

Cyradon preview fiction: “In the Spring...”

by Gavin Bennett

In the spring, the snow melts in the passes, and the world comes back to life. The mountains shrug off their winter blankets and the valleys blossom. The summer is short, up here. The days are long, but the warm weather is a precious gift. The work is hard, but when autumn comes, we have feasts and we celebrate the coming of winter again.

I am old now. I am an old stooped man, thin of hair and grey of face. My hands are liver spotted, and the old swordsman's callouses are softened and gone. Look at me now, another old man in a world that forgets. But I was young once, and strong. I am respected for my wealth; I earned that wealth with the point of a sword, with theft, and with long years of adventuring. For a time, my name was sung in the great halls of the kingdom. Perhaps you have heard of me; perhaps not. People do not dwell on the trivia of forgotten years.

But, ah, to be young...

If you believed those songs, I was a mighty man, gold of skin, and bronze of hair. I had arms the size of tree trunks and eyes that burned with the dawn. You might be surprised to have seen me then, sixteen years old, on the high passes in the north, shivering into against the cold, wearing a suit of armour that was forged for a much bigger man. My hands stung from the blisters on my palms; blisters that had formed by constant practice with my sword. I was thin, a half starved shepard boy, and my hair was not long and bronze and flowing. It stuck out, like thatch, and never sat still. My skin was still scarred with a boy's pimples. But I was hungry, and I was foolish enough to be brave, and thus I picked the trail through the high passes, away from the world of my people, deep into goblin country.

There were four of us, four insubstantial shadows shivering into the wind. I led the way, but I was no leader. Behind me, Fayal, the dwarf; behind him walked Silclair who Elvish blood made her different; behind her Barcel, the dark skinned man of the distant south. Barcel was a bard, and sometime thief, and sometime sellsword. His feet had brought him up the king's roads from the port cities of the south of the kingdom, to the poor northern frontier lands. I think he had a price on his head. But no matter, like us, he was hungry, and ambitious, and foolish enough to embark on this idiot's adventure. Fayal was a dwarf, who was out of favor with his people for either being too brave or too cowardly, or likely both. He was young, by their standards, but he was an old man by mine. Sometimes he resented me, sometimes he looked to me for guidance or inspiration or justification. His red beard curled when he was angry, and he spoke a dozen languages. In years to come, he would become my truest friend. There are songs about that too, but few remember them. And Silclair. Silclair was born of a mortal woman, a half mad woman who saw things that weren't there and in later life was little better than a drab. But she brought Silclair into the world, after a mad tumble, in her youth, with some Elvish ranger of the east. Silclair seemed not to feel the cold. Her cloak was made of the finest Elvish weave, a gift from her father, and although she dressed like a shepard boy, there was no mistaking what she was. She was the most beautiful woman I have ever seen, and I love her to this day. Her long brown hair whipped out behind her in the wind. I remember looking back at her, catching her eye, and feeling my heart beat heavier in my chest. She smiled, at me, and we continued on.

Silclair was a magician, you see, a witch girl who had studied under a lecherous exile from the southlands. She was not powerful, not then, but she had some tricks, and she had her mother's collection of hidden knives and treacherous wiles. Silclair brought us together. She had a plan, you see, something that could free us of the silly lives of poor exiles in the poor towns of the lower valleys, and give us riches, give us fame...and perhaps give us lives to live, free of the small people and the small minds of those towns. We did not meet in some tavern, as some of the songs will have you believe. I met Fayal when I was dozing, pretending to watch my bond-lord's sheep. He sat and shared some bread with me, and we spoke of adventure, and of seeing more of the world than these tedious mountains. It was idle talk, but we met again, on a fair day late in the following summer, when I had challenged a local boy to a sword fight. My father was a hunter, and a poacher and a soldier in his youth. He had fought in the goblin wars, some ten years past. My father had thought me how to hunt, how to fletch arrows and how to hold a sword. The boy was the farrier's son, and the farrier had sold his son to our bond-lord to be a soldier. The boy was big, fleshy and mean. He was a natural bully. We'd both had a little schooling – the bond-lord was generous enough to his servants – and he had bloodied my lip and nose on occasion. I stood there, trembling, sweaty hands clasped on the worn hilt of my father's old practice sword. The farrier's son wore the bond-lord's insignia, and carried the bond-lord's latest practice swords. How fine he looked. How little like a scared boy. The farrier's son had learned his swordsmanship on the parade ground. I had learned it under my

father. The fight was over in seconds. I cheated. I used my father's tricks, and swung my sword in ways that could never be described as gentlemanly. I was disqualified. There were boos from the crowd. But there was Fayal, grinning, and he bought me an ale. It was my first ale, and I did not like it.

Weeks later, as the year grew old, Fayal introduced me to Silclair. He brought me out to the broken grotto on the outside of town, and there I met Silclair. I was bashful and shy, and she barely noticed me. She had a plan, you see.

The closest tribe of Goblins was the Buhrne tribe. They were a weak tribe, whose numbers had been decimated in the Goblin wars. Indeed, they were the first to fall. Their leader was a chieftain named Bwor, or something similar. He had made an alliance with a tribe further north, and his warriors had marched to war in one of the interminable feuds between those vile creatures. The point, she said, as I grew restless, was that he had left his armory undefended. He would be gone until well after year's end. All that was left were the females and the children, and a few elderly warriors guarding the armory. We could steal into the tribe's territory, and steal into the armory, and steal from the goblin's hoard.

"But why?" I asked. "What do the Goblins have that we need to steal?"

She looked at me coolly, and smiled despairingly. "Goblins steal gold. Gold is not their currency. Slaves are. Human slaves, dwarf slaves, elf slaves, indeed, goblin slaves. But they collect gold. Gold is a status symbol. A chieftain with much gold has proven himself. He has looted human villages, and Elvish palaces and taken plenty of gold. And Bwor is old, and although his tribe is weak, he has plenty of looted status. We are going to take it from him."

"How do you know?" I asked.

"I am a mage. I have certain ways."

And here we were, trudging through the early snow, and the biting wind, with dreams of avarice, and dreams of adventure.

From my village to the first markers of goblin country is a four day walk. Goblins claim more territory than they can ever defend, so in truth, it is a ten day walk to the tribal lands of Buhrne tribe. We traveled fast, and traveled light. Barcel watched our trail and obliterated all traces of our passing. We saw no goblins. We weren't surprised. They rarely defended the southern parts of their lands. They were too afraid to incur the wrath of humanity. I wondered if they understood that humanity had little wrath left to be incurring. We were poor. A generation of men had marched off to fight the wars with the goblins, and a generation of men had not come back. In my village, fifty men marched off to the king's banner, and a mere dozen came back, crippled, lame and dead eyed. My father was one of them. He was in better shape than his friends – though his scars ached in the wet cold days of early spring – but he too was cold eyed, distant and numb. I have heard stories of other towns and other places where the king issued decrees to relieve the suffering. In some places, the bonds-lords freed their serfs so that the work could be done more efficiently. Not in my village. My father returned to service a mere month after returning to our village.

After half a month on the road, moving as stealthily as we could, we climbed up into the higher slopes, and came at last on a goat's path that led us to the ridge that overlooked the goblin's village. Silclair had a lodestone that led us on our way.

"This is it," she said as we crouched behind some bare rocks, squinting down at the small village below. Turf fires burned in the small huts strewn around the small crevice valley. The mountain's arms reached out on either side of the village, shadowing the sun out and sheltering them from the wind. A beaten path snaked through the village, from the valley's entrance off to the east, to the place where the mountain cut into the earth below. "There's a cave, down there," she said. "That's where we are going."

The drop below was steep, but it was not sheer; scrubby trees and stunted ferns clung to the grassy slope. If we moved slowly, we could get down there without raising the alarm. The sky above was grey and heavy with unfallen snow. The wind blew drizzle in our faces. As I watched, I could see a few tired, worn goblins stomp around the village, rubbing their arms for warmth. Their breath steamed. I wondered if our breath gave us away. I hope they would not look up. They didn't. We sat there for an hour, braving the bitter cold. It would get colder

when the sun went down. My father had said that goblins preferred to live by night, but I believed that in this weather, the goblins would stay inside by night.

I had taken three weapons with me. I had taken my father's old bow, my father's old sword and a long dagger. Anything else would have been too heavy. The sword was a long bladed heavy thing, but sharp. I hated it, the friction of the worn hilt cut my palms. But it was a good weapon. If this adventure went well, I reasoned, then I could purchase a better weapon. The bow was ancient; a good twenty years old. It had been well kept, and I had downed a few bucks with it in my time. Now it was returning to battle. The arrows I had flatted myself, but they were cheaply made. I hoped they could pierce a goblin's thick oily skin; I could not hope for my arrows to cut through their hide armour.

The plan, if such it could be called, was for us to get into the caves and overpower – and by that I mean kill – the guards and find the armory and the treasure chests, and get the hell out before the goblins woke up for the night, and be the hell away before they could mount a decent pursuit. In hindsight, the plan sounds naive. As the sun sank, we picked our way down the hillside, down into the goblin's valley. The sky grew dark quickly and the clouds gave way. Snow, heavy, thick, wet snow poured out of the sky. I looked at Silclair. She nodded in return. It was alright. The plan went ahead. It took us a good hour to clamber down the slope; by the time we reached the bottom, snow was piling high on the bare grass around the village. We would leave tracks. It was too late to stop now. The wind was blowing towards us. I had heard that the goblins could smell humans, but the wind took our scent away, up into the hills.

We trudged through the snow, past the sleeping goblin huts. I remember thinking how sad and small and petty their lives were. I remember feeling a little guilty about what we were about to do. We reached the cave entrance without incident: there were no shouts of alarm, no cries, no sound of goblins waking. Fayal punched me lightly on the shoulder. I grimaced back at him. He grinned, tightly. We picked a path around the outermost of the huts just short of the incline of the hill. The snow was soft and wet under our feet. The cold seeped in through my boots. The snow crept down, and filled out footprints and accumulated in ever larger drifts.

Finally, we rounded the corner, and came to the cave mouth. A dim glow of firelight emanated from within. Warm air slipped out, kissing our faces. I almost relaxed as I walked in out of the cold. Then cold, leathery hands grasped my neck. I twisted to see a goblin, a guard I assumed, about to cry out. His cold hands tightened on my throat. Then his hands went limp and Bercel was cleaning his knife. He kicked the goblin body out of the way.

"Foolish," is all he said, in his thick foreign accent. I slipped my sword from its scabbard. We were in a narrow, twisted passage. Warm air whispered out from some bonfire deep inside. The light was dim and flickering. Fayal took the point, and padded on down the passage, towards the light. His heavy short sword was held casually in his hands. I looked back at Silclair. Her face was wan and pallid. She was scared. I felt reassured. I heard a muffled gurgle to my front, and I looked away from her, and back to what was in front of me. Fayal was pushing a goblin body out of the way.

"Two down," Fayal whispered. I wondered how many more there were. Then I found out. The passage opened into a wide antechamber, and then, suddenly, we were surrounded by goblins. A good dozen of them sat around, warming their hands around a campfire. When they saw us, they reached for their weapons. Fayal cried out, some Dwarvish battle cry and ran towards the nearest goblin, swinging his sword. Bercel slipped his long fighting knives out of his shirt, and advanced. I stood there, dumfounded, stunned. What could I do now? Silclair punched me in the back, and the shock was gone. A goblin – an old, wrinkled goblin – dove towards me, his wicked curved sword flashing in the firelight. I stepped back and stabbed out blindly with my father's sword. The blade found the goblin's belly, and the old goblin cried out and fell. He looked up at me with such unbelieving eyes. I almost wanted to apologize, but then Fayal yelled at me, and I looked towards him, and saw a younger, bigger goblin looming over me, his knife raised, ready to strike. I swung my sword. He dodged back. Fayal hit him with the hilt of his sword. The goblin growled, turned to his Fayal, and then I drove my sword into the goblin's spine. I cut through his crude clothing and I could feel bone and tendon crack. Behind me Bercel held off two goblins, his long knives parrying goblin attacks, and then jabbing back at them. It was dizzying to watch him, but I had no time to spare. Another goblin, even older again limped towards me. He swung his sword, and I parried, but the force of his blow knocked my sword from my hands. I reached to grab it, and he kicked the sword away. I dove down after it, but he kicked me in the shoulder with his heavy booted foot. My arm went numb, and a second kick forced me to the ground. The goblin screamed and drove his knife down towards me. In panic, I reached for my knife and shoved it upwards, catching him in the throat. The cut bled, and black goblin blood streamed down. I swallowed some and my tongue burned. The goblin staggered

back and touched his throat. The wound wasn't deep. He swung the knife again. I threw my knife. This time the knife hit him, driving into his chest.

Behind me Fayal was swinging his sword inexpertly, trying to hold off three goblins. On my right, Bercel was continuing his dance, and one of the goblins menacing him was lying dead and bleeding on the cave floor. I wondered where Silclair was. Then there was a massive bang, and a sudden sharp light. The goblins screamed, and held their eyes. I looked around, saw her leaning against the cave wall, exhausted. She'd just cast some sort of magic. Fayal was the first to act. He drove his sword into the nearest goblin and then produced a light battle axe and sliced it into the next goblin. The third, still sobbing and holding his eyes, never had time to react. Fayal cut the thing's head off.

And then we were alone, in the chamber. A dozen goblins lay dead, and bleeding on the floor. The stench of death and goblin and blood and fear was overpowering. I would like to tell you how I manfully mastered myself and did not vomit. But I would be lying. I was sixteen years old. I had never killed anyone before. I tried to think of them as animals, but they weren't.

Silclair took the point. Bercel squeezed my shoulder. I wiped sweat off my brow and followed Silclair. The cave opened again on the far wall, and the passage twisted on. Fayal and Bercel followed on behind. I wondered what lay ahead. I wondered how many more goblins there were. I believed then, as I do now, for other reasons, that fate is flinty with the luck she gives us. I think we were already overspending. I was right.

The passage seemed endless, climbing for what seemed like miles into the heart of the mountains. As we walked, we climbed, and Fayal whispered that we were very high in the mountains indeed. He told me that we were likely inside one of the peaks some miles back from the village. I felt terribly alone, and claustrophobic. The entire weight of the mountain bore down on me. There was no light. Silclair had a gift of Elvish blood that gave her some sight in the dark. I listened to the faint sound of her walking, and followed that sound. The passage grew thinner, and the roof lower. I had to stoop to carry on. I bashed my head on the sharp rock above, and drew blood. I winced. The pain was heavy and sickening. I felt tears running down my face, and thanked the gods that no one could see them. I was miserable. My stomach still heaved. My feet were cold, bitterly so. The passage offered no warmth.

After some time, the rough stone floor of the passage gave way to the smoothness of broad steps. The steps were worn and old, having been scraped away by generations of booted feet.

And then, we emerged onto a vast chamber, high up in the mountains, half open to the sky. The chamber was a good four hundred yards across and three hundred deep. A black, rude, altar was carved from the sharp rock in the center. The chamber was illuminated by a hundred torches and the light of the stars above. The chamber was empty. Wind cut across the mountains and through the chamber. The torches spluttered and danced, but did not go out. I wondered what was fueling them. Behind the altar there was a large mound, a good fifty feet high. I thought it was more of the mountain's spine. But it wasn't. It was a mound of skulls. There were other bones scattered around, but mostly the mound was a carelessly thrown pile of skulls. Goblin skulls, human skulls – and maybe others. I wondered how many had died to pile their remains so high. I wondered why.

As we stood there, examining the chamber, I realized that there was obviously another chamber, deep inside the mountain, an entrance we had missed. This was as far as the passage took us. Now we stood on a carved mountaintop, staring at the snowclouds below.

"This is dwarven work," Fayal said. "The goblins have added to it, yes. But they would not have built such a thing."

Bercel nodded in agreement. He was on the far side of the room, looking away to the east, up at the stars.

"Do you think such creatures would appreciate a sight like this?" he murmured. Fayal grunted, and muttered "never." I didn't say anything. I think, in the end, the goblins did. I think even they recognized that they had made something special, a place that cut above the clouds and opened itself to the stars. Perhaps the skulls were the honored dead, free at last and open to the sky.

"We will have to go down," I said. "We are trapped here. Someone will raise the alarm shortly."

Someone did. As we reached the rough stone of the passage again, we heard horns blowing, from above and below. The guards had been found. The village was being roused.

"By the bright lady," Silclair said. She closed her eyes, her face a tight mask of concentration. This is it, I thought. They'll rush up here, they can see in the dark, they'll use those crude crossbows and we shall die, bravely and pathetically, and we will be forgotten. I thought of my father. I wished I could see him one last time.

"Silclair?" Bercel said. "Can you blind them again?"

"Yes, I think I have enough strength left."

"Fayal," Bercel said, taking command, "Light a torch, plant it here."

"Torch?" Fayal grunted.

"On the wall, idiot."

"Oh. How did you know they were there?"

"You saw them, dwarf."

"Hurry up, you two," I said. I fancied I could hear the goblins storming up the passage. Fayal kept a flintbox in his pocket. He sat down on the first step and set to work. After some cursing, he lit a taper. In the hesitant orange light, I saw the fear on his face, the terror on Silclair's face, and the distant fatalism on Bercel's. Fayal stood up, and walked down the passage, cupping the flame in his palm. Some way down the passage, he found an old torch, and lit it.

"Fuel's almost gone," he said.

"Good enough," Bercel said.

In the light, I could see that the passage curved to the left, down into the mountain. It was not a sharp curve; a few degrees of curvature at most. But Bercel was down there already, tracing the walls with his hands. At last, after some minutes search, he found what he was looking for. A small shard of rock on the left side of the passage formed a shallow alcove.

"Put the torch here," he said. Fayal planted the torch on the alcove. "Everyone keep left," Bercel ordered. "Standing here, we are going to be targets."

The torch flickered illuminating but half the passage. We retreated back to the steps.

"Silclair," Bercel said, "When the goblins come up this passage, I want you to let loose one of those spells. I want them blind. Everyone else, cover their eyes. He turned to me. "I want you to shoot everything that comes into range. Don't waste your arrows. One arrow, one goblin." I nodded. "We still have a chance," he said. "Unless their warband has come back from wherever they are, there cannot be many warriors left." I understood the torch then. He was giving me enough light to see the goblins by. Hopefully Silclair's light would blind them, and stop them loosing crossbow bolts at us. I had a dozen arrows in my quiver. One arrow, one goblin. The bruises on my face and shoulder from the earlier fight still throbbed. In the light, I could see Fayal wiping blood from his lips. He had hefted his axe from his scabbard. He twisted his hands on the hilt, nervously.

The sound of goblin feet on the passage floor was real now, and near.

"Wait," Bercel whispered.

Then they were there. They came rushing up the passage, two abreast, rounding the corner. They were younger warriors, faster and wilder than the elders we faced earlier. They howled at us in their terrifying language.

Silclair cried out, and the passage was bathed in bright, overwhelming light. I closed my eyes, just in time. I could still feel it burn. I opened my eyes, and blinked, and notched my first arrow. The ancient bow groaned from the strain. Hold, hold, I whispered to it. The bowstring burned my fingers. The nearest goblin, a mere twenty feet away, shook his head trying to get the hellish light out of his eyes. I loosed the arrow. The arrow caught the goblin full in the face. He cried out and slumped to the ground. I reached into my quiver and shot off the next arrow. The next goblin fell, an arrow cutting into his chest. A crossbow bolt skittered aimlessly off the wall beside me. The goblins were still coming. I notched another arrow. The bow was wet from my sweaty palms. My heart thundered in my chest. Another crossbow bolt whistled by. I loosed another arrow, and it disappeared into the darkness. Missed. I reached behind me, grabbed another arrow, but I dropped it. Two goblins raced towards us. One carried a big, ugly crossbow, and it was loaded. I knelt down, one eye on the goblins, one on the floor, groping for the missing arrow. I couldn't find it. I reached into my quiver, found another arrow and cursed myself for my stupidity. I let it fly. The distance was too short, but it didn't matter. The arrow found its target. The goblin dropped his crossbow. The other one lunged at me. Fayal neatly sliced his head off. From down the passage, more goblins were coming. I loosed another arrow, and another goblin fell. Another ran to take his place, and ducked beneath another of my arrows. Fayal moved in to cut him off, but the goblin punched him in the face, and knocked him out of the way. The goblin ran straight for me, his curved long knife flashing in the half light. He didn't see Bercel step between us until Bercel ran his fighting knife into

the goblin's mouth. Bercel nodded at me, and ducked out of the way. I loosed another arrow. And another. I lost count.

And then my quiver was empty.

I threw the bow to the floor, slipped my sword from my scabbard and waited. The others were already fighting. The passage was rank with the stench of blood and sweat. Bercel and Fayal stood side by side, retreating slowly. More goblins were coming. They had shaken off their blindness. In the dark, I could not count them all. I looked at Silclair, pale and wan and slumped against the wall, utterly drained by the exertion of her spell. She saw me looking towards her, and shook her head.

"I'll be alright," she said. "I just need time."

A goblin clubbed Bercel against the forehead with a stone. Bercel staggered back, and the goblins surged forward, towards me and Silclair, pushing Fayal out of the way. Another goblin raised his sword to kill Bercel. I screamed and ran towards Bercel, swinging my sword randomly. The goblin looked up, saw me running towards him, and stepped backwards. Bercel pushed him away and forced himself back against the cave wall. I caught the goblin full in the chest with my sword. I heard Silclair cry out. Goblins had gotten past us and they were on her. Another goblin lunged at me. I cut him, he stepped back and disappeared in the darkness. I heard Fayal moan as a goblin overpowered him. There were goblins on all sides. I was alone. I wondered if death would be quick.

"Enough," came a voice. The voice repeated itself again, in the goblin's language. The goblins relaxed, drew back. "Being them to the summit. Take their weapons." The voice said. I realized the voice was speaking in our language for our benefit.

We were shoved roughly up the passage, back to the summit. Goblins surrounded us. We were herded towards the altar at the center of the temple. Our weapons were taken from us and we simply sat on the altar, stunned, silent and exhausted.

A goblin, dressed in a long purple cloak, emerged from the passage, and the others bowed to him. He was taller than the rest. His skin was paler, more greenish than the black of his fellows. His eyes were big and expressive and...human. Here was a half breed. His jaw was shorter, his forehead longer, and long hair, blood red, poured down his back. I bit my lip, and said nothing.

"Thieves?" he said, his voice low and whispery. No one replied. He looked at us one by one, as he walked around and around the altar. Beyond him, his warriors waited, snickering amongst themselves. There were a bare two dozen left standing. I wondered how many we killed or wounded in the passage. The big goblin saw me looking, and grinned, his yellow teeth gleaming.

"You are fierce warriors," he said, in approval. "You have killed many, many of my household warriors."

He punched Fayal, hard, in the gut. Fayal doubled over and toppled off the altar.

"Dwarves. They send *dwarves* to steal from me. Who hired you?"

"No one," I started. The big goblin half breed stormed over to me and slapped me hard across the face with his mailed fist. I spat blood.

"Who?"

"Prince Paktr of the Raavi clan." Silclair said. I had no idea what she was talking about.

"What?" The goblin threw me to the ground and then turned to face Silclair. "Paktr declared an oath to me. And you, elf bitch are saying that he sent thieves to rob my gold."

"He said your tribe is weak, that you allowed yourselves to be slaughtered by the humans in the wars, and that you have no place fighting for the princes." The goblin howled and grabbed her arms and shook her violently. "How dare you?"

"I think the prince has proven his case," Bercel said. "A half breed goblin with pretensions." The goblin rounded on him.

"Pretensions? I have pretensions? Allow me to show you what I think of that!" The goblin screamed in Bercel's face.

"He says you are a useless sorcerer, a pathetic warrior and a lousy breeder of children," said Silclair. I wondered what the hell Silclair was talking about. I was beginning to suspect that we were actually serving some other

goblin prince's interests. The thought terrified me. I wondered had I been besotted with Silclair's beauty and been fooled into serving some goblin's errand.

The goblin drew back, raised his strong, human arms to the sky and called out.

"I call to my gods," he said. "Show these assassins my power."

I remember hearing, many years later, about how there have been generations of gods. The newest, and youngest and most powerful gods, are the gods of men. But there are older gods, gods as old as the world, and they are forgotten and unworshipped. But the goblin shamans learned the names of these old gods and made these gods serve the goblins. They feed these gods sacrifices of atrocities and rapine and cannibalism, and make these captive gods just powerful enough to serve the goblin princes.

The goblin prince's eyes burned as he spoke some ancient language, and called to the sky. The winds picked up and howled around the summit, and chilled us to the marrow. The wind seemed to carry the mist from the clouds with it. There were faces in the mist. Old faces of old things, long forgotten. The mist crept towards us. The tendrils burned as they touched skin. But the mist flowed over us and past us, and seemed to be sucked towards the skulls.

Then the empty eye sockets of the piled skulls burned from within. The wind grew stronger, rattling the skulls loose from the pile. And then they raised themselves into the air, supported by some invisible hand.

WHAT WOULD YOU HAVE US DO, PRINCE, the skulls said, screaming above the wind. The other goblins looked in terror at the skulls. They'd forgotten us. Dozens, hundreds of skulls rose from that vast pile and hovered in the air, glowing. The prince turned to us and said: "Are you afraid? This is my power. Tell my cousin I am not to be laughed at."

Then, Silclair laughed and spoke something in that magical language, and the goblin prince had fallen, burning, struck by magical lightning. The skulls all seemed to drop, a little, and the wind died down.

"RUN!" Silclair called out, and she dashed from that altar. Bercel and Fayal limped after her. The prince was screaming now, overcome by pain. I looked around, one last time, and spotted the goblin holding our weapons. He was cowering close to the door, terrified at the sight of the goblin's slave gods' wrath. I ran to him, and punched him in the snout and hefted my sword from the pile he was guarding. The wind picked up again, and the skulls were moving. I grabbed an armful of the other's weapons and dashed down into the welcome darkness of the passage.

I looked around one last time, and saw the burning skulls descend on the goblins. Goblins burned; others were skinned alive by the mist. In the center, the prince lay, still screaming from Silclair's magic. I turned away and ran into the blind darkness. A bare few yards further, I dropped Fayal's axe, and tripped on it and fell. I looked up, behind me, and saw the skulls batter themselves against some invisible wall, blocking their entrance to the passage.

"It's ok," Silclair whispered to me, "they cannot follow us down here."

Blindly, in the darkness, I handed back the weapons, by feel. I had lost half of them – Fayal's sword, most of Silclair's knives, some of Bercel's daggers. I had dropped my bow. Bleeding, bruised, defeated, we walked slowly down the passage, miles and miles down the twisting rough corridor. Eventually we came to the bonfire room again, and saw that the goblins had stacked their dead on one side of the room. On the other, goblin footprints were clustered around a bare rock wall. The bonfire burned low and dim. The room was much colder now.

"Hidden passage," Bercel said. "the treasure room should be in here."

"We should go," I said. "We are alive. We..."

"No," Silclair said. "I came here because I want to buy my mother a cottage and leave her free of her past. I risked all for that."

"Your mother?" I said, too loudly.

"My mother is a prostitute. She is forty four years old. Soon she will not be able to make a living. She paid for me to apprentice to an old sorcerer. That cost her much, and cost me much, and all it has gotten me is a handful of spells. I need money."

Fayal just nodded and set to work finding a way to open the door. The rest of us stepped away, and sat in dejected silence, on the floor beside the firepit.

"How did you know about the goblin's politics?" I asked. Silclair laughed.

"One of my spells is a scrying spell. I am not very good with it. But I found Bwor, and Bwor's half breed son. I discovered that Bwor, and what was left of his warband was marching off north to support some claimant to the goblin kingship. There will be wars for years over that throne... and I knew if I could find someone to go with me, we could steal their gold. I didn't think there would be quite so many."

"How did you know about the rivalry between the goblin and his cousin?" I said, chuckling.

"I didn't. Wild guess."

"How many did we kill?" Bercel said, suddenly. His voice was low and sad.

"Too many," Silclair said.

At length Fayal laughed. "Got it!"

The door rolled open. In the pale light of the fire, we could see small piles of gold and silver and a small collection of armaments. It was not a lot, but it was more money than any of us had ever seen. Silclair had brought about a dozen burlap bags with her, and we eagerly filled them to the brim. Fayal found an old dwarven sword, a fallen warrior's heirloom and he placed it in his belt scabbard. I found an old bow belonging to the Frontier Knights from some old war. There were no arrows, but it was a fine weapon. Neither Silclair nor Bercel took any weapons from that place. They just continued stacking the bags.

We walked out of that place, unchallenged, save for one thing. The bags were too heavy. A dozen bags of gold...we would have needed donkeys and carts to carry it all. We didn't. We had our bare hands. We managed to carry our burden to the edge of the village. I could hear the whimpering fear of goblin children inside their huts as we passed. At the edge, we realized we could not take all twelve bags. A few hundred yards beyond, we sat down, half hidden in a snow bank, and emptied the silver from our bags. We had nine bags now. As best we could, we made our way up into the hills again, and to the old roads.

The pursuit began the next day.

In the end, we left the gold, six bags of it, buried it under an old tree, and carried as much as our exhausted bodies would bear. The goblins still hunted us, but we traveled by day, and the snow slowed them down as much as it did us. On the sixth day, we realized the goblins had called off their pursuits. Two days later, we passed the skull markers that designated their territory. A day later, we took a forester's path down out of the mountains, down into the hills. The way was hard, but the further south we went, the less the snow fell. A few days after that, we stumbled into my village.

I would like to tell you how we were feted as heroes; how the entire village turned out to commend our bravery. But I would be lying. In truth no one noticed us gone. Our bonds-lord had noticed my absence and threatened my father with a fine. The others were outsiders and of no import. We had a hearty mill in the biggest inn, and paid the local cleric to bind our wounds.

We went our ways, half promising to meet again and retrieve the gold from goblin country. I went to the bonds-lord and paid the fine, and paid my family's bond debt. It was a piffling sum, two hundred gold pieces; it freed my family from an obligation earned by my grandfather's grandfather. I bought my father a small cottage on the outskirts of the village. I hired someone to watch over him. We barely spoke, my father and I. He had grown ill that winter, and he seemed to retreat inside himself. He spent much of his remaining days in silence, or sleeping in the cottage I had bought him. We spoke once, of my adventure, and he told me of the wars, and his service. He told me something curious. The prince had offer to pay all the bondsmen's debts and free them, but my father had believed the obligation to the bondlord to be paramount. You may resent our bondlord, he said, but he has fed and clothed our family for three generations, he said. Later, before I helped him to bed. He told me I was his son, with all the bad and good that entailed. It would be years before I understood what he meant.

That spring, I buried my father. I took his sword, and the bow I took from the goblins and I set out, and went to find Fayal. And that is really where this story ends. Other things have happened. Bards have sung songs about them. You might have heard of Fayal's fall during the Goblin wars leading the Dwarven kingdoms against their ancient enemies. Or you might have heard how Bercel and I fought over Silclair's favor; and how she chose neither of us, and went to live amongst her father's people, her human heritage and her mother's status forgotten. You might have heard about the dragons we slew, or the secrets we unearthed, or the gods we killed. You might have heard how I was offered immortality, and turned it down. Oh we had many adventures, and we shook the

world in our time. But the adventure I think of most is the one of which I have just spoken. That combination of youthful bravado and dumb luck that brought us there, and saved us... but I digress. This was a small town once, a bare collection of cottages clustered around the small road. My money made it what it is today, after I returned from my adventures. That's all that really matters. I was young and foolish and brave enough to walk a path that brought me back here, in the end. If you want to hear about how we sailed the known and unknown worlds and woke the old elvish princes, or recovered the First God's sword... well, you shall have to wait. The weather's clearing, and it is time for me to walk home. Those are stories for another day.