een, or at least to what she believed the Children of Een to look like. She made kobolds, goblins and orcs. Goblins were the most like us, standing about our

height and having clever, strong hands that they could use to wield weapons just like us! But Mother Immu gave goblins snouts like pigs ...”

At this point Dukki began to oink, much to the laughter of the children around him. “... and ears like foxes ...”

Dukki then screeched like a fox on the hunt.

“... and fuzzy heads like bunnies!”

He then pulled up his hands in front of him and screwed up his face in an impression of a hopping rabbit. The children around were roaring and squeaking with laughter. Dukki hushed his voice as he continued.

“... But they were mean you see and she sent them out into Mithrym to cause trouble. There was one particularly wicked and miserable Goblin that came all the way to Angmark! And he lived under a big

stone bridge, not far from here, a long, long, long time ago.”

The children stopped laughing and drew in, their faces pictures of curiosity and intrigue. Dukki continued.

“Now this particular goblin ...”

“What was his name?” A child broke in excitedly, raising her hand as she asked. “His name?” Dukki thought fast. “Eric.”

“Eric the Goblin?” The girl looked puzzled and suspicious of this answer. All around her the children began laughing again and she soon joined them. Cries and shouts of “Eric the Goblin!” erupted from the other children as Dukki roared a laugh as well.

“As I was saying,” he said with a smile, “Eric the Goblin was especially tricky. He liked to jump out at travellers and surprise them. And on one particular day he noticed a man walking towards his bridge.

So he hid as best he could and just as the man came walking up. Stomp, stomp, stomp,” here Dukki stomped his own feet to demonstrate, “Eric jumped out and landed right in front of him!” The children gasped. “Tell me, tell me, son of Een, what do you want from the goblin green?’ Well, the man was scared, as I’m sure you would be too!”

“No I wouldn’t!” shouted one of the children. Dukki smiled. The others shushed them and Dukki continued.

“Well, this man was scared anyway and he said ‘Oh no! Oh no! Oh please, please, please! Don’t steal my purse oh goblin green!’ Now the goblin winked and said with a smile ‘Oh I promise you, I won’t steal your purse.’ But as the man went to walk on the goblin pinched at him and grabbed the man’s purse! The man was so shaken that he ran away back down the lane!”

Gasps came up from the children. “But he promised!”

Dukki winked and continued.

“So Eric laughed and hid again just as someone else came walking up. This time it was a lady! Stomp, stomp, stomp,” Dukki stomped his feet again, “Eric jumped out again and landed right in front of her!” The children gasped again. “Tell me, tell me, daughter of Een, what do you want from the goblin green?” Well, the woman was scared just like the man before. ‘Oh no! Oh no! Oh please, please, please! Don’t steal my jewels oh goblin green!’”

One of the children who seemed to be thinking hard began “Oh no! He’s going to ...” but was quickly shushed by the others.

“Now the goblin winked and said with a smile ‘Oh I promise you, I won’t steal your jewels.’ But as the lady went to walk on the goblin pinched at her and grabbed her jewels! The lady was so shaken that he ran away back down the lane!”

The children drew closer in towards Dukki.

“So,” he continued, “Eric laughed and hid again just as someone else came walking up. This time it was not one someone but two someones! A boy and a girl! Stomp, stomp, stomp,” Dukki stomped his feet, “Eric jumped out again and landed right in front of them!” The children gasped. “Tell me, tell me, children of Een, what do you want from the goblin green?’ Now the children were clever and they listened at school and they knew that when Mother Immu made her children she taught them to only ever tell lies. So they looked at each other then back to the goblin and said ‘Oh no! Oh no! Oh please, please, please! Don’t jump off the bridge oh goblin green!’”

The children fell silent as they thought about this.

“Oh I promise you, I won’t jump off the bridge!’ And then as the children

made to cross, old Eric hopped up onto the edge of the bridge and leapt down ...” Dukki made a whistling sound as of a massive weight falling a long way down. “... SPLASH! Into the river below! And the children crossed the bridge!”

The children around Dukki laughed and clapped and cheered.

Just then, Elvin and Derville came back out of the school house followed by the teacher.

“Uh oh!” Dukki said with a smile. “It looks like I’m off again!”

The children groaned. “But can’t we have another story?”

“Sorry,” Dukki smiled again, “duty calls!”

The children cheered and waved as the three made their way back down towards the docks.

“So what did you find out?” Dukki asked.

Stealth

“This is getting ridiculous,” Elvin was explaining, “the way they all talk about each other you would think that there is no trust in this town at all. They all seem to have someone in mind that stole something from them at some point and they all seem to be the suspect of a different theft somewhere else!”

The three of them had made their way back to the inn. The sun was working its way down the sky again and the street seemed to have calmed as most of the townsfolk were having their supper. Through the open doors of the tall building they could make out a few people sat at tables, eating and drinking, and at the far end Ms Green seemed to be talking to someone. The conversation was evidently getting quite heated as she began throwing her hands up in the air and they

could see she was shouting about something.

The three turned back to each other.

“Are you sure it was a child you saw?” Elvin asked Derville.

“Certain of it.” She replied. “The figure I saw was shorter than any of the adults I’ve seen around this town.”

“I wonder ...” Elvin stroked his chin thoughtfully. “... You said they were staggering out, didn’t you? Is it possible they were ... kneeling or something?”

Derville laughed.

“What? And hobbling their way across the street?”

“Yes.” Elvin looked quite serious. Derville stopped laughing and rounded on him.

“Are you seriously suggesting ... ?”

“Look over there.” Elvin broken in. “You see that man? Talking to Ms Green.”

Dukki and Derville both looked in through the doorway. They nodded.

“This is going to sound mad,” Elvin went on, “but I have seen him all over the town today. Everywhere we have been. Look! He is wearing a cloak. Even in the bright sunlight he does not want to be properly seen! What do you make of that?”

“That you’re right,” Derville turned back to Elvin, “you are mad!”

“Alright then!” Elvin looked taken aback. “You two keep everyone talking in the inn. I will follow that man when he leaves and see where he goes! You do not have to believe me, just help me to find out for sure. I have a hunch!”

Derville sighed.

“You’re serious, aren’t you?” She looked him up and down. “Okay, I’ll help you.”

Elvin smiled.

“But on one condition!” She raised a finger in the air and held him in her gaze for a moment.

“What’s that?” He asked.

“That you do the distracting,” she turned to the inn, “and I do the sneaking.” She turned back. “Anyone could hear you coming. You’re about as stealthy as ... as ...” She thought hard for a comparison. “... as Dukki!”

Elvin laughed.

Dukki looked slightly taken aback but began to laugh too.

“You have a deal.” Elvin smiled. Derville walked off. “Happy hunting!” Elvin called after her.

Elvin and Dukki continued on into the inn. For a moment, the whole room seemed to fall silent. They made their way over to the bar and the conversations and general chatter started up again.

The cloaked figure turned on them. It was an older man with a short white beard. He was shorter than Elvin, and a long way shorter than Dukki, but he looked sternly up at both of them then moved off quickly towards the door.

Elvin watched him leave. A movement in the street outside seemed to be Derville heading off to track him. Elvin smiled.

“Could we get some supper?” He asked loudly, turning back to the counter. Ms Green looked flustered but straightened up at the request and forced a smile.

“Certainly.” She said. “Just for the two of you?”

“Yes,” Elvin said, “our friend is still out doing some shopping. She will join us a bit later.”

“Very good.” Ms Green made her way out to the kitchens and Dukki and Elvin sat down at an empty table.

A little while later they were brought plates of meat and bread and each a bowl of steaming broth. Dukki called for ale, gulping down the first he was given and then calling for another. Elvin asked for wine and was soon brought a bottle of it.

The sun began to set outside as they ate and drank and watched as more people found their way in from a hard day's work and ordered their own food.

Each of the tables seemed quite insular with little or no conversation between the groups that came in. Looking around, Elvin could see a small stage in one corner, although there seemed to be no sign of any musicians having played here in quite a while.

They finished their food and were just starting to wonder how Derville was getting on when suddenly there came a great commotion from outside.

A crowd of people seemed to be coming up towards the door. The town guard they had met the night before stepped in and banged the butt of his poleaxe hard down onto the floor. The whole room fell silent.

“What’s going on here?” Ms Green called from the counter.

“It looks like we’ve caught the thief.” The guard declared loudly to the room. “Apprehended whilst casing out another robbery by the looks of it. Caught ‘em half way up a wall.”

Elvin smiled, leaning in towards Dukki. “See? I knew it was ...” His words tailed off though as the old man came running in behind the guard.

“I told you! I told you!” He was declaring excitedly. “I knew it!”

Ms Green came running around to meet him.

“You mean ... ?” She began.

“Yes!” He continued. “I saw them going round, checking out all the houses.” He turned and pointed at Elvin. “Happy hunting’ you said! Well now the hunter’s being hunted!” He hopped gleefully on the spot. “I checked with the local barracks, there’s no military police ‘round here at the moment!”

Elvin’s stomach lurched. He and Dukki both stood up as the room of people began to mass around them.

“What is going on here?” Elvin cried out.

Just then, more figures came in through the doorway, drawing behind them another. Wrists tied, stumbling forwards.

“Derville!”

Stand Off

“You have made a grave error, I assure you!” Elvin implored the crowd.

It seemed that most of the town had gathered now. The main room of the inn was packed with Elvin and Dukki well in the middle of it all. Derville was brought forward and held there by the guard.

“We found her watching Archibald Brownstone’s house. She was hiding on the rooftop opposite and watching the doors. Seems pretty suspicious behaviour to me!” He smirked. The crowd around them scoffed.

“It’s not like that!” Derville protested.

“And when he left, she made her way down to it ...” the Guard continued.

“Really, Warden, it is not like ...” Elvin tried to speak but he was quickly cut across by the guard.

“... made her way down to the door. Looking around. Spying!” He pointed a finger at Derville. “If that’s not the first step of a thief then I don’t know what is!”

“Please, Warden, listen to me!” Elvin tried again.

This time the short, old man leapt forward again.

“If it wasn’t for our guard, she could have been off with all my things!” This led to more jeers from the crowd who seemed to be getting quite worked up now.

“Please, listen to reason, we ...” It was no use though, Elvin and Derville seemed to get shouted down no matter what they said.

“And I ain’t no warden!” The guard shouted. “We ain’t had a warden posted here for years now.”

Archibald began to laugh.

“No, but you know what we have got?” He said darkly. “Military protection!” He sounded the words out almost like a spell. “The barracks watch over this port! And I made sure they knew that there was someone impersonating an officer here! They’re on their way to arrest you now!”

“Now steady on!” Elvin shouted. “I am no imposter!”

“Oh yeah!” Archibald leapt towards Elvin and began jabbing him in the chest with his long, bony fingers. “Turning up out of the blue! Asking all sorts of questions! Finding your way into every bit of our town!”

With each jab, the crowd around them jeered.

“If you ask me,” he continued, “I’d say we’ve got them bang to rights!” The crowd roared. “I say we don’t wait! I say we deal with them while we can!”

The crowd roared even louder. Sounds of banging and cries of anger were erupting from all around them.

All of a sudden, with a loud crash, the room fell silent. Dukki's great sword was buried in one of the tables and the enormous man looked furious.

"Enough!" he shouted. "I've no plans on sticking around here if we're not wanted. And anyone that fancies trying to stop me is welcome to try!"

Elvin reached for his sword.

"You see! You see!" Archibald shouted, jumping on the spot and trying to stay as far back from Dukki as he could. "Thieves! Brigands! They mean to kill us all!"

Derville looked around. Every exit was blocked by people. Even the windows could not be reached without a fight! What were they going to do?

But then, cutting through the silence, there came another voice.

“Ranlee?” Every head turned towards the main doors. “Lieutenant Ranlee? Is that you?”

A tall man dressed in the same berry-red as Elvin was making his way into the inn. The crowd parted to let him through. He was thin with pale-skin and short, dark brown hair that was almost black. At his waist hung a sword and in his hands he was holding a fire staff, cocked and sparking slightly from its barrel.

Behind him came two more soldiers, each similarly armed with fire staves.

“Captain Gideon!” Elvin’s voice filled with relief.

“Een’s hammer, man! What are you doing in all this mess?” The captain lowered his staff and signalled to his soldiers to do the same.

“It is a long story, sir!” Elvin let go of his sword and shook the captain’s hand. “We were passing through and we heard about ... well ... everything.

I wanted to help out.” He looked back at Derville and Dukki. “We,” he emphasised the word, “wanted to help out!”

“So this is the young woman they caught, is it?” Gideon pointed at Derville. “And is this your bodyguard’s handywork?” He pointed at the broken table.

“Look it is all a misunderstanding, I assure you!” Elvin implored.

“So she is not a thief?” Gideon asked.

“Well ...” Elvin began. He thought about what little he had learnt of Derville’s past. “... reformed. I promise.”

Derville looked shocked. The crowd around them seemed quite shaken too.

“I think you and I should have a word.” Gideon signalled to the back room of the inn. “Will you give us a minute, land lady?” He looked over at Ms Green. He did not wait for a response though.

Elvin, Derville, Dukki, Gideon and the two other soldiers made their way through. Gideon shut the door behind them.

“Is anyone going to untie me?!” Derville protested.

“Untie a thief caught casing a property? They would have my commission for that!” Gideon snorted. “Reformed, eh?”

“I was pardoned!” Derville attempted to reach into her pocket. “If you untie my hands I could show you.”

Gideon looked at her. He reached inside her coat and pulled out a folded piece of parchment and ...

“A hatchet?” He looked it up and down then placed it on a nearby bench. “One moment.” He read the paper carefully. “This is for Alsager.” He put the paper down beside the axe. “That is miles from here.”

Gideon sighed and sat down.

“I cannot imagine that that mob out there would accept that as proof of innocence.” He gestured to the soldiers. “Untie her, I do not expect her to achieve much with the way they have this place surrounded.”

“She really is innocent though,” Elvin spoke up, “I assure you. We were just trying to get to the bottom of what has been going on around here. And besides, these robberies have been going on for months apparently! We only got here last night!”

“Got proof of that have you?” Gideon asked half-heartedly. “Proof that they would accept, mind you.” He looked Elvin up and down. “You have picked a strange way to spend your retirement I must say! Why did they drum you out anyway? I would have thought you could have spent another ten or twenty years with us!”

“That ...” Elvin started, he was not sure how to explain it though “... that is another story, sir.”

“I dare say! But look, if you and your ...” he looked at Derville and Dukki “... friends wanted to take a shilling each right now then I would have jurisdiction to take you out of here straight away.”

“I ain’t ... !” Dukki began but Elvin raised a hand and signalled him to stand down.

“No,” Elvin stepped in, “that is not an option, I assure you.”

“Then what?” Gideon looked at him. “Believe me, I want to be out of here about as quickly as you do now!”

Elvin thought fast.

“Tell them I really am an officer. Explain that I am not an imposter! Put Derville in my custody!” Derville sneered at this last remark.

Gideon seemed to think it over.

“Okay,” he said with a sigh, “but you understand that one more ...” he paused “... just one more thing! And I will have to arrest you all! My

hands are tied here, Ranlee. If I were you, I would get on the first ship out tomorrow morning!”

Gideon and his soldiers made their way out to the main room. The sound of shouting could be heard as he settled the crowd.

“Well, that was close!” Elvin turned to the other two and tried to smile.

Derville glowered at him.

“Yeah,” she said, her voice dripping with sarcasm, “thanks for standing up for my reputation!”

Dash

“Well it seems to me that we do not really have many options now then.” Elvin was sitting in a chair in the back room of the inn. Dukki sat beside him as Derville paced back and forth. Back in the main room, the sounds of shouting had died away and it seemed as though the crowd were leaving.

“I’m not getting thrown in prison,” Derville said flatly, “I’m doing just as your officer friend said and I’m getting out of here as quick as I can!”

“Aye to that!” Dukki growled.

“Well we are not getting out any time today,” Elvin said, looking at the fading light through the small window of the room, “I say we get settled for the night.” He stood up and dusted himself off. “How about we all get a good sleep under our belts ready for tomorrow?”

Derville scowled and headed for the stairs.

Dukki stretched and made to follow.

Elvin waited, listening to the sounds of the streets outside. He sighed a heavy sigh then made his way up too.

Derville stood in her room, caught in deep thought. Through the walls she could hear the sounds of Dukki and Elvin getting ready for bed. She looked at her small collection of things. A patched bag, a few provisions, an axe and a pardon that was worth less than the paper it was signed on apparently! She could just leave. That was not much to sneak out with. She could make her way to the gates easily enough. Maybe if she picked up some extra food on the way out ... then she could last a few days in the countryside and find her way back to another town ... a big one ... she could get lost again.

She sighed. She did not have to be treated like this. She began packing up her things and made her way over

to the door. The sounds of footsteps were still echoing around the building. There must be someone still up. She crossed the room over to the window. The shutters had been re-latched. She would need to be very quiet indeed if she were to use that way.

She placed her bag down softly onto the floor and pocketed her hatchet again. Then, with every ounce of concentration, she lifted up the sash and pulled open the window. The wood slid on its tracks and came to rest.

She stopped. Waiting to see if there was any sound of stirring from the other rooms. After a minute or two she continued. A careful bit of work and she was able to unlatch the shutter. It flung back! She hurried to try and catch it before it could hit the wall. Her hand grasped the timber hard.

CRASH!

Derville winced. The sound echoed down the street. Already she could hear sounds outside. People seemed to have been roused immediately.

But wait! The crash had not come from the shutter! She opened her eyes again and looked. She was holding it a good few inches from the wall. Then she saw, far below, a bright orange light was spilling out into the street. A small figure was stumbling out again. Flash backs to the night before ran through her mind.

She crossed back to the door. Opening it, she saw Elvin hurriedly attaching his sword to his belt. Dukki slammed out of his room too, sword in hand.

Far below they could hear the sound of shouting.

“Thief! Thief!” Ms Green’s voice echoed around them.

The three looked at each other and then, all together, ran downstairs.

They found the landlady amongst a pile of broken odds and ends and could see the side door wide open. Staff and family were hurrying in to look.

“He went that way!” She pointed through the door to the street outside.

“So it’s not ... ?” Broke in a man, pointing at Derville.

“No! I saw him! He went that way!” Ms Green was sobbing as she looked at the destruction left behind.

Derville smiled. Elvin looked at her and then to Dukki.

“Come on!” He said, and sprang forward through the doorway.

The other two quickly ran on behind him.

The night air was cold on their faces. All along the street, light began to spill out from the houses as doors and windows were opened to look.

Derville, Dukki and Elvin were followed out by a handful of men and women from the inn. As they continued though, they were joined by more and more inhabitants of the town until at last a whole crowd of them were running together.

Ahead of them they could still see the small figure. It seemed almost to be hopping from cobble to cobble, swaying with an ease of movement and a light step.

“We have him now!” Elvin called out as they saw the gateway to the docks ahead. Two men were standing on guard and had turned to look at the commotion. They both came round to block the archway but just as the mysterious figure was coming close to them it suddenly leapt up!

Gasps were heard from the crowd as the small figure landed right on top of the wall! Silhouetted by the night, it seemed to be dancing with delight. Then it made a gesture to the crowd and began running along the wall

towards the rooftops of the houses nearby.

“No! Not this time!” Derville shouted. She spied a number of barrels beside a nearby house and leapt on top of them. She then proceeded to climb as quick as she could.

Her hands met with wood and brickwork as she made her way up. The small figure was not far from her now. It seemed to be moving with a tremendous speed though.

“Let’s get a good look at you.” She snarled as she brought herself round towards it.

The figure turned on the spot and was trying to run back the other way but something in the uneven surface must have caught its foot as suddenly it pitched sideways. Hanging for a moment, balanced on one foot.

“Elvin!” Derville called out as she jumped over to the wall. “Get ready to catch!”

Elvin duly positioned himself.

Derville inched forwards and reached her arm out.

“Hello, my lad!” she said and grabbed at the hood.

In a moment though, everything seemed to spin.

A small hand suddenly gripped Derville’s arm. She was pulled forwards and lost her footing. She did not stop reaching though and caught fabric tight in her grip. The two of them tumbled together.

At ground level, Derville landed hard in Elvin’s arms, knocking them both to the cobbles.

As they got up there were gasps and shouts from the crowd.

They dusted themselves off then turned to look at what was causing all the commotion.

Dukki was holding the figure tight round its waist in a bear hug. The hood had fallen from its head and underneath they could see ...

“Ibis preserve us!” Elvin shouted. “Is that ... ?”

Dukki beamed.

“It’s a kobold!”

Lore Master

“In the beginning, Mother Immu was jealous, she was angry because Een had given his children so many wonderful things, things that Immu had thought were hers, and she wanted them back. She could not take them back though, for Een had blessed his children.”

“Een’s hammer, are you telling us a fairytale?” The town guard looked furious. Dukki was none too happy either. At least the children had had the decency to wait before they asked questions.

“That’s how it starts!” Dukki protested. “Do you want me to tell you about them or what?”

“And since when was Immu a mother?” Came another voice.

“I can’t say as I’m happy to have anyone talking about that fiend under my roof!” Cut in Ms Green.

“Immu has many forms!” Came in Archibald, adding something of a ghostly timbre as he spoke. “We must guard ourselves from ... “

“What I want to know,” shouted the guard, “is what in Ibis’ name that ...” he looked over at the creature, shackled and bound “... what that thing is!”

The creature was sat cross-legged on the floor. It was dressed in rags, mismatched and patched in many places. Its hood was now down behind its back and its head could be fully seen. The skin was a bright purple and its ears were long and pointed. Its bald head shone in the candle light and its eyes, keen and focused, were a deep red.

Every now and again it would bear its teeth at an onlooker and hiss.

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you!” Dukki slammed his fist down on the table. The room fell silent except for a faint sniggering sound. Dukki continued “So Immu vowed to cause

trouble for the Children of Een and she became Mother to all sorts of strange Monsters. She made them all to look like the Children of Een, or at least to what she believed the Children of Een to look like. She made kobolds, goblins and orcs. Kobolds, she made to be like children, small and curious. She taught them to spy and to sneak and to cause mischief.”

They all looked over at the creature. This seemed to fit the bill. It could not be more than about four feet tall at most. The clothes it wore looked very much like they could belong to a child.

“Is that all you know?” Asked the guard.

“Well it goes on,” Dukki continued, “Immu sent the kobolds out among the towns and villages of the young humans and one in particular found its way to a farm.”

The guard sighed.

“More of your fairytales, eh?” He scoffed.

“Hey!” Dukki protested. “I ain’t exactly a scholar, that’s right enough. But I don’t see anyone else round here with anything to share! So how about you just listen.”

The guard threw up his arms in exasperation then slumped down into a chair.

“As I was saying ...” Dukki continued “... This kobold came to a farm where he found sheep and pigs and cows and chickens but he was struck dumb when he saw, hopping around the fields, a hare! The kobold looked at it as it hopped and ran about and thought how wonderful it was that it had such long ears, just the same as the kobold. So it went up to the hare and asked it its name. The hare said ‘I am hare! I am fastest of the animals.’ Well the kobold couldn’t stand that. ‘I bet I’m faster!’ it said. ‘Then we should have a race.’” Said the Hare. And so they did. The hare

chose marshals from the farm. A pig would start the race, the sheep would watch the way to guard for cheating, and a cow would watch the finish line. The race would run all through the farmland.”

The guard rolled his eyes but Dukki glowered at him and continued.

“So the next day, when all was set ready, they began. The pig counted them in and the two began to race off down the track. The hare kept a steady pace while the kobold skipped and laughed. He fell behind the hare, who was so much faster than himself. He stamped his feet with anger then saw a cart nearby. The kobold leapt up on it and spurred on the horse that was tied to it. For kobolds hands may have sharp claws but they can hold things just like we can! They raced past the hare, who kept hopping along. A way down the path the kobold stopped. Looking back he saw the hare away in the distance. He laughed and jigged a merry dance in triumph for pulling

ahead. He looked at the way ahead. The finish line was close. He knew that he could win it easily. So he sat down beside the cart and waited. He wanted to make his victory all the sweeter by beating the hare when it was close enough to see him. As he sat though, he laughed. In time his laugh turned to a chuckle and his chuckle turned to a snore. For he had fallen fast asleep! When he awoke, it was to cheers and whooping, but not for him! For as he had slept, the hare had passed him and won the race! The kobold was so angry that he stamped and stomped the ground and hissed an angry hiss. He kicked the cart and then ran away back down the path.”

“What is the point of all this?” Broke in one of the dock workers.

“Well, that you shouldn’t assume you’ve won when you haven’t actually ...” Dukki trailed off.

“No! I mean, what’s this actually tell about ...” the man pointed “... about that!”

“Well,” said Dukki, “that those hands of its have thumbs and fingers just like ours.” He flexed his own hand to demonstrate. And it’s probably the one that’s been stealing all your stuff!“

There was a gasp from the crowd. But it did not seem to be aimed at Dukki. The great man turned to look at the kobold. It was standing up now and stamping its foot. It looked annoyed.

“You told that all wrong! I never lost! To think that I would lose to a hare!”

The kobold was talking.

Direction

In another room of the inn, Elvin and Derville were sat at a table together. The sounds of talking and occasional shouts and gasps came from the main room.

“I am sorry, by the way.” Elvin said after a long pause. “I really did not mean to make things worse.”

Derville looked at him.

“It’s ...” she paused for a moment. “... It’s fine. Just, how about next time you ...”

Her words trailed off as the door slammed open and Dukki came through. He was beaming from ear to ear as he started speaking.

“You’re not going to believe this! It can talk!”

“What?” Elvin and Derville both started together.

“It can talk! Come in and see!”

They made their way through with him. The crowd of people had pulled away from the kobold as it sat cackling on the floor.

Elvin walked over to it and drew himself up to his full height.

“So you can talk, can you?” He asked in a stern voice.

“Nope, not a word!” The kobold laughed even more.

Elvin marvelled for a moment then he drew his sword slowly and placed the tip of the blade to the creature’s throat.

“How about you try being a bit more cooperative.” He sneered.

The kobold gulped.

“Sure! Sure! I can help! I’ll help!”

Elvin kept a grip on his sword but lowered the blade and drew back slightly.

“It would seem you been leading us all on a merry dance this last day or

so. Probably longer I would hazard.” He looked around at the people gathered there. “A lot longer I would wager.”

The kobold began laughing again.

“My silver,” a tall man that Elvin recognised as Mr Smith spoke up, “I was sure that ... I mean, I thought that ... well, Ms Green ...”

“And I had thought that you had ... well, or you ...” Ms Green pointed to an older woman in the corner.

Realisation dawned as they all began sharing stories of their lost possessions. Apologies were shared by most along with regrets and assurances as the tension in the room began to ease.

“There’s one thing I can’t help but wonder about though.” Derville said thoughtfully.

Everyone turned to look at her.

“Well,” she continued, “from the sounds of it you all searched this

town pretty thoroughly over the weeks or months or whatever since this all began. Don't you think that in that time you would have come across ... well ... something!"

There was a general murmuring of confusion from the people gathered there.

"I don't mean him," she pointed to the kobold who was once again cackling with laughter and rocking, "I mean that he must have taken it all somewhere! Even if you couldn't find the culprit, surely you would have found the hoard!"

Elvin stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"That is true," he said, "you cannot lose that many things without something or other showing up. He must have been taking it all somewhere else."

"Ooh!" Dukki jumped up excitedly. "I know another one about that! IT all starts with ..."

“Any chance of the short version this time?” cut in the guard.

Dukki glowered at him but then shrugged.

“Fine,” he said, “well it’s just that the stories say they like to live in our homes. Well, not our current homes mind ... I mean ... look, there’s a whole story about it! But if I’ve got to cut it short then ... well ... they like to scare people away. Not just from one house but from a whole place. Then they sort of ... move in.”

“Move in?” Elvin looked puzzled.

“Yeah!” Dukki continued. “Granny always used to say, they’d scare away the people but ... you know because they wanted the people’s things. They want to live like us! So they need ... well ... doors, and rooves, and walls, and beds, and tables, and chairs and such.”

Something struck Elvin here and he turned back to the kobold.

“They’?” He pondered the word for a moment. “Of course!” He snapped his fingers. “That is what was not making any sense here. One of anything cannot survive. Certainly not when it is supposed to be living like we do. This creature ... is not a hermit. Look at him! Those clothes may have been scavenged but I warrant they were patched and mended since. And something about this little chap makes me think he did not do that himself.”

He raised his sword to the kobold again.

“There are more you! Am I right?”

The kobold gulped again but then it began to chuckle.

“More? No! Just me! Always me! I raced the hare! I stole the silver! Always me! Only me!”

“Do not lie to me!” Elvin roared at the creature.

Derville had been thinking hard.

“Ruins!” She said suddenly.

“What?” Elvin turned.

Derville had turned to the crowd though.

“How far away is the nearest town? Or village for that matter. How far away are the nearest people?”

“Well,” Ms Green thought, “there’s the barracks, of course. After that though, there’s not another town or even a hamlet for nye on five leagues. Everything travels up the road from here. Or comes down it to the docks.”

“That’s what I thought!” Derville snapped her fingers.

“I still do not follow.” Elvin looked at her.

“Don’t you see?” She smiled. “All that open countryside, woodland, forest and hills? There’s plenty for them to hide in.” She looked at Elvin, when he did not seem to pick up the trail though she continued. “But

Dukki says they don't go for that sort of thing!"

"Ohhh!" Thought sparked in Dukki's mind. "They'd want somewhere that had been made for people but left nice and empty!"

"Exactly!" Derville grinned, turning to look at him.

"I think I see where you are going with this." Elvin smiled too. He turned to the people around them. "Before the barracks, was there ever a fort ... or a castle ... or something?"

"Well sure." Mr Smith said pointing out of the building. "Up that way there used to be a fort. Back in the old days of course. I can't say as anyone would have been up there in" His voice trailed off.

"In years." Elvin smiled. "Ms Green, Mr Smith, Archibald, everyone ... do you think you can get things in order here?"

"I reckon so," Mr Smith nodded, "we've heard a few of your stories

now,” he nodded towards Dukki, “I reckon we know a bit about them. We can probably start shoring things up and keeping a lookout. Why?”

Elvin signalled to Dukki and Derville. Then, grabbing the kobold by the scruff of its neck and pulling it upright, the four of them made their way to the door.

Elvin lifted the creature up and chuckled.

“Because we have a nest to find!”

Bog and Brier

“So what’s the plan?” Derville asked as they made their way through the town gates.

The sun was high in the sky now and riding its way up towards noon. Behind them they could hear the sounds of sawing and hammering as the townsfolk began altering the defences.

Elvin placed the kobold down on the road. It began squirming and pulling on the ropes and shackles that bound it.

“Hold steady!” Elvin commanded as he knelt down and began untying the rope. He left the shackles in place and tied one end of the rope to them. Then, holding the other end tight in his hand, he stood up.

“Well,” he began, “now it is a matter of finding the others.”

“What and you think he’ll just take us there?” Derville scoffed.

“Not exactly,” Elvin smiled and lowered his voice conspiratorially, “but it seems to me that this little chap will find a way to slip free at some point and then we just need to keep a track of him.”

“Ahhh,” Dukki tapped the side of his nose, “got it.”

Elvin kicked the kobold in its back and it leapt up yowling.

“Come on!” He ordered. “Quick march!”

The small creature turned and looked at him. It smiled a wide smile then began to run. Elvin held the rope as tight as he could as he ran to keep up. The creature, for all its small stature, seemed to have the speed of a fox.

They continued along the road and up the hill for some way, keeping true for some time until suddenly a yank on the rope drew Elvin

sideways into a hedge. He fumbled but held fast to the rope as he followed the kobold into the woods.

Behind him, Derville and Dukki did all they could to keep up too, jumping and springing their way through the brush and shrubs.

Elvin panted as he pushed himself to keep pace with the small creature. Several times getting soaked by sudden streams and puddles.

The kobold was laughing as it went. Cackling a high-pitched squeak as it hopped along.

“Not far! Not far!” It shouted as it went.

“What?” Elvin gasped, panting harder as he spoke whilst running. “You do not ... mean to say ... you are actually bringing us ... to your home?”

All of a sudden the kobold stopped. Elvin fell flat on his face as he continued on, tripping on the remains of a fallen tree.

The kobold pulled at the rope and it dropped from Elvin's grasp. The small creature leapt up onto a nearby stump and creased up laughing as it watched Elvin push himself up from the mud.

"You foul creature! You spawn of Immu! I will kill you if you ..." Elvin picked himself up as he began to fill with anger.

"Stop!" Derville called out from behind him.

"Why?" Elvin rubbed at his face to clear away the mud from his eyes. "I do not suppose he has actually brought us to the others."

The kobold was laughing even harder.

"Not to the other kobolds, no." Came Dukki's voice.

Elvin turned to look at them, then back to the kobold, then further on to the wood ahead.

A massive brown bear roared at him.

Elvin stumbled backwards and reached for his sword. His hand, caked in brown sludge, slipped from the hilt.

Dukki ran in, his own sword held high and brought it down hard at the beast.

The bear reared up as the blade came down, missing it by inches and burying itself in the ground.

The kobold hopped down and made to run off towards the trees. As it did though, it too was suddenly pulled hard to the ground. Behind it, Derville was now holding the rope.

“Not so fast!” She said as she wound the rope around her hand.

Once she had it firmly, she held out her other hand and clicked her fingers. It was a hard job with all that was going on but she bent her mind and looked at the seam of magic in the air around her. She could see the frantic figures of Elvin and Dukki, the odd, distorted pattern of the

kobold and the huge, lumbering hulk of the bear. She focussed hard and a spark formed in her hand. With a flick of her wrist she sent it towards the bear where it caught the creature's fur, causing it to yelp in pain.

She screamed loudly at the creature and it lowered itself to the ground, rolling slightly to extinguish the flame. Then it turned and bounded off into the woods.

“I suppose you think that was funny?” Elvin turned on the kobold. It had stopped laughing though and was now pulling hard at the rope that Derville was holding. Elvin drew his sword and once again held it to the kobold's throat. It stopped protesting and stood quite still. “I say we dispense with pretence.” He held it firmly in his gaze. “Will you take us to your home?”

The kobold smiled.

“Oh!” It exclaimed. “Of course! Yes! I will!”

It was just about to run ahead again but Derville tugged hard on the rope and pulled it over. It got up and dusted itself off.

“Walk!” She commanded. “We’ve had enough of your tricks.”

The going was a lot slower now but they wound their way through the trees, down the hills and up steep slopes, turning this way and that. The sun rose high over them and began working its way down into the afternoon before they saw any sign of structure or building.

After several hours though they could make out the definite shape of a wall, a stone wall in fact.

“At last!” Elvin exclaimed. “Right, let us take this slowly though. I do not want us to be overrun before we have a chance to scope it out.”

He made his way through the bushes and down towards the structure.

Beneath his feet a twig snapped. The sound echoed all around. He chided himself for such a simple mistake.

“Who goes there!” A voice came from nearby.

Elvin froze.

“For the love of the crafters!” Dukki exclaimed.

Derville tugged at the rope as the kobold started hopping and laughing.

Around the corner came the town guard.

They had come full circle.

The Other Way

“Damn your hide!” Elvin shouted.

The kobold was rolling on its back, creased in hysterics as it laughed at them.

“It has lead us right back to where we started!” Elvin kicked at a nearby tree stump.

“Looks like it took you on quite the journey to get back here, mind!” Said the guard, looking them all up and down and taking in the now dry mud that had caked onto Elvin’s coat and hands.

“That’s not even the half of it.” Derville sneered. “It even managed to find us a ...”

“What’s your name?” Derville stopped suddenly as a voice cut in. To all their surprise it was Dukki ... and he seemed to be kneeling down next to the kobold.

“What in Een’s name are you ... ?” Elvin began but Dukki raised a hand to him and continued to talk to the kobold.

“What is your name?” He asked again.

The kobold stopped laughing and looked up at him quizzically.

“Me? I’m Dukki!” It declared. Dukki smiled.

“Is that so?”

“Yes! Dukki! That’s me!” It repeated.

“Funny that, did you know that’s my name too?”

“No it’s not! Only me! Only one!” The kobold snapped at him.

“What is going on?” Elvin gawped. Again, Dukki lifted a hand to hind.

“You live here, don’t you?” Dukki asked the kobold.

“Yes! That’s right! All my life! Born and raised!”

“Grew up working the ships, didn’t you?” Dukki continued.

“That’s right!”

“It’s ... lying.” Derville began to smile.

“I do not understand, why is ... ?” Elvin tried again but Dukki continued.

“You’re just a human really, aren’t you?”

“All my life! Man and boy! That’s me!” the kobold clapped its hands triumphantly.

“You’ve no family to the north of here have you?” Dukki asked.

“None! They’re all to the south!” The kobold declared proudly.

“But the south is ... “ Elvin’s voice trailed off as he looked out to the sea.

“And none to the west?” Elvin asked.

“All of them! All to the west!” the kobold turned on him.

“Living among the trees?” asked Derville.

The kobold turned to her too.

“Only in trees! Never in houses!
Never in stone!”

“Down in a valley?” Dukki asked.

“Right at the bottom! Down in the stream!”

“Dukki, you are a genius!” Elvin beamed.

“Not me,” Dukki laughed, “my granny!”

“Guard,” Elvin turned to look at the man, “do you think you can find somewhere for this little chap while we go for another walk?”

The guard looked puzzled.

“I suppose so.” He said, scratching his head. “We can stick him in the cells. But where are you going?”

Elvin thought through the answers.

“North-east, uphill ... to look for a stone building.” He said with a smile.

The kobold began stamping its foot angrily on the ground but the guard took the rope from Derville and pulled it away.

“Let’s go.” Dukki smiled as he stood back up.

The three of them made their way up the hill. The sun was on their backs now as they cut east through the trees, always following the rise of the earth as they went. Some way on they saw a clearing ahead. Approaching it through the trees they could make out a lonely hill in the distance at the very top of which was the tumbling remains of an old watchtower.

The stonework looked ancient, moss and lichen was growing all over it. At the very top, a ragged black banner was blowing in the breeze.

Dukki and Elvin were about to continue on when Derville blocked them with her arms then pointed to a small doorway at the foot of the tower.

From that distance it took them a moment to make out exactly what she was pointing at but as they looked they made it out ... kobolds ... two of them! They were leaning against the wall with spears in their hands, looking out towards the forest.

The three stood silently, watching from the trees then it was Elvin that spoke.

“I think I have an idea.”

A little while later, the shadows were getting long in the clearing as the two kobolds on guard chatted and laughed with each other as they watched the tree line. They both leapt to attention as they saw a tall man walking across the grass towards them.

“Who are you!?” They shouted, pointing their spears at him.

“Me?” the figure smiled.

“Yeah, you!” They shouted again.

“Oh I’m just a traveller. Taking in the sites. Pretty tower you’ve got here.”

The kobolds snarled and bared their teeth at him.

“Name’s Dukki!” He said with a bow.

As he drew himself back up he reached a hand round and drew his sword from his back. As he did so, both kobolds leapt at him, spears charged. They did not get far though as two other figures dropped down from the stonework above them.

Derville and Elvin landed on a kobold each. They rolled and fumbled with them but brought up rope and began to bind their hands. They tied cloth tight around the kobolds’ faces, muffling their calls and they squirmed and try to claw at them.

Dukki began to laugh but Elvin quickly shushed him.

“That’s two down.” Derville whispered. “How are we going to go about getting in?”

“I am not sure yet,” Elvin began, “we should have some time to make our plan now though.”

He looked down at the two squirming figures. Just like their kin back at the town, they had bright purple skin and were dressed in odd ends and rags.

Looking over at the ruins, Elvin could see a single doorway in which was hung a crude door of rotten wood and rusty nails. It was held by great hinges that looks as though they would probably creek far too loudly if they tried them.

“What do you suppose ... ?” he began to whisper. He stopped though as he began to hear a thumping sound from nearby.

They all turned to look and realised that one of the kobolds had wriggled its way over to the wall and was kicking at a section of it hard with one foot.

“Oy!” Dukki shouted and leapt forward to grab it.

It was too late though. There was a gentle but sudden sound of falling dust, shortly after followed a rumble. Loose stone from the wall above began falling down, landing on the ground with a thundering crash.

Once the dust had settled it was apparent that little of the wall had fallen, indeed few of the pieces could have hurt anyone there. But the sound echoed about the clearing with little sign of dying away. Elvin cursed under his breath as there came the sound of many running feet inside the tower.

“So much for a stealthy entrance.” Derville sighed.

The door began to open.

The three of them all readied their weapons.

Attack of Opportunity

The door of the tower slowly creaked outwards. Daylight spilled in on the passageway behind it, lighting up a floor of ageing flagstones covered in mud, dust and moss.

A purple head poked out and looked from side to side. It settled at last on the figures of its two friends, sprawling on the ground, gagged and bound.

The kobold ran over and began to untie its kin. As it removed the gag from one it cried out.

“Watch out! Watch out!”

But it was too late. Dukki, Derville and Elvin all leapt out from behind cover and descended upon the newcomer.

“Let’s go!” Dukki shouted and ran through the doorway into the

passage. The other two followed him. The passageway was short and opened out into a wide, high-ceilinged hall. Cracks high above were letting in streams of pale sunlight, dim with the coming of dusk.

Where the light fell they could see piles upon piles of bric-a-brac. Odd ends of this and that, all in various states of use or decay were piled here and there. There were knives and forks, pillows and blankets, saws and hammers, dishes and cups. Everything was piled all around and many of the softer piles appeared to have been used very recently for beds.

The floor itself was soft under foot and there was a foul smell of filth to it. It took some time for their eyes to adjust to the dim light. As they did though, their hearts fell. About two dozen pairs of red eyes were staring back at them. Each belonging to a kobold, grinning and brandishing a weapon. Knives, spears, trowels, one

even held a pitchfork. The weight of it was clear and it brandished it as a human might a poleaxe.

Elvin gripped his sword tight and turned around to take it all in. From behind them, above the entrance they had just come through, fell even more of the creatures.

“It looks as though there is nothing else for it.” He said as every muscle tensed. He leapt forward at the nearest kobold. Dukki and Derville each did the same. Every time they swung their weapons though the kobolds only jumped backwards out of the way. Each time they did they chuckled and cackled until soon the whole room was echoing with the terrible sound.

The kobold with the pitchfork pushed forward and jabbed it hard towards Elvin. As it did so though Dukki jumped on to the blades, pinning it down. He then brought his sword down hard on the kobold

which crumpled in a heap to the floor.

Howls and yowls went up from the assembled host. Many of them began throwing small rocks and pebbles at them. Others began to climb up the walls and sat on ledges in the stonework where they hissed menacingly.

Derville raised her axe to them and snarled.

Just as they thought they were about to be attacked again, one kobold voice suddenly rang out above the others.

“Mother!” It called. “Father!”

From across the way, they heard another door creek open. Through it stepped two figures. Not short like the kobolds but about human height. Derville and Elvin gasped at the site.

“Green skin!” Dukki shouted. He looked the creatures up and down. “Ears like a fox, nose like a pig”

“Goblins!” Elvin yelled. He was not waiting to find out how else they lived up to their reputation though. He ran forward and Dukki ran with him.

As they brought their swords down so too did the goblins bring up their own swords. Great heavy things with blackened and notched blades. The sound of metal on metal rang out around the room. The kobolds jeered and yelled as they watched.

Again Dukki and Elvin brought their swords down on the goblins and again they were met with parries.

Dukki held his sword hard against the goblin’s and pushed with al his might at the creature.

The goblin’s face suddenly broke out in a wide, beaming grin as it drew its head back and then, in one swift movement, spat hard in Dukki’s face!

The great man reeled backwards, stumbling slightly as he let go of his

sword with one hand in order to wipe his face.

His opponent took the advantage and swung its great sword again. This time it buried itself hard in Dukki's arm. He howled in pain as blood began trickling down it.

The goblin laughed a deep chuckle of a laugh and brought its sword up with both hands ready to bring it down on Dukki's head! All of a sudden though its eyes crossed and it fell forward, Derville's axe buried in its chest.

The other goblin stopped its assault on Elvin and ran to its fallen kin. As it did, Elvin buried his sword hard in its back. The creature yowled in pain and fell to the floor, dead.

Derville ran over and retrieved her weapon.

Dukki was leaning against the wall, holding his hand over the wound on his arm as his eyes crossed from the pain of it.

Elvin made his way over too.

“Listen,” Derville said hurriedly, “I need to go ...”

“What?” both men shouted together.

“Are you going to leave us here?”
Elvin exclaimed.

“No, look,” Derville looked round at the kobolds now drawing in towards them, “it’s not I mean you’re just going to have to trust me!”

She spun round and knocked a kobold hard to the ground with her axe then leapt up onto a ledge on the far wall. Near it was a crack in the rock, just wide enough that with some effort she slipped right through it.

She was gone.

Elvin swung his sword menacingly at the kobolds as they tried to close in.

Dukki heaved his great blade up in one hand and growled at the creatures.

“Why would she ...?” Elvin started to ask.

“I don’t know,” Dukki was breathing hard through the pain in his arm, “but it looks like it’s just the two of us again!”

“Together?” Elvin said with a smile.

Dukki swung his sword at the kobolds and grinned.

“Together!” He growled.

Just then the kobolds all drew back.

A faint sound came from the other side of the door again.

“Grandad!” They all yelled at once.

Grandad

Sounds of scurrying and scrambling echoed around the room as all the kobolds hurried to climb up to the ledges again. They began whooping and cheering as the cacophony was added to by the heavy thud of footfall. The rear door of the room creaked open again and a broad figure seemed to step through it.

Dukki and Elvin inched backwards as far as they could. More rocks were thrown at their backs by the kobolds. The creatures cackled and jeered.

The figure coming through the doorway was strange. It looked almost rolled up like a great ball. They quickly realised though that it was bent almost double to get through the doorway.

Once it was fully through it stood up straight. A massive figure with bright blue skin. Aside from the strange colouring, it looked almost like a

man. Dressed only in a pair of ill-fitting breeches left hanging at the knees, it stood some eight or nine feet high. Muscles rippled on its thick arms and the great beast roared, bearing enormous sharp teeth at Dukki and Elvin.

“What in the name of all that is holy is that!?” Elvin shouted.

Dukki’s face went pale.

“Orc.” He said, almost whispering.

“By any chance, do you have a helpful story about this one too?” Elvin turned to Dukki.

“No,” Dukki gasped, “I never liked the tales about these ones.”

The two men straightened up and readied their weapons as best they could.

From all around them came the continuing jeers of the kobolds. More stones were pelted down at them. Hunching themselves as best

they could, they tried to avoid as many as possible.

The orc roared again.

“Come on then ... !” Elvin leapt forward, bringing his sword up. Dukki followed.

The orc brought both of its enormous hands down hard on the ground which trembled, shaking the walls and dropping a cascade of dust from the ceiling.

“Again!” Elvin shouted as they both spun to try and hit the beast.

As they did, the orc raised its arms up high, pushing them both backwards.

Elvin fell hard against one wall. He raised a hand to his face and, bringing it down, saw that there was blood trickling down his head. He turned just in time to see the great beast’s hand coming for him again.

He dodged just in time, dropping down to his haunches then rolling away to stand next to Dukki.

The orc's hand slammed into the stonework, shaking the whole wall. Cracks could be heard running up the wall and a small piece of it tumbled down into the room. Dim light shone through the small opening.

Elvin was panting as he signalled to Dukki to draw round and flank it.

Just then a voice echoed down from the ceiling.

“That’s it! Get him to do that again! I’ll keep working it from here!”

“Was that?” Dukki looked up.

“No time, come on!” Elvin pulled him sideways and they faced up on the orc again.

Over their heads they heard the sound of metal on stone. Something was hitting against the roof.

“Now!” Elvin shouted. The two men leapt at the orc again. Dukki’s arms fell as he moved, wincing at the pain from the goblin’s attack. His hands met the chest of the orc though and it lost its balance, fumbling backwards and slamming into the wall again.

More dust fell and another piece of the wall crumbled down.

The kobolds began to jump down now. They rounded on the men and gnashed their teeth menacingly. Each kobold found a weapon. Pulling out knives from their pockets or grabbing at daggers and great carving knives from their piles of stolen goods.

Elvin and Dukki formed up again.

The orc roared loudly at them and flexed its muscles. The sound sent more dust cascading down on their heads.

“Come on! Keep it up!” Came the voice from above them again.

“What?” Elvin looked up. As he did though, another stone was thrown at his face by a kobold. It laughed at him as he turned back. His head was swimming. Dukki was having trouble staying standing.

“Together!” Elvin called to Dukki. “Lean on me!” The two men leant together. At Elvin’s signal they rushed at the orc and slammed it hard into the wall behind. The hands of the kobolds clawed at them as they did and they both leapt backwards, crying out in pain.

Stumbling back, they saw the orc had almost buried itself in the wall behind. The great beast shook its way free and another piece of the wall fell down from the onslaught.

There was nowhere to run now though. The entrance was behind them but neither man had the strength to turn and dash through it. Dozens of red eyes stared at them through the dimming light and the jeering of the kobolds and the

roaring of the orc chilled their very blood.

Still they heard the ringing of metal on stone though.

“That ought to do it!” Came the voice high above.

The ringing stopped.

The mass of monsters moved on towards Dukki and Elvin. Sharp teeth and claws could be seen as the host of kobolds began to leap towards them.

The two men, exhausted, stumbled backwards and fell on their backs into the passage way.

“We had a good try.” Elvin said, turning to Dukki.

“Yeah, can’t say as I ever thought I’d see any of this for real!” Dukki laughed.

They both closed their eyes as the creatures hurried towards them.

All of a sudden though, they stopped. Elvin and Dukki opened their eyes and looked as the whole host seemed distracted by a rumbling coming from high above.

A small stone hit Elvin in the face again. But it was not thrown this time, it had fallen from the ceiling.

The rumbling grew louder and soon there was a waterfall of dust and small stones falling down. Dukki and Elvin inched backwards as the creatures began falling over each other to look for a way out.

Dust became stones became great boulders of the building's walls and ceiling that fell and tumbled. The sound was deafening and seemed to go on forever.

When the commotion was over. Dukki and Elvin found themselves at the edge of a great slag heap, surrounded by the ruins of the walls. Not a sign of life could be seen.

They marvelled for a moment then they laughed as down from the top hopped a figure, smiling broadly and holding a very notched hatchet.

It was Derville.

Said and Done

The sun was far below the horizon when the three of them finally made their way back through the gates of the town. Interest grew from the townsfolk as soon as they were spotted. Doors were flung open as they made their way down the street. Bright orange light spilled out and they were increasingly illuminated to gasps from the growing crowd as they saw the injuries the three had sustained.

At the end of the road they came to the door of the inn. Elvin rapped hard on it and Ms Green quickly came and let them in. They all stumbled forward and dropped bags and boxes down on the tables inside.

Cries and cheers went up from the crowd as they began exploring the hoard and found silver and tools, jewels and heirlooms all bundled together.

Elvin, Dukki and Derville made their way over to a set of chairs and slumped down.

The guard came over to see them, a broad smile on his face.

“How did you ... ?” he began to ask.

“We, errm,” Elvin focussed, “we found the nest.”

“Came down on them hard did you?!” Came the triumphant voice of Archibald.

“More like they came down hard on us!” Dukki laughed, wincing again at the pain in his arm.

“How did you know that would work?” Elvin turned to Derville.

Derville laughed.

“Like before,” she explained, “the kobolds showed me! Didn’t you see their little ‘warning’ bell?”

Elvin recalled the guard, kicking at the wall to alert the others. He laughed.

“Well,” Ms Green came over to see them, smiling like the others, “you three have certainly been in the wars, haven’t you! Still, all’s well that ends well, as they say! Let me get you some dinner.”

“Yes please!” They all said together.

“Sammy!” Ms Green called to a young man near the bar.”

“Yes miss!” He stood to attention.

“Drinks are on the house tonight! Seems to me we’ve got reason to celebrate.” An even louder cheer erupted from the crowd.

The mood that night was much transformed from the night they had first arrived. The townsfolk plied them with questions and asked them again and again to tell the story of their fight with the ‘beasts of Immu’ ... Before long, even Dukki could not keep up with the excitement and they soon settled to just eating and drinking and re-binding their

wounds as the party went on around them.

A band struck up in one corner and the people began to dance and sing. But Dukki, Elvin and Derville just slumped back in their chairs and let the sound wash over them. Before too long they drifted off to sleep.

The next morning, having been helped to their beds by the grateful people, they woke to a bright and sunny day. Derville got up and dressed.

She checked over her things, making a mental note that she would need to find a grindstone soon for her poor, battered axe. Making her way downstairs she saw Dukki and Elvin chatting together at a table and the warm smell of breakfast came up to greet her.

Elvin gestured to an empty chair and Derville sat down.

“So are we staying around for a bit or are we heading off now?” Elvin was asking.

“It looks to me as these folks have things in hand now.” Dukki said.

A plate of bread and meat was brought out and Derville began eating.

“I’m not sure we can afford our plan anymore.” She said after a while. “We spent quite a bit staying here and we didn’t exactly find work.”

Elvin smiled.

“Aha,” he chuckled, “that, I think, is where you are wrong!”

He dropped a purse on the table and it jingled with the sound of coins inside.

“The town had a whip round for us.” He continued. “It looks like we are professional monster hunters now!”

Derville laughed.

“I’ll start on the adverts!” She chuckled.

Once they were done with breakfast they said farewell to Ms Green and the staff at the inn then made their way down to the docks.

The foreman was on duty and bade them good morning.

“We are looking for a ship.” Elvin explained.

“Where too?” The foreman asked.

“Nowhere in particular.” Derville smiled. “Just, well, somewhere.”

“Well, I’d say we’ve got a fair choice docked here for you then!” He gestured to the ships moored up along the quay. “The lads are just finishing up loading so you should start seeing the crews about soon. I dare say you’ll find one right enough.”

“Thank you!” Elvin beamed and the three of them began to make their way to the ships.

Just then though a commotion came up from behind them.

One of the dock guards was running down with a panicked look on his face. Behind him were about two dozen children and, Dukki recognised, the teacher from the school.

“Sir! Sorry sir!” the guard was calling. “I couldn’t stop them, sir!”

“Now, now, what’s all this?” Said the foreman.

“I’m sorry,” said the teacher, wrangling in a couple of the more excited children, “but they heard that ... well ... that he was leaving.”

The children ran forward and began speaking all at once.

Elvin and Derville laughed as they realised that the crowd was there for Dukki.

The great man smiled down at them and reached around to draw his sword and demonstrate for them

again. He almost fell to his knee though as the pain in his arm caught him again.

The children gasped.

“Are you alright?” One child asked.

“I,” Dukki rubbed his arm, “well, I had a bit of a run in ...” he explained.

“With a kobold?” Asked another child.

“No, this was from a goblin.” Dukki pointed to the bandage around his arm and shoulder. “It cut me deep.”

The children all gathered in to look. Sounds of “ooh” and “ahh” came from them as they inspected the injury.

“Oh no!” One child declared, the penny dropping, “did you tell it not to!”

Dukki laughed.

“I guess I must have done!” He smiled.

“Mr Dukki,” a small girl stepped forward and looked up at him, “we made you something.”

Dukki leant down to look as the girl lifted up what looked like a small toy made from odd ends of fabric and string. It was quite recognisable though. Green skin and a small axe in one hand ...

“It’s a goblin!” Shouted another child.

Dukki laughed. He took the toy and sat it on his shoulder.

The children laughed and cheered.

The teacher thanked them and led the group away.

Dukki, Elvin and Derville made their way to the ships and before long found a captain happy to take them.

They made their way up onto the deck and leant over the rail as they watched the crew untie the moorings. The ship lurched and began to pull away from the dock.

On the shore, they could see figures waving to them. They waved back. Soon though the people disappeared into the distance. In time so did the land itself and they found themselves drifting off into the great and wide oceans.

Off to their next adventure.