

Unremembered Loss

For all the news and information from the world of Rathrae, and for the story *Unremembered Loss*

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The Decision

They sat in the inn, drinking their mead and cutting morsels from the roasted mutton to savor. Their purses bulged with the silver from their latest adventure, but never quite bulged enough.

Their good mood was interrupted by a woman's shrill voice. "Please, will someone help me! My husband is missing."

Glances passed quickly between the friends, followed by nods.

"Miss, I am Garwin," one of them said while standing. "Come tells us of your troubles."

The woman looked at the young man who stood there. His hair was unkept and his leather armor held the marks of recent battle and perhaps blood. The woman looked away, looking at each one's face, then taking a deep breath turned again to the standing adventurer.

Garwin extended a hand to the woman and motioned for her to sit.

"Kind sir, my husband, Karl, has been gone two days now. He has never spent the night in the Dark Woods and now it has been two. I have little money, but what little I have is yours if you can bring him back."

The woman pulled a small coin purse from her wraps and placed it in Garwin's hand. Garwin looked from the woman to the purse in his hand.

"We don't need your money. To help you is all the reward we need."

One of the other young men now stood. "I am Dark Wolf, tell us where your husband is and we will fetch him." Dark Wolf then took the purse from Garwin's hand. "We will use this small token to buy supplies for the journey."

The woman looked from Garwin's eyes to Dark Wolf's and back. "He is a lumberman and his camp is four miles down the road that runs through the dark woods."

"Fear not, we will leave now and return before dark," said Garwin. "Come friends let us be on this noble quest."

The five friends rose and headed for their rooms to get their gear, some more quickly than others as two finished stuffing their faces and emptying their mugs.

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An hour later Garwin, Dark Wolf, Malison, Allison, and Grog left the warming rays of the sun and stepped into the cold chill of the Dark Woods. Like walking through a door, one moment they were on a rolling grassy plain and the next the trees reached high over their heads, the branches intertwined, the ground an impregnable bramble.

Through the undergrowth a one wagon wide road wound between the larger trees. Garwin and Grog walked the left rut. Dark Wolf and Malison chose the right, while Allison favored the crown.

The miles passed quickly and quietly, and soon the lumberman's camp could be seen to the right of the road. The trees here were larger and a clearing had been cut.

"Hail," cried out Grog. "Your wife be worried. Ye be here Karl?"

Grog's cries were answered only by the sounds of vermin scurrying for cover.

The party entered the clearing and began a search for any signs of the men. Allison searched for tracks. Dark Wolf examined the axes and saws that had been left by a tree that was half felled. Grog continued to call out. Malison scanned the woods, looking between the trees. Garwin hacked his way into the underbrush.

"I found something," called Allison.

Garwin turned back, but then fell to the ground. A cry of pain exploded from him as something bit his leg. As one the others turned towards where he had once been and started running.

Garwin rolled onto his back, trying to free his leg, but it was held fast. He bumped along the ground, moving into the woods – branches and thorns buffeting him. As he passed between two larger bushes he saw his attacker. A spider three feet tall and as wide had his leg in its mandibles.

Garwin tried to raise his sword to strike it, but branches kept knocking his hand back. Suddenly he wasn't being dragged on the ground, but up into the air. Into its web, the spider carried him, his head bounding against the trunk of a tree.

Twank. The sound of Allison's bow rang through the woods, then Garwin found himself falling. The fall ended as quickly as it had started and was replaced with pain.

Malison prayed over him and the touch of her hands took the pain from his arm. Grog and Dark Wolf carried him back to the clearing, while Allison watched to make sure no other spiders tried to make then their dinner.

When the haziness left his head, Garwin asked, "What did you find, Allison?"

Allison came closer, the smile on her face let Garwin know that she knew he wasn't better yet, but was ready for the fussing over him to stop.

"New wagon tacks. Just one set heading deeper into the woods. All the others – scores of them – head back towards town. Also a dozen or more boot prints that come from the woods and then leave with the wagon."

Garwin smiled back. "I wish you'd have found that out a minute earlier; it would have saved me a bit of pain."

"I'll try harder next time."

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After some discussion the group gathered their things and headed deeper into the woods. There had been talk of heading back to town to let the wife

know her husband's fate, but the need to find and rescue the apparently captured man, and the possibility that rescuing the man and his friends might bring a reward from his friend's families won out.

They walked until dark and a little longer. They stopped when the glow of firelight was visible ahead of them.

Allison scouted ahead while the others waited for her return. When she returned they couldn't read the look on her face because of the darkness.

"Fifteen Drow with three Human and one Orc as prisoners. Maybe half have bows."

"Drow?" asked Dark Wolf.

Allison's voice was just a whisper. "Dark Elves. They live underground and only come to the surface to capture slaves and trade."

"We can take them," offered Grog.

"Fifteen?" asked Garwin.

"We've faced worse."

Allison let the three men talk for a while, but when they started to agree that attacking was the right thing to do, she spoke up. "They can see in the dark and they're expert bowmen, like normal elves. We don't stand a chance."

The other were silent for several minutes.

"But. We can't just leave them."

It was the first time that Malison had spoken.

"We can all die trying to rescue them, or join them as slaves, but we can't win."

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There were a few other words spoken, but in the end they all knew Allison was right. They went back towards town and then off the road a bit and made camp for the night. It was a cold camp as no fires were lit, and they took turns taking watch.

They woke early and prepared to head back to town. When they reached the road, Malison turned right instead of left.

"What are you doing," Dark Wolf asked.

"I can't leave them."

"I though we agreed that we couldn't win."

"We did, but I can't walk away."

"I've got an idea," said Grog.

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Malison walked into the Drow camp, tall and boldly. "Hail," she called out.

Three Drow rushed towards her, but she did not flinch, did not take her mace from her side.

The Drow stopped, unsure of how to react to this lone woman.

"I'm here to trade with you," she said.

One of the Drow stepped forward, "You either very brave or very stupid." He then looked at his cohorts, "Me think stupid."

"I have friends" Malison placed her hand against the side of her head and almost immediately an arrow thunked into the tree right behind the Drow.

All three heads turned at the sound and stared at the arrow.

"I have lots of friends." She touched the other side of her head and a second arrow, from another direction joined the first. "I could have them kill you, but that would be bad for business. I'd rather trade with you."

"Trade good," said one of the Drow. "Yes, trade good," put in a second. The leader looked deep into Malison's eyes – she prayed that her fear wouldn't show. "What you want to trade," he asked.

"Furs, gems, slaves," she said, "I have gold and silver."

The Drows all smiled. "We have no furs and we choose to keep our gems, but slaves we have. Ten gold pieces a head we say. What do you say missy?"

"Let me see your goods so I'll know if it is a fair trade."

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After seeing the prisoners Malison let the Drow and returned to her friends on the road.

"Allison was right, they're slavers. Karl and the other are all right, if a bit black and blue. There's also an orc with them. They want ten gold pieces for each of them."

"Let's pay it and get out of here," offered Garwin.

"I shan't be paying blood money, it'd just encourage 'em to kidnap someone else.

"We just have to pay eight gold each."

"Are you asking me to help buy the Orc?"

"You are a crazy one."

"No one deserves to be a slave, not even an Orc."

"Then you can do it without my coins."

"I will help save the humans, but not the pig face."

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The debate went on longer than it should have. At one point swords were even drawn in an effort to make everyone chip in.

In the end, Allison, Garwin and Malison each put in ten gold to buy back the Humans and Allison put in another ten for the Orc.

The trade went well, the Drow were more than happy to get the gold and be rid of the soft, complaining eaters of food.

The group returned the men to town to a heroes welcome. Monies were offered, but given to the widow of the fourth man who they found had been taken off by spiders.

The five friends remained friends and after provisioning and preparing headed back into the Dark Forest, using the Orc as a guide, first to his village and then to the entrance to the Drow's dark world.

They had learned something about doing what's right and about each other.

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The five teenagers put down their dice and cleaned off the table of miniatures and dungeon map pieces. The game master had rewarded them with experience points for the role-playing, with extra for Malison's bravery and conviction.

They also had learned something about the costs of doing what's right, and about each other. About making hard decisions, if only in a game.

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Memories of a Dungeons and Dragons game I played with my son and daughter and three of their friends. An opportunity to not just have fun, but to teach life lessons.

The five went on to fight many battles, right many wrongs, and befriend the down cast – both human and monster.

And through it all, I got to walk with them, to know them. That is the decision I made – to spend time with my children.

Douglas Clarke