

The Valley Of Mazes

Chapter 1

The rain fell slowly, but steadily from a cloud covered sky, the constant pitter-patter on the roofs of the rough buildings and in the muddy streets enough to drive most men crazy. But still they came, hundreds of them, flocking to Hambrish, a small town at the mouth of the Predish Valley, but which was more commonly known as the Valley of Mazes. Men, elves, dwarves, thieves, even gnomes and an occasional wizard descended on Hambrish to prepare for their journey into the Valley, all in hopes of finding wealth and power. The lucky ones found nothing. The rest found death. No one had found the legendary treasure.

Gloin Rockbreaker stumped through the mud of Hambrish towards the Inn At The Edge Of The Forest, so named because it had been built at the end of the road from the south that led into Hambrish, just at the edge of the dark, old forest that surrounded Hambrish and flowed into the Valley. The Inn At The River, the Inn At The Bridge, the Inn At The Mouth To The Valley and the Inn At The Crossroads were all full up. The Inn At the West Road was still being built and the Inn At The East Road had burned down two weeks before. The Inn At The Edge Of The Forest was Gloin's last hope of finding a room, otherwise he would be pitching a tent in the woods, a thought that he was none to happy with. Not only would it be wet and miserable, but the Dreadwolves prowled through the old forest and sometimes slipped into town after dark.

The Inn At The Edge Of The Forest was the oldest of all the Inns in Hambrish, and the least comfortable. Once it had been beautiful, with a large, wrap-around porch and a huge common room, but the rooms were small and drafty, the beds lumpy and uncomfortable and the food, though cheap, was known to be of poor quality. The worst part about the Inn, however, was its owner, a crusty old woman with one eye and coarse, gray hair who walked stooped over

and tried her best to make everyone as miserable as she was. Gloin had heard the stories, everyone had, but like all the other patrons of the Inn, he was desperate to find lodging as nightfall approached.

Gloin climbed the five, man-sized steps that led to the porch and took a moment to shake the water out of his long, dark beard and adjust the heavy pack on his back. He was tired and hungry and none too pleasant as he stomped through the sagging doors. He found himself in a large, dark room, filled with smoke and alive with chatter as dozens took their meal. Men mostly, from many different countries, but he also saw elves and dwarves and in the corner five gnomes who appeared to be experiencing the best meal of their lives.

"What der you want?" the old woman barked at Gloin from behind a counter.

"I need a room," Gloin snapped back.

"A room? You come to an Inn to find a room?" she asked sarcastically. "And why should I rent a room to a dwarf?"

"You've got dwarves here now," Gloin pointed out impatiently, gesturing to several dwarves in the common room.

"So? Might be they don't have rooms, just sitting there drinkin' and eatin'. Who says they have rooms?"

Gloin stared at the old woman, who was not much taller than himself, even if she were able to stand up straight. Her one eye was clouded and her teeth rotten. Her skin was sickly looking, her hands boney and deformed and the tattered dress he wore was stained both with food and sweat. He hoped that someone else was doing the cooking back in the kitchen. "Aye, that might be," Gloin said. "And it matters not. I need a room, or time to find lodging somewhere else."

The woman cackled. "I'm bettin' there ain't no other rooms, otherwise you would not be here, dwarf. But a room I have, if you have the coin. Three coppers for the night." Gloin fished through his pocket and pulled out the three small copper coins and slapped them on the

counter. The old woman frowned as her misshapen fingers tried to grasp the coins. "Up the stairs," she grumbled, "down the hall to the end. Number fifty-three. And I'll be havin' no loud noises!"

Gloin spun away and thumped up the stairs, cursing the men who had built the Inn. He looked neither left nor right, ignoring all the eyes from the Common Room that watched him climb the steps. The Inn was larger than he thought, the bulk of it extending far back from the front, and it took a while to make his way down the long hallway. By the time he reached the end, the sounds and smells of the Common Room were far away, replaced by softly spoken words behind closed doors and the smell of mildew from the dirty carpet. It took him a moment to figure out which room was number fifty-three because not all of the doors had numbers on them. The door to his room stuck and he had to force it open.

The room, like all the rooms, was small with only a single bed and a rickety table with a lantern on it. A small, grimy window sat in one wall, and a curtain covered what passed as a closet. Gloin dropped his pack on the floor and lit the lantern. He took a moment to examine his room, making sure nothing was crawling in the mattress before blowing out the lantern and making his way back to the Common Room with the intent of getting something to eat.

"The kitchen's closed!" the old woman groused at him.

"Closed! It's barely sunset!" The Common Room was much emptier now, only a handful of people lingered smoking pipes and drinking ale.

"An' the kitchen's closed!" the woman repeated. "You should have eaten earlier! You want food, there're taverns all over this town." The old woman spun away from Gloin and started yelling at a young girl who was cleaning tables in the Common Room.

Gloin ground his teeth in frustration and walked out the door and into the cool evening air. It was still early yet, but the high peaks blocked the sun and the constant clouds and endless rain seemed to drain all light from the world. Gloin started up the road, away from the dark, ominous trees that loomed next to the Inn, in search of a tavern. The muddy streets were

still busy with people coming and going, some drunk and merry, others secretive, still others slogging along miserably. Gloin stopped at the first tavern he found called the Fallen Tree and stepped inside. The tavern was like any other mannish tavern he had visited. Rough wooden tables and benches were filled with unwashed travelers who were spilling as much food and drink on themselves as they were able to eat. There were the usual types of patrons, the drunkards, the mercenaries, a few soldiers who were off duty and the quieter types that sat in the darker corners.

Gloin found an open spot at the end of a bench and called for the owner. "Ale!" he ordered, "and what have ye got to eat?"

The owner was a fat, balding man who had considerable trouble making it through his own place, but he had a jolly laugh and clean mugs. "Roast venison, master dwarf, boiled potatoes and fresh bread, if that will suit you!"

Gloin nodded. "That suits me just fine!" he bellowed, his spirits lifted.

"At your service!" the owner responded and made his way back to the kitchen, dispatching his daughter, a tall, thin, plain girl, to deliver Gloin's mug of ale. Gloin drank it heartily, wiping his mouth off with the back of his hand and sighing deeply. It had been a long journey from the mountains of his homeland, Kordish. He had traveled hard and rested little, living off the land as much as possible so that he could save his money. He assumed he would have to buy men with swords to accompany him into the mazes, at least until they were lucky enough to find some real treasure. He knew that over half the people in Hambrish were there to hire onto expeditions into the valley. Finding these men would be simple. The tavern was full of them. Finding the right men would be much harder.

The owner's daughter returned with a plate of food for Gloin, who paid in copper, tossing in a few extra for the girl's trouble. Gloin devoured the food and looked around the tavern as he did, searching for likely candidates. He spotted a couple that might do, but he was not ready to

talk to any of them. He finished his meal and left the tavern, heading back to the Inn and his lumpy bed.

Gloin slept in late the next morning and was not surprised to discover that the kitchen was once again closed by the time he came down. He left the Inn and headed back to the tavern he had visited the night before. Amazingly, the sky was clear, the air cool and fresh and the sun shone bright. The streets were crowded and Gloin could hear the sounds of the peddlers and musicians in the market near the crossroads.

"Bah," he said, "it's like a King's Tournament here!"

He entered the tavern, and the owner greeted him cheerfully. "Master Dwarf! Good to see you again."

Gloin smiled despite himself. "Breakfast?"

The owner leaned on his counter and smiled. "Eggs fried in lard, bacon, fried potatoes, bread, jam and coffee?"

"That'll do!" Gloin said and took a seat at a bench with his back to the wall. The owner waddled off to the back as Gloin looked around. The tavern was not nearly as full as last night and those that were there were much quieter and less drunk. Some appeared to be locals, those people who actually lived in Hambrish. Others appeared to be more serious adventurers, more the type that Gloin wanted for his trip into the valley.

The owner returned shortly with a large mug and a pot of coffee. He poured Gloin a mug and sat himself down on the bench opposite the dwarf, breathing heavily from the exertion. "So, Master Dwarf! What brings you to Hambrish?"

"What else? The valley!" Gloin answered.

"Of course! Of course! And why not? Promises of riches undreamed of in those mazes, but, oh, those mazes!" The owner shook his head. "Wizards work, you know! How else could the mazes change every time you go in?"

"Aye, wizard's work for sure."

The owner nodded his head and leaned heavily on the table. "And you? Come alone or are you with a party? Not safe to go in those mazes alone."

"I hear it's not safe to go in at all," Gloin said.

The owner slapped the table. "Hah! And that's why I get what I can before the fools go in! Meaning no offense, Master Dwarf."

Gloin smiled and drank his coffee. He liked this man. He was plain and simple and friendly. Many men he had met would barely give him the time of day until they saw his gold. "I've come alone," Gloin said, "but I don't mean to enter the mazes that way."

"Ah, looking to hire some men, are you?" the owner asked. Gloin nodded. "Lots of them here, but not all to be trusted. Careful how you pick them. Most would as soon cut your throat once they have some gold in their hands and scurry out of the maze like the rats they are."

Gloin nodded, secretly sliding a silver coin towards the owner. "Aye, that's the trick," he said. The owner pocketed the coin and winked at Gloin.

Just then the owner's daughter walked up with a plate heaped with food and several more customers wandered in. The owner stood with difficulty to greet them. Gloin paid for his meal and began to eat, waiting to see who among those in the tavern would approach him. It did not take long.

"So, you're going into the mazes, are you?" a small man said from the corner to Gloin's right. He was thin, but muscular and dressed well in soft leathers from head to toe. He had a friendly smile and well trimmed moustache. Next to him sat a large man wearing chain mail under boiled leathers. He had dark eyes and a hard look about him, but not untrustworthy.

"Isn't everyone?" Gloin asked.

The man laughed. "Without the mazes, Hambrish would still be just a pig farm! Now it's the center of the world, at least, that's what the locals want you to think." The man took a drink from his coffee. "My name's Silver."

Gloin looked at the man. "Silver?" he asked.

Silver shrugged. "It's a name. And you are?"

"I am Gloin of Kordish."

"My friend here, that talkative one, is Nickola. We're interested in the mazes as well, and looking to join a party."

Gloin glanced at the owner who was serving a pile of steaming potatoes to a nearby table. The owner glanced back and gave him a quick thumbs-up signal before waddling off again. "And what do you want from the mazes?"

"Why, gold, of course! Or gems, silver, copper, anything that can be spent. Nickola would love a magical sword but I have little use for magical items myself. Still, if I found something of use, I would not be too proud to pick it up."

"And your price?"

"No price, a percentage. An equal share of what is found. We all go in together, we all come out together."

Gloin nodded and chewed on some bacon. "And what about you, Gloin of Kordish? What do you seek in the maze?"

Gloin glanced at the men, drank of his coffee. "As you, I seek gold," he said.

Silver stroked his moustache. "I don't think so," he said.

"If not gold, than what else is there?"

"What, indeed?" Silver asked. "What is it that would drive a dwarf to crawl through magical caves that they have not dug? Hmm, I can't say, but it must be important. You're on a quest, perhaps? There's some dwarven rumor of a magical tunnel digger hidden in the mazes?" Silver laughed. "Ah, well, it matters not. We are on a quest too, a quest to get rich, and as my Uncle would say, 'the greater the risk, the greater the treasure.' We would be pleased to join you in your adventure, if you'll have us."

Gloin thought about it for a moment. "I can see what your friend brings to this adventure, but what of you?"

Silver smiled and gestured to himself. "Me? Why I am perhaps the best thief you'll find in Hambrish. But it's not really thieving you'll want, it's my knack of finding secret doors and my ability to get around those nasty traps that litter these mazes. And I'm not bad with a bow, either."

"You've been in the mazes?"

"Twice, so far, and neither time was very profitable. But that was not our fault. Some of these adventurers are too eager to find their treasure that they don't think about the dangers. As it was, the last time, Nickola and I just made it out alive."

"Hmmm, so you've experience with the mazes, then. That's good." Gloin thought some more, and then nodded. "Aye, I'll have you."

Silver smiled. "Excellent! And it's agreed that all money and gems will be split evenly between us?"

"Agreed," Gloin said.

"Excellent."

Gloin nodded to Nickola. "And him?"

"Who, Nickola? Nickola will let us know if he disagrees to something," Silver said. "Otherwise, you might not even know he's around. But he's a mighty handy fellow to have around in a fight."

"You'll want archers, indeed you will!" the owner of the Fallen Tree was saying excitedly. "Men with swords are great, but no party has survived without archers to back them up."

"Hmm," Gloin grumbled, stroking his thick beard. He had sent Silver and Nickola off to buy a mule and supplies, and he himself wanted to go find some armor.

"Elves are the best," the owner whispered, breathing heavily.

Gloin frowned. "Elves. But I suppose you're right. It's those eyes of theirs."

"Most of the elves stay by the river," the owner said. "But there's one, an Elf Prince, as I hear it. He has a camp in the old forest. The Dreadwolves don't scare them, I suppose. He's been here for weeks, but has never gone into the Valley."

Gloin nodded. "I'd best pay him a visit, then."

Gloin left the tavern and headed to the market place first. The sun was starting to dry up the roads and the merchants were louder and in good spirits. Hunks of meat sizzled over fires and onions and peppers roasted in covered pots. Rice and fish steamed and bread and pastries baked. Fruits of all kinds were everywhere and live chickens clucked and squawked in cages. Gloin passed them all in search of armor. He found what he was looking for beneath a tattered tent.

"Ho, cousin," Gloin greeted the dwarf that was pounding on a red hot sword.

The dwarf glanced up. "Ho, cousin," he said in the traditional Dwarven greeting. He jammed the sword into a bucket of water that sizzled and steamed. The dwarf was considerably older than Gloin, thin and his skin was hardened from a hard life.

"You're a long way from home, cousin," Gloin said.

"Aye, as are you," the dwarf said, wiping his hands on a dirty rag. "But home for me is where my forge is, and these days, it's here."

Gloin nodded. "I need armor," he said, nodding up at a shelf where various pieces of armor lay.

The old dwarf glanced up at the shelf. "Aye, going into the mazes, are ye? It's armor you'll be needing, but not from up there. Come, I'll not have a countryman braving those tunnels with less than my best. Aldrach! Mind the front!"

Gloin followed the dwarf through the tent to the back where a larger tent stood. Half of the tent was where the older dwarf and Aldrach, who might have been a son or grandson, lived.

The rest, though, was a carefully staged display of fine armor, most of it dwarf sized, all of it dwarf made.

"Here is what I offer you, cousin. Chain mail as our fathers wore and thick leather on top. Light and strong. Or here, plate armor, none better."

Gloin fingered the chain mail. "My father wore mail just like this," Gloin said. "I would have brought it, but I didn't want to lug it all the way down here."

The old dwarf nodded. "It's a long journey by foot to be wearing chain mail, but in the mazes, you'll be needing it. And here, a half-helm to protect your head. Will you be needing a weapon?"

Gloin shook his head. "No, the weapon I brought." Gloin purchased the armor from the dwarf and deposited it in his room at the Inn before setting out to find the Elf Prince. It did not take him long. The Elf Prince had taken over a small clearing not too far from the Inn At The Edge Of The Forest. Several tents surrounded a much larger tent that flew gold banners trimmed in hunter green with the image of a prancing deer on it.

As Gloin approached, two elves greeted him, or rather, barred his way. "Good day," one said as they both bowed slightly. They were taller than Gloin, but not quite as tall as most men. Both had deep blue eyes and long golden hair tied in a pony tail. "May we help you?"

"I've come to see the Prince," Gloin stated.

"For what purpose?" the other elf asked.

"To invite him on an adventure," Gloin said.

The elves exchanged surprised glances. "This way," one of the elves said, and led Gloin to the main tent. One of the elves disappeared inside for a moment, and then returned. "The Prince will see you," he said, and drew back the tent flaps.

Gloin glanced once at both of them with a scowl on his face and then, shrugging his shoulders, stumped into the tent. The interior of the tent was divided into several compartments. He stood in what appeared to be an audience chamber, lavishly decorated with

thick rugs and comfortable looking furniture. Candles burned all around and incense scented the air. To one side, a young elf maiden played a soothing melody on a harp, and another stood waiting to serve her Prince as necessary.

"I've come to see the Prince," Gloin announced.

"I am here, Master Dwarf." The Prince emerged from an adjoining room dressed in a purple velvet robe. He walked gracefully to the main chair and sat, calling for a glass of wine as he did so. "Please, join me," the Prince said, indicating a chair across from him.

"Thank you," Gloin said gruffly, he was a Prince after all, and sat.

"I offer you wine and fruit if you would like, or we do have ale if that's more to your liking."

"I would enjoy some wine", Gloin said, and immediately the elf maid poured him a glass which he held nervously. It was a delicate goblet, or at least appeared to be.

"My men tell me you would invite me on an adventure."

"I am going into the maze," Gloin said, "and I am in need of archers. There are none better than elves."

The Prince smiled. "I have been waiting for you."

"For me?"

"Yes. I am Sindew, Prince of the GreenWood, and Lord of the Seeing Pool. The Pool told me to be here. It foretold that a dwarf would offer me an invitation to an adventure, which were the exact words you used, otherwise my men would not have allowed you past."

"And what is it that you would gain?"

The Prince leaned forward. "That, I do not know. And so that is why I would be more than happy to join you."

Gloin returned to the Inn late that evening. The Common Room was nearly empty, but the old woman sat at her counter and glared at him. "The kitchen's closed!" she snapped.

"I've eaten!" Gloin yelled back. He thumped up the stairs and down the long hallway to his room and threw open the door and stood frozen in shock. The room was not empty. A man was lying on his bed, sliding a whetstone along the length of a large knife, and an elf was leaning against the wall.

The man smiled at him. "Did you truly think you could get away from us?" he asked.

"I thought I'd left you two well behind!" Gloin growled.

The elf pushed away from the wall. "You thought wrong."

Gloin sighed. "Ah, you two are a pain in my rear!"

"What else are friends for?"

Chapter 2

Gloin and his two friends, Dorn the Ranger and Kel the Elf arrived at the bridge at noon as Gloin had arranged. Silver and Nickola were already there, Nickola holding the reins to a small donkey that was laden down with supplies. As they approached, Silver took a step forward and bowed with a flourish.

"Good day to you, Master Dwarf!" he said, "and to your friends, who I assume will also accompany us on our adventure?"

"Aye," Gloin said. "This is Dorn Baelish a Ranger from Dergion, and the elf is Kel of the HighWood." Gloin pointed to Silver and Nickola. "He is Silver, a thief, and the quiet one is Nickola."

"Well met," Dorn said.

"The pleasure is ours," Silver said, bowing again. He looked the party over. "Is this it, then? Just the five of us?"

"There's another," Gloin said.

"A wizard, I hope," Silver said.

"Another elf," Gloin stated.

"Ah. I see." Silver's smile had faded. "No wizards at all, then?"

Gloin shook his head. "I don't trust them."

"Neither do I," Silver said. "In fact, I don't even trust myself, but this is a magical maze, after all."

Just then Sindew approached, dressed in plain leathers, much like Kel, with an ornate bow on his back. He and Kel saw each other first, and Kel was about to bow to the Prince, but Sindew, using the Elven hand language, told him not to.

"Ah, here is our final member. This is Sindew of the GreenWood," Gloin said, not mentioning that Sindew was a Prince as they had agreed. Gloin introduced the remaining team to Sindew. "That's it, then," he said. "It's time we were on our way."

Gloin began across the bridge and the others followed, Silver bringing up the rear. "I still think a wizard would be a good idea!" he said. "It's not too late to look for one!"

Once across the bridge, the road split into three directions, one heading south along the river, one heading west and the third heading north along the river into the Valley. Gloin set the pace, and started up the road, which was lined with merchants selling weapons, clothing, armor, food supplies and magic potions, but as they left the bridge behind, the merchants disappeared as well. The way became quiet, though several people walked in both directions. Silver noted with a grimace that those who were heading south, away from the Valley, were often bandaged and bloodied. He shuddered at the sight and wondered why he was going back in.

They did not talk much as they marched along, following the road that followed the river. The road narrowed steadily as they neared the Valley and started to climb steeply. The river, which had run lazily through its wide banks near the bridge, now tumbled and crashed over large rocks, until they finally came across a high waterfall that fell from the misty lip high above.

"We'll rest here," Gloin said staring up at the rainbows that danced in the mist. The waterfall marked the beginning of the Valley. A narrow path had been cut into the face of the rock, switching back on itself many times before reaching the top, which was always shrouded in mist.

"They say it's not natural," Silver commented, "the mist at the top, I mean. No matter how warm the day is that mist tumbles through the Valley."

"Wizard's work?" Dorn asked.

Silver nodded gravely. "Without a doubt."

"You've been in the Valley, then?" Kel asked.

"A time or two. Nickola and I have survived so far, but have nothing to show for our efforts, except a few more bruises and scars."

As they spoke, a man supported by another man and a woman stumbled down the path having just made the descent from the Valley. They were dirty and bandaged and blood was caked in the hair of the man being supported. They did not speak as they shambled past, only spared a glance.

"How many were you?" Silver called after them.

"Nine," the woman yelled back.

"And the rest?"

"Dead."

Silver sighed. "Dead," he repeated.

Gloin let his pack fall off his back and laid down his ax. He sat on a rock and pulled out his pipe, calmly filling it and lighting it. The others also dropped their packs and drank water from the river and there they rested for a time before making the climb up the trail.

A small fire crackled in the darkness, a chicken roasting on a spit over it, its skin crackling and juices falling into the fire, hissing and spitting. Not too far away, two other fires burned. A party of nine and a party of five, also bound for the mazes. All of them sat in the cool mist, huddled around their small fires, listening to the sounds of the Valley.

The climb up the trail had been long and tiring and took the rest of the day. They had reached the top as the sun was setting and immediately felt the chill of the mist that enveloped them. At the edge of the cliff they could see the lands rolled out beneath them. The fires from Hambrish flickered and they could hear the distant sound of music. It was hot in Hambrish, even with the setting sun, but at the top of the cliff it was cold, and each of them pulled on a coat or cloak.

"The Temple entrance," Gloin said in a quiet voice. "Do you know where that is?"

"I know it," Silver said. "It's probably the farthest away, though."

"Distance doesn't matter," Gloin said. "That is the entrance we must use."

"Why that one?"

Gloin ground his teeth. "Because I said so," he hissed.

Silver sat back raising his hands defensively. "Okay, I was just curious."

Gloin looked back into the fire and happened to glance up at Dorn on the other side who was watching him. "It's my expedition," Gloin said, "not yours!"

"I said nothing," Dorn said calmly.

"No, but you were thinking it!"

"And yet," Sindew said, staring into the fire, "we would all be curious as to why you chose the Temple entrance."

Gloin looked around the fire at the faces looking back at him and grumbled. "All right," he said gruffly. "I had it in a dream. A woman, an angel most like, showed me the way."

Silver grunted. "In this valley? Not an angel, something else. Something deadly."

"It's dreams we're chasing, then?" Kel asked.

"Doesn't matter," Silver said. "The entrances never change, but the corridors and rooms beneath are never the same. Monsters wander through the open rooms, other monsters wait within the closed rooms. The maze changes behind you as well. The last time, we marked the walls so we could find our way out, but when we followed those marks they led to a dead end."

"How did you get out then?" Dorn asked.

Silver stabbed the chicken with his knife and cut a hunk off. "We turned around and fought our way back down the corridor and took another corridor instead. Eventually we found our way out. Chicken's done." Silver started slicing the chicken and tossing the pieces onto tin plates.

"You were lucky," Kel asked.

Silver glanced at him and smiled. "Lucky? No, it wasn't luck."

"What then?"

Silver stopped cutting and regarded Kel. "The maze has a life of its own. It was playing with us. When it got tired, it let us out."

They were up early the next morning and on their way before either of the other two parties were awake. The morning air was colder than the night before, and the sun was hidden behind dark clouds that threatened rain. Their mule was skittish as they followed the road deeper into the valley. All around them the trees began to look sickly. They had few leaves and thorny vines wrapped around their trunks. The underbrush was dead and dry and the ground covered with rotting vegetation, but the worst part was the silence. There were no birds or animals or even insects. It was an unnatural silence that made them all jumpy.

The road continued to follow the river, whose water looked black because of the dark rocks that lined the riverbed, until it came to a fork. One road continued to follow the river, the other crossed the river over an old stone bridge covered in moss and headed off into the trees.

"Which way?" Gloin asked.

"Over the bridge," Silver said. Gloin nodded and started over the bridge. Suddenly, out of the mist, a huge figure swooped down and grabbed Gloin in its claws.

"Griffin!" Dorn yelled pointing. The griffin was obviously laboring as it tried to haul Gloin up into the sky. Kel and Sindew each nocked arrows to their bows and shot at the griffin. Both arrows hit true and the griffin released Gloin as it spiraled to the ground, dead. Gloin crashed through a tree branch and then into the cold, rushing water of the river. He came up sputtering and cursing, but none the worse for wear as Dorn and Nickola dragged him out.

"C-cold!" Gloin said, shivering, icy water dripping off his clothes and pack.

"We'd better get you next to a fire," Dorn said.

They crossed the bridge and found a spot on the other side to make a large fire. Gloin stripped off most of his clothes which they hung on poles near the fire to dry and he huddled in a

blanket drinking coffee. "Never in my days have I felt water so cold!" he muttered, still shivering, his hands a pale blue color.

"Be thankful for your armor," Kel said. "Without it, the griffin would have gotten you a lot higher."

"That could have been quite a fall," Silver said, as he reclined against a fallen tree trunk. "And with you dead, what's the point of going on?"

"Your concern is touching," Gloin growled.

Silver shrugged. "I didn't mean anything by it, just stating a fact."

As they talked the party of nine adventurers reached the fork but stayed on the other side, deciding to follow the river and reach one of the closer entrances. "All men," Gloin observed.

Silver watched the party. "So?"

"I heard that most of the parties that go into these mazes are all of one race."

Silver frowned and thought about that, then looked over their party. "I suppose so. Is that important?"

Gloin shrugged. "Maybe. Maybe not."

"Most of the races tolerate each other well enough, but aren't likely to go adventuring together. Not sure why, though." Silver shrugged and tucked his hands behind his head.

"More direction from your dream?" Dorn asked.

"Aye," Gloin said nodding.

Gloin's clothes dried slowly in the misty air, forcing them to spend the night where they were. The next morning they were off again. Gloin's clothes were mostly dry, but they had a distinct smell of smoke and bacon which they had fried for breakfast. The road had once been fairly wide, but the forest had reclaimed much of it, leaving it no more than a path in some places, and in others it was obstructed by fallen trees. Still, the land was fairly even, sloping up gently. The Valley itself widened out considerably once you were past the bridge, and the mist

seemed to be thinner, or perhaps the sky overhead was clear so the sun was actually able to penetrate the fog. In any case, it was lighter and warmer and they made good progress. By the time the light started to fade, they were less than a day's walk away from the temple.

They took refuge in a ruined building which appeared to have once been a house. The stone walls still stood for the most part, but most of the roof was gone. What was left had been repaired as much as possible by other travelers over the years and was just enough to give them shelter against a soft rain that started to fall. They built a fire and huddled in their blankets.

Sindew sat by the door of the structure, and examined the stonework with a critical eye. "This is dwarven made," he said. The others looked at him. "The stonework is very precise. Even now, it is still strong."

Gloin nodded. "Aye, it was dwarves who lived here once. Long ago. Dwarves built the bridges; they cut the trail up the cliff. They built the Temple and the Keep and dug the beginnings of the tunnels. They found wondrous riches down in the earth. Gold, silver, copper, gems of all sorts. Their good fortune was their undoing. Rejevic, the Barbarian King, decided those riches should be his and with his army they slaughtered the dwarves and sought to take the treasure for themselves. But the dwarves had placed spells on the tunnels when they saw the Barbarian army approach. Spells that made the tunnels defend themselves." Gloin grinned in amusement. "Rejevic never found any treasure."

"So, where did all the monsters come from?" Silver asked.

The smile faded from Gloin's face. "That I do not know."

Silver sighed. "Are you sure you don't want to get a wizard?"

"No wizards!" Gloin said. "My dream told me so!"

Dorn leaned over to Gloin. "Did it truly?" he asked in a whisper.

"No," Gloin admitted with a smirk, "but maybe it'll get him to shut up!"

"Ah."

Sindew stood and examined some of the rubble. "Time did not bring these walls down. Or storms. These were torn down by something." Sindew turned to Gloin. "Something big."

Gloin nodded. "Aye. Dragon, most like."

"Or an armored Crawler," Silver said absently sliding his knife across a whetstone as he stared into the growing darkness. "Or maybe a Stalker. We had better post guards now, two per shift. The upper valley is not safe."

It was well past midnight and the night was deathly silent. Missing were the sounds of insects, nocturnal birds and small woodland creatures. Even the leaves on the trees did not stir in the dead air. Silver and Nickola had drawn the last watch of the night and sat on opposite sides of a tree, Nickola with his sword across his lap, staring out into the gloom, Silver wrapped in a blanket.

"There's only six of us," Nickola said, his voice deep and gruff.

"I know."

"The last time there were only six of us, we barely made it out alive."

Silver knew. He relived the desperate dash through the tunnels as the skeletons chased them. "It'll be different this time."

Nickola grunted. "Yeah, this time we might die."

Silver thought about that too. Dying was not high on his list of things to experience, but they had to keep trying. The Thieves Guild had given him one chance to redeem himself, and that was to find the Key. Rumored to be somewhere in the maze, the Key was a magical device that could open any lock. It had been in the possession of the Guild for many years, until Geriven, who was the Head of the Guild Council at the time, thought it would make sense to take the key into the maze. He never returned and the key was lost. "Find the key," the Guild council had told him, "or watch your back!"

He knew he was being watched day and night, and as long as he continued to try to find it, they would let him live. Him and Nickola. He sometimes regretted getting Nickola involved,

but he was the only person Silver trusted. They had grown up together as orphans living on the streets of Danask. Nickola always protected him. He always provided the means to eat.

Silver's thoughts were interrupted when he heard a sound. He did not move except his eyes. He listened, but he smelled them before he heard or saw them. He heard Nickola slowly get to his feet, and he followed suit, slipping an arrow out of his quiver as he did. They did not speak. Silver slipped over to where the elves slept. They would be easier to wake and had sense enough not to say anything.

Sindew was awake at Silver's first touch on his shoulder and on his feet with an arrow nocked before Silver could lay a hand on Kel. Kel, too was on his feet quickly. Dorn woke and looked at Silver in confusion for a moment until he realized there was trouble. Silver shook Gloin.

"Wha' is it?" he asked, his voice crashing through the silence. Silver shushed him, but by then it was too late. If they had not smelt them out already, they certainly heard them now.

"Get up!" Silver hissed. "We've got..."

Silver was not able to finish his sentence. A huge bundle of fur raced into their camp, large, yellow teeth flashing, bowling Silver over and stepping on Gloin.

The air was filled with the hiss of arrows and Kel and Silver felled the beast, but the howls that followed told them there were more. "At least four!" Kel shouted. There was no need for stealth anymore.

"Dreadwolves!" Gloin bellowed, snatching up his ax. "I didn't think they prowled the Valley."

"Now you know better," Dorn said, grunting as he lifted the Dreadwolf's leg so that Silver could scramble out from under the beast. Out of the darkness three shaggy shapes lurched towards them. Standing five foot at the shoulders, the Dreadwolves bared their teeth and slashed with their long claws. Gloin jumped to the front with his ax swinging, Dorn and Nickola

flanking him. Silver got back to his feet and grabbed his bow. Sindew and Kel were ready, but could not get a clear shot at the beasts with their companions hacking and slashing at them.

Suddenly another of the beasts raced in from the side, knocking Silver down and trampling over him as it raced to attack Dorn from the back. Sindew and Kel let fly their arrows, but not before it raked Dorn's back with its claws, sending him sprawling into the dirt before it died. This left the Dreadwolf that Dorn was fighting exposed, and Sindew placed an arrow down its throat. The beast gurgled and flailed about, spinning and kicking in its agony, knocking Silver over again just as he was getting his feet under him.

Dorn got to his feet, his coat torn, but the wolf's claws had not broken his skin. He stabbed at the wolf that had Gloin's ax in its teeth making it yelp and topple over, freeing Gloin's ax, which he promptly buried in the neck of the wolf that was harassing Nickola.

Suddenly the forest was quiet again, except for a muffled muttering. They all turned to see Silver's feet sticking out from underneath the wolf that Sindew had shot in the mouth. They rolled the beast off of the thief, who came up gasping for air.

"That's no way to fight one of these monsters!" Gloin said laughing.

Silver spat dirt out of his mouth. "Believe me, it was not my choice!"

Dorn helped him to his feet. "Are you all right?" Silver brushed dirt off his clothes and nodded. "Well," Dorn said. "It's nearly morning. I doubt if any of us will sleep now."

"Fine," Silver said, picking twigs out of his hair. "Well, since I wasn't much help in that battle, I'll make breakfast. How do fried potatoes with onions and green peppers sound?"

By the time the sun was up, they had already eaten and packed and were well on their way to the Temple. The sky was hazy all day and very little of the sunlight made it through. The road wound between large, old trees that towered above them, their lower trunks barren of branches or leaves. Tough grasses and weeds were all that would grow under them, giving the travelers a clear view of what was around them. They were comforted by that. At least they

would be able to see if something was coming after them. Early in the evening, they passed over a stream that rushed down its rocky banks, and climbed a hill. The trees gave way to an open meadow where tall grasses swayed in a gentle but chilly breeze. The sun was brighter and the sky clear as they crossed the meadow towards the stone structure that had been built in the middle.

The Temple was still in good shape. Built of white stone, the temple had four towers, with large bells at the top. The steeply sloped roof was covered with bright red tiles, and some of the windows still retained their stained glass. A twelve foot tall curtain wall, also built of white stone, surrounded the Temple, leaving a large grassy area between it and the Temple itself. Four gates penetrated the thick wall, their wooden doors having long since rotted away.

They passed through the nearest gate, warily searching for danger or ambush as they did. "Who is this Temple dedicated to?" Sindew asked.

"No one knows," Gloin said. "Apparently the gold statues of whatever god was worshipped here were stolen long ago."

"It's dwarven built, but dwarves don't usually erect temples, do they?"

Gloin shook his head. "No, at least, not above ground. A dwarven temple is usually a chamber in our tunnels, and not so large besides." Gloin looked up at the towers staring down at them, the dark windows seeming to watch them. He wondered if anyone or anything was in those windows. "This was made by dwarves, but not for dwarves."

"Curious," Sindew said.

"Look," Silver said, pointing off to one side. There, beside the Temple, grazed a dozen mules.

"I wonder who those belong to," Kel asked.

Silver looked at him. "People like us," he said. "The mule won't be able to come into the maze with us. The stairway down is narrow and steep. People just let them graze out here, hoping they'll be here when they get back to help carry out the treasure."

"I'm surprised they're still alive," Dorn said, thinking about the Dreadwolves they had encountered.

Gloin grunted. "Well, we may as well let our mule join the others."

They unpacked their gear from the mule and he trotted happily over to the other mules. They divided their supplies between them and started up the marble steps of the Temple. The great doors had been torn down, their metal frames bent and mangled, and showing signs of having been burned. Debris littered the steps and doorway, making entry difficult. Cautiously they entered the Atrium, which had a high, curved, ceiling and, far above, a balcony which ran around the Atrium. To the left and right dark corridors led to the towers and living areas for the priests that had once presided over the Temple. Straight ahead another set of tall doors led into the sanctuary.

"The entrance to the tunnels is in there," Silver said. "Under the altar."

They entered the sanctuary, a large round chamber with a raised altar in the center. Once, wooden benches would have circled the altar, but those were destroyed or had been used for firewood. A large hole in the ceiling let in rain and birds and the fading light of the sun, but the chamber was empty as they entered cautiously and proceeded to the altar, a large, stone pedestal that had no decoration on it or carvings of any sort. Marks on the floor indicated the altar slid to one side to reveal the stairway into the tunnels.

"We'll not open it yet," Gloin said. "Who knows what might come crawling out of there once we do. We rest tonight here, and in the morning, we begin."