

# HEROES WANTED



ALLEN DONNELLY

## CHAPTER ONE

The grim sounds of war echoed around the once peaceful fields of the valley; the harsh clashing of metal on metal and bestial cries of rage reverberated off the wooded slopes of the valley sides, carrying with them the promise of death and suffering.

Catlyn opened her eyes with a groan; her eyelids felt as if lead weights were attached to them and her head was pounding in time to the rhythm of violence. The ringing song of battle surrounded her, drowning out almost all thought. It was real, then, she thought. It hadn't just been a terrible nightmare. Struggling up into a sitting position, wincing with every laboured movement, she took a deep breath and cried out in anguished rage. "Darin!" she shouted. Suddenly a truce was called and the war paused. "What in the four hells are you doing?"

A thoughtful silence, seemingly louder than the cacophony that had preceded it, reigned for several long seconds, almost as if someone was trying to work out if they were in trouble or not.

"Nothing?" said a disembodied, hopeful voice.

Catlyn sighed, contemplating just shutting her eyes and pretending it had all gone away. No, she needed to see what was going on. With a muttered curse she pushed back the faded quilt of red and green patchwork. Trying to rub the tiredness from her eyes and get them to focus properly, she swung her legs off the bed and stood, swaying slightly. Around her, the bedroom was bathed in the muted glow of an early summer morning, the light coming through the dusty yellow curtains illuminating the equally dusty chest of drawers, and the row of misshapen cuddly toys that sat atop it, and turning the white plaster of the walls a golden yellow. Had she not been up until the early hours of the morning tidying up the main lounge of The Dragon's Flight, the inn that was both her business and home, then Catlyn might have appreciated its aesthetic qualities a bit more; as it was, she was more interested in determining what exactly her younger brother was doing.

Walking unsteadily over to the nearest window, she pulled the curtains aside, flinching at the unreasonably bright light, and pushed the window, already slightly ajar, open to its fullest extent. There was a wince-inducing creak of protest from the badly neglected hinges, a few flakes of white paint drifted away on the morning breeze and a small spider scuttled out from the side of the window frame. It paused briefly on the windowsill, appearing, at least to Catlyn's sleep deprived mind, mildly affronted at the disturbance, then it sped over the outside edge and abseiled away.

Catlyn tore her attention way from the offended arachnid and looking down at Darin, her voice heavy with weariness and limited patience. "What are you doing?" she asked. The sun had not long cleared the top of the mountain range to the east; it couldn't have been later than six o'clock in the morning.

Below, in the backyard of the inn, stood her younger brother, Darin; six foot four in height, barrel-chested, broad-shouldered and with close cropped brown hair, bright blue eyes and an open, honest face that was almost permanently locked into an optimistic smile. He also currently had a saucepan on his head that was obscuring his

eyes and squashing his ears. He pushed back the pan so he could look up at his sister and gestured vaguely with his mighty Sword of Justice, which did somewhat resemble the battered looking poker from the fireplace in the inn's main bar. "I'm fighting the Dreadlord Corinthus; he wants to take over the world and make us all into brain-dead slaves."

Thinking privately that her brother was already halfway there at the very least, Catlyn looked down at his upturned, sheepishly grinning face, and then at the target of his righteous wrath, the Dreadlord himself. "It's a bucket on a fence post."

"Well, yes, but I think it's infused with evil essences!" He waved the poker threateningly at the bucket. It made no move to answer his accusations; of evil essences there was little evidence. "See?"

Catlyn closed her eyes and rested her forehead on the windowsill. Unseen, the spider retreated further into a crack in the stone wall and considered moving home as a lock of hair dropped down to hang in front of it.

"What are you doing, sis?" shouted up Darin. The saucepan slid down over his eyes again.

"I'm counting to ten," was her muffled response. With a heavy sigh, she straightened up and opened her eyes. "Could you not have fought the bucket further away from the inn, or practised more stealthy, quieter warfare? You know, sneaking up and taking it unawares type of thing. Silently." She wondered, without much hope, if the hint was getting through.

Darin squared his shoulders and took on what he hoped, slightly optimistically, was a noble expression. "That would be dishonourable; a warrior faces his enemy on the battlefield. He looks him in the eye..."

"Handle."

"LOOKS him in the EYE, and faces him face to face."

Catlyn decided she was not yet awake enough to cope with the idea of honourable single-combat against a dented bucket. "Did you at least feed the chickens and get some eggs?"

"Yep," said Darin, nodding happily. The saucepan slid forwards once more, obscuring his eyes.

"Oh for fu..." muttered Catlyn.

"What?"

"Nothing. Go and start getting the breakfasts ready, and be generous with the portions; we're going to have to do some making up to the guests after their early morning alarm call." She turned away from the window and eyed her bed thoughtfully. Her large, soft mattress looked awfully inviting, almost as if it was beckoning her to come back to its warm embrace, and the quilt might as well have been crying for her return; you just had to look at it to see how much it missed her. It'd be at least an hour before the breakfasts were anywhere close to being done, maybe she could have just a few more minu...

"Catlyn?" said a plaintive voice floating in through the window behind her. "Cat, I think the pan's stuck."

The inn had stood at the heart of the small village of Heroes' Rest for at least seven hundred years, though its origins we're lost to history; it had been partially destroyed and rebuilt several times so it was debatable whether or not it could be called the same inn. It had thick stone walls that kept it warm in winter and cool in the summer, and wide oak timbers, blackened by time and the occasional fire. At three storeys high it was easily the largest building in the village, providing a place for travellers to stay and for the locals to drink away their money. When they paid. The main bar was a big, comfortable room, with wooden floors and furniture, some of which was even cushioned, a large fireplace and a long, well-stocked bar. Pictures and a few badly-stuffed examples of the local wildlife were hanging on the stone walls; one cross-eyed, distressingly lumpy badger in particular looked especially affronted by the taxidermist's efforts. Only one wall, wooden instead of stone, was bare of decoration; instead, row upon row of names were etched into the dark, ancient oak.

Catlyn leaned against the wall next to the door through to the kitchen, looking out into the main bar whilst she waited for Darin to serve up the first of the breakfasts. The large room was filling up, most of the guests having come down from their rooms by this point, though there were still a few who had yet to appear, most notably the young elven ranger who had been a little over-enthusiastic with the ale the previous night. They had the usual assortment of travelling merchants, messengers, a few people on holiday and, of course, the heroes. She shook her head as she watched a young, square-jawed, blond haired warrior carefully polishing his breastplate with one of the napkins. Who wore full armour to breakfast? Half her clientele, it seemed like.

It had been like this since she'd inherited the inn almost a decade ago when, just after she turned fifteen, her aunt and uncle had come to an unfortunate end whilst on a sight-seeing trip to the famed and beautiful city of Talorien, capital of Slandaren. Apparently it had happened as they were looking at the majestic Sorrow's Fall, a huge waterfall that thundered past on either side of the stone outcrop where the city's shining spires and winding streets perched precariously. Eyewitnesses said that her uncle's last words to his wife were, "Honey, lean over here! You get a really good...".

She had heard the news as she was waiting tables in the Dragon's Flight, the inn her uncle and aunt owned and where she and Darin had lived since they were orphaned six years earlier. She was serving lunch in the main bar, trying not to scowl too much at the customers, and then, surrounded by the chatter and laughter of the regulars and the merchants and the heroes stopping in on their way to a dangerous, glory-filled quest, a messenger with a sad, sympathetic look on her face had handed the teenage Catlyn a bit of paper and suddenly the inn was hers.

She had dropped the plate she was carrying, gone out into the yard for a good cry and to curse her aunt and uncle for being so damned clumsy, and then she had gone back to serving food because times were tough and they needed the coin.

The young, sniffing girl with the blonde pigtails who kept crying in people's dinner had grown up to be a slender, self-assured, fairly grumpy woman in her mid-twenties; the sniffing had been replaced by a near constant frown and the blonde hair had become a bit more brown and was now locked almost permanently into a ponytail. She did brush it. Sometimes. When she remembered and she didn't have anything better to do with her time. She was about eight inches shorter than her brother and half as wide; her slender build had occasionally provoked customers to suggest that she should get a few more hot meals in her, try to fill out a bit more, maybe then she could wear a nice dress, instead of her usual shirt and leggings, and attract a husband who could look after the inn so she could be a good little wife and look after him. The glare that Catlyn turned on people for suggestions like that ensured they rarely suggested it more than once; she had a good glare, her fierce grey-blue eyes boring into the victim with icy contempt.

The door behind her opened, interrupting her reverie, as her brother stuck his head round to tell her the first of the breakfasts was ready. She looked up at his smiling, expectant face, and then at the red line that went across his forehead, just above the eyebrows; the pan had taken a fair bit of effort and a lot of shouting to remove. In the end they'd needed the help of an adventurer, one of the fearsome mountain-dwarves from the far north who happened to be staying in the inn, and a pack of butter; Darin's head still had a greasy look to it where they'd smeared the butter around the edges of the pan. She wasn't sure it had actually done any good but it had been quite funny.

"Is this the one for Mr. Namon?" she asked. Namon was the name of the helpful dwarf and he was getting an extra helping of bacon and eggs, on the house, by way of a thank you.

"Yeah," nodded Darin, grinning broadly. "He promised to show me how to use a battle axe if the rest of his company hadn't shown up before lunch!"

Catlyn kept smiling as the door swung shut, but the smile had taken on a glassy, rictus look. A battle axe. As she picked up the heavily laden plate, she made a mental note to have a quiet word with the helpful dwarf about his choice of student; her brother, strong and enthusiastic as he was, had inherited his agility and poise from their uncle's side of the family, a man who had once knocked himself unconscious brushing his teeth. The thought of Darin wielding anything more dangerous than a soup ladle, and even that was risky, made her blood run cold.

The breakfast itself was a symphony of fried eggs, fried bread, fried bacon, fried onions and fried sausages. If it had been possible to fry coffee then that too would have found its way into the pan. You could say what you liked about her brother; that he was clumsy, a bit dense and too easily distracted, but he was a stone cold genius in the kitchen, even if he did sometimes set himself on fire.

"Mr. Namon," said Catlyn as she weaved her way nimbly through the maze of rustic wooden tables, rustic in this case meaning inexpertly carved and unsteady, "here's your breakfast, on the house." She placed the piled-high plate on the table, which only rocked a little bit. Deep-set, pale grey eyes gleamed as he surveyed the high-calorie landscape before him through the wafting clouds of gloriously greasy steam. In amongst the luxuriant, silver moustache and beard that adorned his face, he licked his lips.

"My thanks, lass, but there was really no need to go to this much trouble," he said, his eyes never leaving the food, the look on his face suggesting that he had no problem at all with them going to this much trouble.

"Nonsense, it was the least we could do after you helped my brother," replied Catlyn. "I wanted to talk to you about him, while I'm here. He mentioned something about you showing him how to use a battle axe..."

Reluctantly tearing his gaze away from his breakfast, he met her eyes and noticed the frown. "I sense this is not necessarily something yer thrilled with," he said. His voice was deep, with a distinctive, rumbling burr.

"He had a pan stuck on his head, Mr. Namon, one which took two of us to lever off. As much as I love him, he is the living embodiment of clumsiness; he does not mix well with sharp objects."

"Does that not make this a wee bit tricky?" He waved a reverential hand at the food and licked his lips again.

"A travelling smith, another dwarf in fact, passed through here a couple of years ago. He made Darin some chain-mail gloves. They weren't cheap but it's saved me a fortune in bandages and refunds."

"Refunds?"

Catlyn nodded. "People, regardless of the quality of the cooking, do not generally like to find lumps of the chef's finger lurking in their breakfast. There have been a couple of occasions when I've had to pay healing minstrels to reattach bits; those spells don't come cheap either but it's hard to say no when your brother is looking at you with pleading eyes and bleeding all over the floor."

"I see your point. I'd hate to disappoint the lad though, he was very keen."

"Give him a stick," suggested Catlyn. "Even he couldn't do much damage with a stick. I hope. I must get on, Mr. Namon. I hope you enjoy your breakfast, let me know if you need anything else."

"Oh I will, lass," he replied, rubbing his hands together and picking up the cutlery as if he intended to mount a serious assault on some kind of bacon fortress, "don't you worry about that."

About an hour after Catlyn and Darin had cleared away the last of the breakfast dishes and finished the washing up, Catlyn was sitting in the inn's garden on an authentically rustic bench that was threatening to tip her into the shrubbery at any moment, enjoying the brief lull before the field-workers and passing travellers began to traipse in for some lunch. Namon had taken her brother off into the field that housed their one, elderly cow to try and show him how an axe worked. A slightly wonky looking stick took the place of the actual weapon, something

that had greatly disappointed the young man. Since he had already managed to smack himself twice in the face with the stick, Catlyn had decided she could live with his disappointment.

From her seat, she could see her brother swinging the stick in wild arcs whilst Namon gesticulated in a way that seemed increasingly despairing: sometimes she could hear him going, "No no no, the other way, swing it the other way!". The cow was watching it all with the kind of bemused detachment that only a large ruminant can manage. It was an idyllic scene if you could tune out the shouting of the irate dwarf.

She leaned back, carefully, and sipped her coffee; jet black and thick enough to line roads with. The one time her brother had drunk a cup of it he had spent the best part of an hour racing in circles around the cow before passing out. The cow had been so dizzy it had fallen over next to him and its milk had come out curdled for the next three days.

Down the length of the wide, rolling, tree-lined valley, she could see travellers making their way along the gently winding road that followed the path of the ambling river Stonk; an unfortunate name for a river that was actually quite picturesque. Ten miles down that road and you'd reach Garfin, dimly visible on the distant plain, a large town famed for its armour and weapon smiths, and its horribly polluted lake; another thirty miles down the road and you'd reach Talorien, with its gleaming towers, grandiose halls, cobbled streets and dangerously unfenced waterfalls. All that was a world away from the sleepy village of Heroes' Rest though, a small collection of cottages and businesses that nestled in a bend of the river. They had one shop, a baker, a smith, a butcher, a small school and an artist's studio (apparently the valley's ambience was 'divine' and oh...the light! Darling, the light was simply magnificent!). Dotted around the valley sides were an assortment of small farms, mainly housing a variety of bored sheep interspersed with the occasional cow. Oh, and there was, of course, the inn - The Dragon's Flight. Social hub and overly-generous provider of credit to residents whose need was great, that need being for the beer that got shipped up from Garfin and the cider that Catlyn brewed in the inn's cowshed. She had reached the conclusion that the slate where she tallied up what her regulars owed had evolved into some new branch of mathematics that mostly revolved around people trying to avoid paying for things.

If you followed the track from Heroes' Rest a few miles up the valley, beyond where it started to narrow and became rocky and steep, you would find yourself in the high valleys of the Haran mountain range. Go still further up and you entered a world of treacherous mountain passes to far off lands, remote castles of ill repute, tribes of wild mountain-men and, if you were brave or foolhardy enough to venture into the deepest reaches of the forbidding, snow-capped peaks, eventually you would reach Falrir's Fall, the doomed, frozen fortress of the undead king Falrir. If she peered up into the distant peaks far enough, Catlyn could just about make out the perpetually black clouds that shrouded what had been Falrir's domain. There were at least half a dozen other castles containing some dreadful evil or another that was trying to drag the world into darkness; it was hard to keep track of them all, but Falrir had lasted a lot longer than most, and had come back from the dead at least three times. Every now and then, some nutcase or another would actually start accruing some genuine power; things got interesting then, interesting being a nice euphemism for dangerous and life-threatening, as they would inevitably send their army of werewolves or ghouls down through the valley, where they would usually meet the queen's army coming the other way. Heroes' Rest and the fields around it had seen many a pitched and bloody battle. It was one of the reasons the village had its name and a disproportionately large cemetery, hidden amongst a thick copse of trees that had grown up around it and filled with crumbling, nameless gravestones.

Thankfully it had been many years since the last time someone had made a genuine attempt at world domination, or whatever it was they wanted, a long time before Catlyn had found herself living in Heroes' Rest, and no one could remember the name of the last would-be ruler. Unlike most of the evil, aspiring despots, however, Falrir's name endured. Some of the older residents of the valley could even remember the last time

Falrir had risen and come down from the mountains, dragging death and destruction with him. They would still mutter darkly that someday soon he would come again, and keep on muttering about it until Catlyn gave them a drink and told them to stop scaring the tourists.

She took another drink of her coffee, unworried by the prospect of another lord of darkness appearing; something was always rising up. Give it a year, two at the most, and some hero on a dangerous quest would have destroyed the source of their power before they could do any harm. That's how it always happened, and it was one of the reasons why the rooms of the inn were always so full of brave adventurers, out for fortune, glory and whatever horizontal action their shiny armour and gleaming sword could get them. That's why, when people asked, Catlyn told them the village was called Heroes' Rest; because this was where the heroes rested on their way to do great deeds and fight unspeakable evil. All true, of course, but not necessarily the whole truth; she had stopped mentioning the other reason, it only tended to make people upset. The large cemetery was also where those young, gallant heroes who made it back down out of the mountains alive - scarred, maimed and with empty, haunted eyes - buried the fallen comrades they had managed to bring back down with them, laying them down to rest alongside the long-forgotten heroes of earlier ages. It continued to grow in size, year on year.

She could see a party making their way up the last steep section that lead into the mountains proper. They had been in the inn the previous night, young, brash and filled with dreams of glory; a thick-necked warrior with an absurdly large sword, two bow wielding rangers (including the one who had missed breakfast and had still looked a little unwell as they set off), a pale-skinned wizard who had kept trying to impress her the previous night by conjuring small fireballs until he set fire to the sleeve of his robe and Catlyn threw a bucket of water on him, and an elven minstrel with a healing harp. As she usually did, she wished them the very best of luck and gave them all a free drink; it was very rare that she saw any of them again.

"We should block the path out of the valley," said a stern voice behind her. Catlyn looked round to see the flint-eyed gaze of Auld Gran staring up at the distant adventurers. Her silver hair was pulled back into a tight bun and, in defiance of the warm summer sun, she was wearing a dark green dress that looked like it had been made by someone with only a limited grasp of human proportions; Gran's somewhat matronly figure pushed at the seams in some places but was swamped with fabric in others. "Dumb kids always chasing after the Fabled Spear of Whatchamacallit just because they read some stupid prophecy!"

"Hi, Gran," said Catlyn. She gingerly shifted along the bench to give Gran room to sit down. There was a warning creak and a wobble as the older woman gently lowered herself into the seat with practised ease. "We can't close the path, as well you know; it's a trade route to Antilor." Antilor was the next door kingdom that was, depending on the prevailing mood of the time, either their best friend or their worst enemy.

"Bah," spat Gran, rifling through her bag before triumphantly pulling out a pewter hip flask containing her own homemade liquor, and a glass. She offered it to Catlyn, who politely declined; she'd said yes once and the headache that followed had taken four hours to subside. At least the blindness had only lasted twenty minutes or so. "Little early in the day for me, Gran."

"It'll put hairs on your chest!" replied Gran, pouring herself a generous measure. Catlyn was sure she could see a haze of alcohol coalescing in the air above the glass.

"I'm happy with a fairly bald chest, thanks very much."

Auld Gran laughed and took a hefty gulp of the clear liquid. "Oof!" she gasped, coughing violently. The seat shook and wobbled in a threatening manner.

"Smooth, is it?" asked Catlyn as she tried to compensate for the genuine rural craftsmanship of the bench.

"Beautiful," croaked Gran. "Might have overdone the pepper a smidgeon."

The two settled into companionable silence, broken only by the occasional aftershock from Gran's chest.

No one was quite sure how auld, or even old, she was; she had been a part of Heroes' Rest since well before Catlyn had come to live with her aunt and uncle; no one who lived in the village could remember a time when Auld Gran hadn't been in her small cottage in the woods on the western valley sides, with its exotically stocked herb and vegetable garden filled with weird and mysterious plants that no one else had ever heard of and which certainly didn't grow in the area (and which every child raised in the village was sternly warned to leave well alone). She knew more about herbs and medicine than anyone else and she was the first port of call when anyone in the village fell ill. But, and this was very, very important, she was NOT a witch. Anyone who ever suggested such a thing would find themselves a victim of her evil eye; it would be about an inch from their own eye while she was standing on their toes and threatening them with a vicious looking trowel.

Once, when Catlyn had been about ten or eleven, she had asked Gran if she could do magic. "No time for magic," came the dismissive reply, "don't trust it. Can't be relied upon - a bit of knowledge and a stout stick are better bets, any day of the week. And good solid boots too, never forget to wear a good pair of boots, preferably with steel toecaps."

As honest as the earth that often stained her clothes, Gran had become like family to Catlyn after the deaths of her aunt and uncle, and she could always be relied upon for good advice. Well, decent advice. Advice, anyway. As long as she hadn't been drinking too heavily.

They sat for awhile, watching the villagers going about their business, greeting friends who wandered past, and observing with interest Darin's ongoing battles with inertia, gravity and the unwillingness of sticks to go where he wanted them too. Namon seemed to have given up shouting now; his broad shoulders had slumped further and further down with every passing moment of his attempts to teach Darin how not to fall over.

"What time does the bar open?" he asked Catlyn after he had finally called an end to their practice, much to Darin's disappointment. The dwarf had a pained look in his eyes.

"I'll open up for lunch in about an hour. Do you think you can hold out that long?" Catlyn replied, trying not to smile too broadly.

Taking pity on the poor dwarf, Gran held out her hip flask. He sniffed it suspiciously, his eyes widening in shock. "Now that smells like the proper stuff!" He took a long draught of the toxic liquor then let out a tortured gasp. "Oh yes indeedy!" he wheezed. "Is that Mountain Fire I can taste in there?" Mountain Fire was a herb that was typically found only in the upper reaches of the mountainous kingdom of Strongholm, the homeland of the dwarves. It was banned in most other countries by reason of the fact that consuming it without proper preparation tended to have an adverse effect on anything with a pulse that wasn't a dwarf. Namely, it stopped said pulse. The last act of many a gastronomic adventurer had been a gasp, a frantic fanning of the mouth, and the utterance, "Blimey, that was a bit on the hot sid..."

Gran nodded happily, pleased to find a fellow connoisseur of fine beverages. "My own secret recipe. I keep telling Cat she should sell it in the Flight but she just won't. No spirit of adventure."

"I like my customers to remain upright and breathing, or at least just breathing, if at all possible. Killing them off is bad for business."

At that point, Darin jogged up, red-faced and grinning ear-to-ear. "Did you see that, sis, it was awesome!" He started waving his stick around in an unconvincing figure of eight. "Mr. Namon taught me how to thrust and parry and do overhead strikes and some awesome moves. Watch this!" He backed away from the bench to stand in the middle of the small lawn. "This is called Leaping Dragon Claw." He crouched down in something that resembled, if you were being very charitable, a warrior's stance, his tongue sticking out of the side of his mouth in concentration.

"Uh, what?" spluttered Namon in surprise. "No, I don't think that's a good..."

Darin exploded upwards, launching himself into the air in a blur of arms and legs, spinning around and twisting into complicated shapes, stick scything through the air with a tearing sound until, at last, the strange aerial ballet ended with a thud, which was followed a second later by the noise of glass breaking.

Catlyn sighed and leaned forward carefully to look down at her brother's red, upturned face. "Are you okay?" she asked. He nodded weakly, still too winded to speak. Twisting round in her seat, she looked up at her bedroom window; the end of the stick was protruding from the shattered glass, still vibrating with dissipating energy. Finally she looked at Namon, who had covered his eyes with his hands when Darin had begun the move and had not yet removed them. "I take it that is not what is supposed to happen."

Wordlessly, still covering his eyes as if terrified of what he would see when he finally looked, Namon shook his head.

"I see," said Catlyn. She finished her coffee and stood up, almost tipping Gran into the flowerbed. "Darin, when you finally get your breath back, I want you to find the dustpan and brush and go and sweep up the broken glass in my bedroom. I'm going to the smithy to get some nails off Bartolbey and then to the store for some wood and to order a new window. Another one. Gran, can you keep an eye on the inn?" The older woman nodded a little too enthusiastically. "Hmmm. Try not to drink all of my profits but I wouldn't object to you getting Mr. Namon a drink. I think he might need one." There was an expectant silence. "And you can get one yourself."

Kneeling down next to her prone, wheezing brother, she gently stroked his cheek. "Darin, I love you dearly, and I know how proud you are of your warrior skills..." There was a muffled coughing from Namon's direction. "But please don't ever do that again. Ever. Okay? Jolly good. Now, if you'll excuse me."

She opened the heavy oak door of the inn, went inside and closed it carefully behind her.

Namon suddenly noticed that Gran was counting under her breath. "What are you...?" he started to ask but she held up her finger to stop him. There was a muffled scream from inside the inn, brief but heartfelt.

"Fifteen seconds," said Gran. "She must be in a good mood. I'm Auld Gran, Mr...Namon, was it? Everyone just calls me Gran. Now, can I get you a beer?"

Catlyn strode down the road that bisected the village, though road was perhaps being overly generous to the track of packed dirt that snaked between the stone cottages. The thunderous look on her face a fair warning to the villagers who knew her to give her a wide berth; it was a look they were all fairly familiar with. A lovely girl, she was, they would all agree. Attractive, for the most part, with her brown-blonde hair that was forever escaping from the perpetual ponytail she kept it in; and it didn't even matter that much that she always dressed in a man's shirt, cinched at the waist with a wide leather belt, tatty, patched together leggings and worn leather boots. She would still make a man a good wife, they said, especially with the pub as a dowry of sorts, if only she was...nicer. A bit less sarcastic and snarky. More polite and less prone to glaring at people with cold, grey eyes that glinted beneath an almost permanent frown.

But still a lovely girl though...

Right now, the lovely girl was heading straight for the blacksmiths. She knew he was in and working; the sound of his hammer ringing on the anvil was clearly audible from pretty much everywhere in the village. She peered round the entrance to his forge, marvelling, as she always did, at the vibrant orange glow from the incredibly hot fire and the molten metal. The heat coming out of the door felt like it was taking her eyebrows off!

In the midst of the furnace stood Bartolbey; originally from the snowy lands to the far north, just shy of six feet tall and almost as wide, he wielded his hammer as if it were a toy, the huge muscles of his bare chest and shoulders flexing as he casually tossed around something that Catlyn hadn't been able to lift with both hands.

Balding as he approached his late thirties, the top of his head gleamed with sweat that ran down his face, over thick, black eyebrows and along a strong, square jaw, and dripped on to the red hot metal of the sword he was repairing, where it briefly sizzled before evaporating into the swirling air.

Once upon a time his work had been almost exclusively making things for the villagers and the farmers of the valleys; ploughs, wagon-wheels, hinges and so on. In the last twenty years or so, he'd found himself making or repairing more and more swords and armour. He would often sit in the bar of an evening, complaining about the shoddy workmanship of the armour the young adventurers brought with them from the city these days. "Cheap rubbish," he'd moan, staring mournfully into his tankard of ale, steam rising from his shoulders. "Wouldn't stop a blow from a stale loaf of bread, never mind a sword. Can barely work on it without accidentally smashing it to pieces."

Catlyn liked Bartolbey; he was almost as sarcastic as she was and, more importantly, he always paid his bar bill, which was more than could be said of most of her other regular patrons.

"Hey, Bart," she called as he paused in his hammering to plunge the sword into a bucket of water.

"Cat? That you?" he replied from behind a cloud of steam.

"Yeah, it's me. How's it going?"

The steam cleared, allowing Bartolbey to see her clearly. "Oh, hi, Cat. Fine. Busy. Trying to turn these children's toys into weapons. Wasted bloody effort."

"How's Mathilde, I've not seen either of you in the inn for a few days."

"Little Maisie took a nasty cold, poor little bugger, so we've been working shifts to keep her entertained." Mathilde was his wife, almost as big as he was and possibly one of the most cheerful people that Catlyn had ever met; she was almost relentlessly positive with a booming, infectious laugh. They had a daughter, Maisie, only a few years old, who already seemed to be taking after her parents in terms of both stature and good-natured personality. It was a constant source of amazement to Catlyn that the three of them managed to fit in the tiny flat above the forge. "So what can I do for you, little Cat?"

"I need some nails to hold a piece of wood on to a window frame; it's only temporary so they don't need to be good ones."

Bartolbey chuckled, a deep, rumbling noise that sounded like an avalanche in the high valleys of the mountain range. "What did Darin do now?" he asked, walking over to a chest of very small drawers that might have been pine but was now so blackened from its time in the forge that even telling it was wood was a struggle. He pulled open one of the small drawers and scooped out a handful of short, black nails. "These should do, I think."

"He was showing me a complicated looking axe move out in the yard. His axe found its way through my bedroom window."

Bartolbey stared at her, eyes wide and shining in his soot covered face. "You let him use an axe?" he exclaimed.

Catlyn coughed with laughter. "Gods, no!" she said. "It was a stick. I'm not suicidal."

Bartolbey let out a sigh of relief. "I thought you'd taken leave of your senses. Here." He handed her the nails.

"Many thanks, Bart," said Catlyn. "How much do I owe you?"

Bartolbey dismissively waved a massive hand at her. "For six dirt-cheap nails? Forget it. Mathilde would skin me if she thought I'd charged you for those."

"You're too kind, Bart. When Maisie's well enough, bring her and Mathilde to the Flight and you can have a meal on the house. See you later!" She waved and walked back out into the sunshine that seemed blindingly

bright after the darkness of the forge. Talking to Bartolbey had improved her mood, as it usually did, making the frown lines on her forehead slightly shallower. However, she predicted that the good humour she had gained in the genial company of the blacksmith would evaporate almost as soon as she entered the village's general store.

She paused at the door, already grimacing in advance; she hated the store. Hated its overpriced goods; hated the stupid bell behind the door; but mainly she hated Mrs. Grossingham, the woman who owned the store, presiding over the perfectly arranged shelves like a white-haired dictator who ruled with a passive-aggressive iron fist. Never anything other than unflinchingly polite, Mrs. Grossingham had perfected the art of pointing out all the ways that you were, in her most humble of opinions, a failure. She would never be so crass as to say something like that out loud, she would merely suggest it with a quirk of her carefully plucked eyebrows and an unconvinced "hmmm" whenever someone mentioned something they had done of which they were proud. She collected gossip too, using half-heard comments and vague rumours as a kind of secondary currency. Always primly turned out in a well-tailored dress, sent by her brother in the city who also provided all the store's produce (she never stocked anything local), her neatly trimmed grey hair neatly pulled back into a neat little bun, her views of the young, headstrong woman in the cobbled together jerkin and leggings who owned the inn were written all over her pinched face and the way she peered over her horn-rimmed pince-nez. She liked The Dragon's Flight though, oh yes; barely a visit to the store passed without her bringing up the subject of her niece, who just so happened to be Darin's age and was a lovely girl and just the kind of woman to look after Darin and the inn. He'd need looking after, of course, because it wasn't as if Catlyn was going to find a husband whilst she was running the business (cue polite laugh and an over-familiar hand on Catlyn's arm).

Unfortunately, no one else in the valley was likely to be able to get her a replacement glass panel for the window; she dreaded to think what kind of hideously overinflated price Mrs. Grossingham would ask to get it shipped to the village by her brother.

Ding-aling-aling, went the bell as Catlyn pushed open the door; she ground her teeth together and fought the urge to slam it shut behind her.

"Hello, Cat, darling," said a shrill voice. Looking down the aisle of pristinely laid out shelves where everything was perfectly aligned, another thing that irritated the defiantly messy Catlyn, she could see Mrs. Grossingham peering at her from behind a box of goods that she was unpacking. "How are you, dear?"

"Hello, Mrs. Grossingham. I'm fine, thank you. I trust you are well."

"Oh, I can't complain, dear."

Ha! thought Catlyn, chance would be a fine thing.

"But I must confess that the pollen is bringing on my allergies."

Liar, I've never seen you sneeze once in the summer, thought Catlyn. Aloud, she said, "I'm very sorry to hear that, Mrs. Grossingham. I was wondering if there was any chance that your brother would be able to order a pane of glass for me and have it sent up." And now, as your face twists up like you just swallowed a lemon because that sounds like hard work, for the secret weapon! "I know I'm asking a lot, I quite understand if it's too difficult for Mr. Draining." Mr. Draining was her brother, Draining being her maiden name; presumably there had been a Mr. Grossingham at some point though no one seemed quite sure who he was or what had happened to him. There were rumours, of course; stories of dark pacts and strange, erotic liaisons with unnatural creatures. In all fairness, those rumours all tended to come from Garlin, the potter, who collected butterflies and didn't get out much.

"Oh no, dear, I'm sure my dear brother will be able to get your glass for you." If there was one thing Mrs. Grossingham hated more than an unevenly stacked shelf or a bit of gossip she was the last to find out about, it was someone implying that her family were in any way deficient. "I'm sending an order off tomorrow morning, if

you can bring the measurements round then I'll add the glass to it. I'm afraid it might be quite pricey though, dear..."

"That's fine, Mrs. Grossingham, thank you very much. I'll drop the measurements off this afternoon."

Catlyn turned to go, hoping to avoid the inevitable question, but...

"So...if you don't mind my asking, what happened to the window?"

Bugger, thought Catlyn. "Well, my brother had a bit of an accident..."

By the time she had explained the incident, and listened to an extended sales pitch about how suitable Artesia, Mrs. Grossingham's niece, would be as a wife for Darin, to take him in hand and look after him properly, Catlyn had an ache in her fingers from the strain of not strangling the nosy, interfering old baggage. Relieved to be back out in the sun she headed back to The Dragon's Flight. Outside the inn she could see a small group sitting on horseback, and Namon was standing holding the bridle of his stout mountain pony whilst he spoke to Darin. Auld Gran was sitting on a nearby chair, sucking determinedly on her pipe and trying not to laugh.

"Now look, lad, I know you're keen and all, and I hate to burst your bubble, but you're really not cut out for the life of a warrior. It's just...well, you need to be able to not hit yourself in the face with your own axe, ye ken? There are enough ghouls, wights, liches, giant spiders and blob things trying to kill you, you don't want to be helping them."

"I guess so," said Darin, staring morosely at the ground. He looked crestfallen. Catlyn felt one of those rare stabs of pity she sometimes experienced.

"Mr. Namon!" she called out in a shocked tone as she approached. "I do hope you're not stealing my brother away from me and taking him off on some hare-brained adventure!"

The dwarf turned to her, sharp eyes twinkling beneath bushy eyebrows as he instantly cottoned on to what she was doing. "Ms. Fordman, I'm sorry for being so presumptuous. I had hoped to add this brave, young adventurer to our party."

"And leave me bereft, Mr. Namon? Shame on you!" Catlyn tried her best to mould her expression into something that looked upset and turned to Darin. "Dar, what would I do without you, who would look after me if you run off on an adventure? I'd be all alone in the inn with no one to protect me from bandits and thieves and the monsters that come down out of the mountains." The last part wasn't entirely made-up; the growth of maniacal, power-mad sorcerers and kings in the mountain strongholds had led to a great many strange creatures being created or dragged from the earth. Quite a few of them wandered off or got lost and, sooner or later, ended up roaming around the lower valleys, causing havoc, confusion and the occasional death, although Catlyn had heard of a farmer who'd trained a giant spider to pull his plough.

"Sorry, sis," said Darin. He looked a bit less disappointed now. "I just thought it sounded exciting."

"I know, Dar, I know. Maybe another time." She patted him consolingly on the shoulder. "I'm glad you decided to stay, it's a very noble and heroic thing to do what others need you to do, rather than what you want to do."

He nodded thoughtfully, starting to smile. "It is isn't it?"

"Yes it is," said Catlyn. "Do you think you could heroically go and start getting some food ready for the lunchtime rush?"

"Certainly can!" He all but saluted her and turned to go back in the pub, but Namon stopped him.

"Afore you go, lad, I've got a wee present for you." The dwarf started fiddling with the straps that held his gear on. Eventually he pulled a long stave clear and held it out to Darin. "Take this quarterstaff, lad. It's a fine weapon but it's too damned long for an old dwarf like me. Also, it doesn't have any sharp edges. Very important

that last bit. You might want to wrap the ends in a soft blanket all the same, at least until you get the hang of it. If I'm lucky enough to come this way again, I'll give you some pointers on how to use it."

Darin held up the staff reverentially, as if it was the finest thing he'd ever seen. "Thank you, Mr. Namon. This is awesome!" He waved it around a bit, forcing everyone to duck away.

"That was very nice of Mr. Namon, wasn't it?" said Catlyn through teeth that were only slightly gritted. "Now, lunch!"

"Yes, sis," replied Darin, grinning broadly. He ran inside the inn, accidentally smacking the door frame with the staff on the way through.

Catlyn stared at the gash in the door's lintel for a long moment and then turned her icy gaze on the bashful-looking dwarf. "I will charge you for every window, chair, table and ornament that gets broken by that thing," she said to Namon. "But thank you for it, all the same, you've made his day."

"Sorry, lass, but I had to give him something, and at least it's not sharp."

"There is that, I guess. Are you off into the mountains then?" she asked him. The rest of his party were starting to look a little impatient.

"Aye, lass." He shrugged. "It's a living."

"Not usually," said Catlyn, smiling sadly. "You know why this place is called Heroes' Rest?"

The dwarf smiled back at her. "I've been doing this for fifty years, lass, and been through here a dozen times, going up and coming down. Even remember a time or two when I got served dinner by a little girl who kept scowling at everyone, don't think she would remember it though." He grinned at Catlyn, who rolled her eyes, but then his expression becomes tinged with sadness. "I've left more than a few friends in yon cemetery, and carved a few names on the wall, but I've got no plans to join them just yet."

"Well, see that you don't. Good luck with whatever ridiculous and pointless quest you're on."

"Cheers, lass, hope to see you soon!" He vaulted up into the saddle of his pony, waved, and set off up the path to the mountains with the rest of his companions.

Gran took the pipe out of her mouth. "He'll be alright, Cat. You don't get to be an adventurer that old without being good at it. And lucky, too."

Catlyn watched the group disappear up the valley and didn't reply.