



R·A·SALVATORE

THE TWO SWORDS

THE HUNTER'S BLADES TRILOGY



The torchlight seemed such a meager thing against the unrelenting darkness of the dwarven caves. The smoky air drifted around Delly Curtie, irritating her eyes and throat, much as the continual grumbling and complaining of the other humans in the large common room irritated her sensibilities. Steward Regis had graciously given over a considerable suite of rooms to those seemingly ungrateful people, refugees all from the many settlements sacked by brutish King Obould and his orcs in their southern trek.

Delly reminded herself not to be too judgmental of the folk. All of them had suffered grievous losses, with many being the only remaining member of a murdered family, with three being the only remaining citizens of an entirely sacked community! And the conditions, as decent as Regis and Bruenor tried to make them, were not fitting for a human.

That thought struck hard at Delly's sensibilities, and she glanced back over her shoulder at her toddler, Colson, asleep—finally!—in a small crib. Cottie Cooperson, a spindly-armed woman with thin straw hair and eyes that drooped under the weight of a great loss, sat beside the sleeping toddler, her arms crossed tightly over her chest as she rocked back and forth, back and forth.

Remembering her own murdered baby, Delly knew.

That horrific thought sobered Delly, to be sure. Colson wasn't really Delly's child, not by birth. But she had adopted the baby girl, as Wulfgar had adopted Colson and in turn had taken on Delly as his traveling companion and wife. Delly had followed him to Mithral Hall willingly, eagerly even, and had thought herself a good and generous person in granting him his adventurous spirit, in standing beside him through what he had needed without regard for her own desires.

Delly's smile was more sad than joyous. It was perhaps the first time the young woman had ever thought of herself as good and generous.

But the dwarven walls were closing in on her.

Never had Delly Curtie imagined that she could harbor wistful memories



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of her street life in Luskan, living wild and on the edge, half-drunk most of the time and in the arms of a different man night after night. She thought of clever Morik, a wonderful lover, and of Arumn Gardpeck, the tavern-keeper who had been as a father to her. She thought of Josi Puddles, too, and found in those recollections of his undeniably stupid grin some measure of comfort.

“Nah, ye’re being silly,” the woman muttered under her breath.

She shook her head to throw those memories aside. This was her life now, with Wulfgar and the others. The dwarves of Clan Battlehammer were goodly folk, she told herself. Often eccentric, always kind and many times simply and playfully absurd, they were a lovable lot beneath their typically gruff exteriors. Some wore outrageous clothing or armor, others carried strange and ridiculous names, and most wild and absurd beards, but the clan showed Delly a measure of heart that she had never before seen, other than from Arumn perhaps. They treated her as kin, or tried to, for the differences remained.

Undeniably so.

Differences of preference, human to dwarf, like the stifling air of the caves—air that would grow even more stagnant, no doubt, since both exterior doors of Mithral Hall had been closed and barricaded.

“Ah, but to feel the wind and sun on my face once more!” a woman from across the common room shouted, lifting a flagon of mead in toast, as if she had read Delly’s every thought.

From all across the room, mugs came up in response and clanged together. The group, almost all of them, were well on their way to drunkenness yet again, Delly realized. They had no place to fit in, and their drinking was as much to alleviate their helpless frustration as to dull the horrible memories of Obould’s march through their respective communities.

Delly checked on Colson again and filtered about the tables. She had agreed to tend to the group, calling upon her experiences as a serving wench in Luskan. She caught bits of conversation wherever she passed, and every thought found a hold on her, and bit at what little contentment remained within her heart.

“I’m going to set up a smithy in Silverymoon,” one man proclaimed.

“Bah, Silverymoon!” another argued, sounding very much like a dwarf with his rough dialect. “Silverymoon’s nothing but a bunch of dancing elves.



Get ye to Sundabar. Ye're sure to find a better livelihood in a town of folk who know proper business."

"Silvermoon's more accepting," a woman from another table argued. "And more beautiful, by all tellings."

Those were almost the very same words that Delly had once heard to describe Mithral Hall. In many ways, the Hall had lived up to its reputation. Certainly the reception Bruenor and his kin had given her had been nothing short of wonderful, in their unique, dwarven way. And Mithral Hall was as amazing a sight as Luskan's harbor, to be sure. Yet it was a sight that quickly melted into sameness, Delly had come to know.

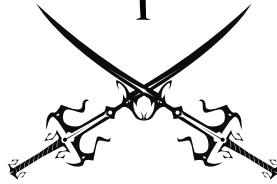
She made her way across the room, veering back toward Colson, who was still sleeping but had begun that same scratchy cough that Delly had been hearing from all the humans in the smoky tunnels.

"I'm right grateful enough to Steward Regis and King Bruenor," she heard one woman say, again as if reading her very thoughts, "but here's no place for a person!" The woman lifted her flagon. "Silvermoon or Sundabar, then!" she toasted, to many cheers. "Or anywhere else ye might be seeing the sun and the stars!"

"Everlund!" another man cried.

In the stark crib on the cold stone floor beside Delly Curtie, Colson coughed again.

Beside the baby girl, Cottie Cooperson swayed.



FOR THE LOVE OF ME SON

“We must be quicker!” the human commented, for the hundredth time that morning, it seemed to the more than two-score dwarves moving in a line all around him. Galen Firth appeared quite out of place in the torchlit, smoky tunnels. Tall even for a human, he stood more than head and shoulders above the short and sturdy bearded folk.

“I got me scouts up ahead, working as fast as scouts can work,” replied General Dagna, a venerable warrior of many battles.

The old dwarf stretched and straightened his still-broad shoulders, and tucked his dirty yellow beard into his thick leather girdle, then considered Galen with eyes still sharp, a scrutinizing gaze that had kept the dwarves of Clan Battlehammer ducking defensively out of sight for many, many decades. Dagna had been a well-respected warcommander for as long as anyone could remember, longer than Bruenor had been king, and before Shimmergloom the shadow dragon and his duergar minions had conquered Mithral Hall. Dagna had climbed to power through deed, as a warrior and field commander, and no one questioned his prowess in leading dwarves through difficult conflicts. Many had expected Dagna to lead the defense of the cliff face above Keeper’s Dale, even ahead of venerable Banak Brawn-anvil. When that had not come to pass, it was assumed Dagna would be



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named as Steward of the Hall while Bruenor lay near death.

Indeed, both of those opportunities had been presented to Dagna, and by those in a position to make either happen. But he had refused.

“Ye wouldn’t have me tell me scouts to run along swifter and maybe give themselves away to trolls and the like, now would ye?” Dagna asked.

Galen Firth rocked back on his heels a bit at that, but he didn’t blink and he didn’t stand down. “I would have you move this column as swiftly as is possible,” he replied. “My town is sorely pressed, perhaps overrun, and in the south, out of these infernal tunnels, many people may now be in dire jeopardy. I would hope that such would prove an impetus to the dwarves who claim to be our neighbors.”

“I claim nothing,” Dagna was fast to reply. “I do what me steward and me king’re telling me to do.”

“And you care not at all for the fallen?”

Galen’s blunt question caused several of the nearby dwarves to suck in their breath, aimed as it was at Dagna, the proud dwarf who had lost his only son only a few tendays earlier. Dagna stared long and hard at the man, burying the sting that prompted him to an angry response, remembering his place and his duty.

“We’re going as fast as we’re going, and if ye’re wanting to be going faster, then ye’re welcome to run up ahead. I’ll tell me scouts to let ye pass without hindrance. Might even be that I’ll keep me march going over your dead body when we find yerself troll-eaten in the corridors ahead. Might even be that yer Nesmé kin, if any’re still about, will get rescued without ye.” Dagna paused and let his glare linger a moment longer, a silent assurance to Galen Firth that he was hardly bluffing. “Then again, might not be.”

That seemed to take some of the steam from Galen, and the man gave a great “harrumph” and turned back to the tunnel ahead, stomping forward deliberately.

Dagna was beside him in an instant, grabbing him hard by the arm.

“Pout if ye want to pout,” the dwarf agreed, “but ye be doing it quietly.”

Galen pulled himself away from the dwarf’s vicelike grasp, and matched Dagna’s stare with his own glower.

Several nearby dwarves rolled their eyes at that and wondered if Dagna would leave the fool squirming on the floor with a busted nose. Galen hadn’t



been like that until very recently. The fifty dwarves had accompanied him out of Mithral Hall many days before, with orders from Steward Regis to do what they could to aid the beleaguered folk of Nesmé. Their journey had been steady and straightforward until they had been attacked in the tunnels by a group of trolls. That fight had sent them running, a long way to the south and out into the open air on the edges of the great swamp, the Trollmoors, but too far to the east, by Galen Firth's reckoning. So they had started west, and had found more tunnels. Against Galen's protests, Dagna had decided that his group would be better served under cover of the westward-leading underground corridors. More dirt than stone, with roots from trees and brush dangling over their heads and with crawly things wriggling in the black dirt all around them, the tunnels weren't like those they'd used to come south from Mithral Hall. That only made Galen all the more miserable. The tunnels were tighter, lower, and not as wide, which the dwarves thought a good thing, particularly with huge and ugly trolls chasing them, but which only made Galen spend half his time walking bent over.

"Ye're pushing the old one hard," a young dwarf, Fender Stouthammer by name, remarked when they took their next break and meal. He and Galen were off to the side of the main group, in a wider and higher area that allowed Galen to stretch his legs a bit, though that had done little to improve his sour mood.

"My cause is—"

"Known to us, and felt by us, every one," Fender assured him. "We're all feeling for Mithral Hall in much the same way as ye're feeling for Nesmé, don't ye doubt."

The calming intent of Fender didn't find a hold on Galen, though, and he wagged his long finger right in the dwarf's face, so close that Fender had to hold himself back from just biting the digit off at the knuckle.

"What do you know of my feelings?" Galen growled at him. "Do you know my son, huddled in the cold, perhaps? Slain, perhaps, or with trolls all about him? Do you know the fate of my neighbors? Do you—"

"General Dagna just lost his boy," Fender interrupted, and that set Galen back a bit.

"Dagnabbit was his name," Fender went on. "A mighty warrior and loyal fellow, as are all his kin. He fell to the orc horde at Shallows, defending his king and kin to the bitter end. He was Dagna's only boy, and with a career



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as promising as that of his father. Long will dwarf bards sing the name of Dagnabbit. But I'm guessing that thought's hardly cooling the boil in old Dagna's blood, or hardly plastering the crack in his old heart. And now here ye come, ye short-livin', cloud-sniffin' dolt, demanding this and demanding that, as if yer own needs're more important than any we dwarves might be knowing. Bah, I tried to take ye in stride. I tried to see yer side of the fear. But ye know, ye're a pushy one, and one that's more likely to get boot-trampled into the stone than to ever see yer home again if ye don't learn to shut yer stupid mouth."

The obviously flabbergasted Galen Firth just sat there for a moment, stuttering.

"Are you threatening me, a Rider of Nesmé?" he finally managed to blurt.

"I'm telling ye, as a friend or as an enemy—choice is yer own to make—that ye're not helping yerself or yer people by fighting with Dagna at every turn in the tunnel."

"The tunnel. . . ." the stubborn man spat back. "We should be out in the open air, where we might hear the calls of my people, or see the light of their fires!"

"Or find ourselves surrounded by an army o' trolls, and wouldn't that smell wonderful?"

Galen Firth gave a snort and held up his hand dismissively. Fender took the cue, rose, and started away.

He did pause long enough to look back and offer, "Ye keep acting as if ye're among enemies, or lessers. If all the folk o' Nesmé are as stupid as yerself—too dumb to know a friend when one's ready to help—then who's to doubt that the trolls might be doing all the world a favor?"

Galen Firth trembled, and for a moment Fender half expected the man to leap up and try to throttle him.

"I came to you, to Mithral Hall, in friendship!" he argued, loudly enough to gain the attention of those dwarves crowded around Dagna in the main chamber down the tunnel.

"Yerself came to Mithral Hall in need, offerin' nothing but complaints and asking for more than we could give ye," Fender corrected. "And still Steward Regis, and all the clan, accepted the responsibility of friendship—not



the burden, but the responsibility, ye dolt! We ain't here because we're owing Nesmé a damned thing, and we ain't here asking Nesmé for a damned thing, and in the end, even yerself should be smart enough to know that we're all hopin' for the same thing here. And that thing's finding yer boy, and all the others of yer town, alive and well."

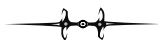
The blunt assessment did give Galen pause and in that moment, before he could decide whether to scream or to punch out, Fender rolled up to his feet, offered a dismissive, "Bah!" and waved his calloused hands the man's way.

"Ye might be thinking to make a bit less noise, yeah?" came a voice from the other direction, that of General Dagna, who glared at the two.

"Get along with ye, then," Fender said to Galen, and he waved at him again. "Think on what I said or don't—it's yer own to choose."

Galen Firth slowly moved back from the dwarf, and toward the larger gathering in the middle of the wider chamber. He walked more sidelong than in any straightforward manner, though, as if warding his back from the pursuit of words that had surely stung him.

Fender was glad of that, for the sake of Galen Firth and Nesmé Town, if for nothing else.



Tos'un Armgo, lithe and graceful, moved silently along the low corridor, a dart clenched in his teeth and a serrated knife in his hand. The dark elf was glad that the dwarves had gone back underground. He felt vulnerable and exposed in the open air. A noise made him pause and huddle closer to the rocky wall, his limber form melting into the jags and depressions. He pulled his *piwafwi*, his enchanted drow cloak that could hide him from the most scrutinizing of gazes, a bit tighter around him and turned his face to the stone, peering out of the corner of only one eye.

A few moments passed. Tos'un relaxed as he heard the dwarves back at their normal routines, eating and chatting. They thought they were safe back in the tunnels, since they believed they had left the trolls far behind. What troll could have tracked them over the last couple days since the skirmish, after all?

No troll, Tos'un knew, and he smiled at the thought. For the dwarves



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hadn't counted on their crude and beastlike enemies being accompanied by a pair of dark elves. Tracking them, leading the two-headed troll named Profit and his smelly band back into this second stretch of tunnel, had been no difficult task for Tos'un.

The drow glanced back the other way, where his companion, the priestess Kaer'lic Suun Wett waited, crouched atop a boulder against the wall. Even Tos'un would not have seen her there, buried under her *piwafwi*, except that she shifted as he turned, lifting one arm out toward him.

Take down the sentry, her fingers flashed to him in the intricate sign language of the drow elves. *A prisoner is desirable.*

Tos'un took a deep breath and instinctively reached for the dart he held clenched in his teeth. Its tip was coated with drow poison, a paralyzing concoction of tremendous power that few could resist. How often had Tos'un heard that command from Kaer'lic and his other two drow companions over the last few years, for he among all the group had become the most adept at gathering creatures for interrogation, especially when the target was part of a larger group.

Tos'un paused and moved his free hand out where Kaer'lic could see, then answered, *Do we need bother? They are alert, and they are many.*

Kaer'lic's fingers flashed back immediately, *I would know if this is a remote group or the forward scouts of Mithral Hall's army!*

Tos'un's hand went right back to the dart. He didn't dare argue with Kaer'lic on such matters. They were drow, and in the realm of the drow, even for a group who was so far removed from the conventions of the great Underdark cities, females ranked higher than males, and priestesses of the Spider Queen Lolth, like Kaer'lic, ranked highest of all.

The scout turned and slid down lower toward the floor, then began to half walk, half crawl toward his target. He paused when he heard the dwarf raise his voice, arguing with the single human among the troop. The drow moved to a properly hidden vantage point and bided his time.

Soon enough, several of the dwarves farther along told the two to be quiet, and the dwarf near to Tos'un grumbled something and waved the human away.

Tos'un glanced back just once, then paused and listened until his sensitive ears picked out the rumble of Proffit's closing war party.



Tos'un slithered in. His left arm struck first, jabbing the dart into the dwarf's shoulder as his right hand came across, the serrated knife cutting a very precise line on the dwarf's throat. It could easily have been a killing blow, but Tos'un angled the blade so as not to cut the main veins, the same technique he had recently used on a dwarf in a tower near the Surbrin. Eventually his cut would prove mortal, but not for a long time, not until Kaer'lic could intervene and with but a few minor spells granted by the Spider Queen save the wretched creature's life.

Though, Tos'un thought, the prisoner would surely wish he had been allowed to die.

The dwarf shifted fast and tried to cry out, but the drow had taken its vocal chords. Then the dwarf tried to punch and lash out, but the poison was already there. Blood streaming from the mortal wound, the dwarf crumbled down to the stone, and Tos'un slithered back.

"Bah, ye're still a bigmouth!" came a quiet call from the main group. "Keep still, will ya, Fender?"

Tos'un continued to retreat.

"Fender?" The call sounded more insistent.

Tos'un flattened against the corner of the wall and the floor, making himself very small and all but invisible under his enchanted cloak.

"Fender!" a dwarf ahead of him cried, and Tos'un smiled at his cleverness, knowing the stupid dwarves would surely think their poisoned companion dead.

The camp began to stir, dwarves leaping up and grabbing their weapons, and it occurred to Tos'un that Kaer'lic's decision to go for a captive might cost Proffit and his trolls dearly. The price of the drow's initial assault had been the element of surprise.

Of course, for the dark elf, that only made the attack all the more sweet.



Some dwarves cried out for Fender, but the shout that rose above them all came from Bonnerbas Ironcap, the dwarf closest to their fallen companion.



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“Trolls!” he yelled, and even as the word registered with his companions, so did the smell of the wretched brutes.

“Fall back to the fire!” General Dagna shouted.

Bonnerbas hesitated, for he was but one stride from poor Fender. He went forward instead of back, and grabbed his friend by the collar. Fender flopped over and Bonnerbas sucked in his breath, seeing clearly the line of bright blood. The dwarf was limp, unfeeling.

Fender was dead, Bonnerbas believed, or soon would be.

He heard the charge of the trolls then, looked up, and realized that he would soon join Fender in the halls of Moradin.

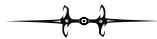
Bonnerbas fell back one step and took up his axe, swiping across viciously and cutting a deep line across the arms of the nearest, low-bending troll. That one fell back, stumbling to the side and toppling, but before it even hit the floor it came flying ahead, bowled over by a pair of trolls charging forward at Bonnerbas.

The dwarf swung again, and turned to flee, but a clawed troll hand hooked his shoulder. Bonnerbas understood then the frightful strength of the brutes, for suddenly he was flying backward, spinning and bouncing off legs as solid as the trunks of tall trees. He stumbled and fell, winding up on his back. Still, the furious dwarf flailed with his axe, and he scored a couple of hits. But the trolls were all around him, were between him and Dagna and the others, and poor Bonnerbas had nowhere to run.

One troll reached for him and he managed to swat the arm with enough force to take it off at the elbow. That troll howled and fell back, but then, even as the dwarf tried to roll to his side and stand the biggest and ugliest troll Bonnerbas had ever seen towered over him, a gruesome two-headed brute staring at him with a wide smile on both of its twisted faces. It started to reach down, and Bonnerbas started to swing.

As his axe flew past without hitting anything, the dwarf recognized the dupe, and before he could bring the axe back over him, a huge foot appeared above him and crashed down hard, stomping him into the stone.

Bonnerbas tried to struggle, but there was nothing he could do. He tried to breathe, but the press was too great.





As the trolls pushed past the two fallen dwarves, General Dagna could only growl and silently curse himself for allowing his force to be caught so unawares. Questions and curses roiled in his mind. How could stupid, smelly trolls have possibly followed them back into the tunnels? How could the brutes have scouted and navigated the difficult approach to where Dagna had thought it safe to break for a meal?

That jumble quickly calmed in the thoughts of the seasoned commander, though, and he began barking orders to put his command in line. His first thought was to move back into the lower tunnels, to get the trolls bent over even more, but the dwarf's instincts told him to stay put, with a ready fire at hand. He ordered his boys to form up a defensive hold on the far side of the cooking fire. Dagna himself led the countercharge and the push, centering the front line of five dwarves abreast and refusing to retreat against the troll press.

"Hold 'em fast!" he cried repeatedly as he smashed away with his warhammer. "Go to crushing!" he told the axe-wielding dwarf beside him. "Don't yet cut through 'em if that's giving them a single step forward!"

The other dwarf, apparently catching on to the reasoning that they had to hold the far side of the fire at all costs, flipped his axe over in his hand and began pounding away at the closest troll, smashing it with the flat back of the weapon to keep it at bay.

All the five dwarves did likewise, and Galen Firth ran up behind Dagna and began slashing away with his fine long sword. They knew they would not be able to hold for long, though, for more trolls crowded behind the front ranks, the sheer weight of them driving the force forward.

Thinking that all of them were doomed, Dagna screamed in rage and whacked so hard at the troll reaching for him that his nasty hammer tore the creature's arm off at the elbow.

The troll didn't seem to even notice as it came forward, and Dagna realized his error. He had over-swung the mark and was vulnerable.

But the troll backed suddenly, and Dagna ducked and cried out in surprise, as the first of the torches, compliments of Galen Firth, entered the fray. The man reached over and past the ducking Dagna and thrust the flaming torch at the troll, and how the creature scrambled to get back from the fire!

Trolls were mighty opponents indeed, and it was said—and it was true—that if you cut a troll into a hundred pieces, the result would be a hundred new



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trolls, with every piece regenerating into an entirely new creature. They had a weakness, though, one that every person in all the Realms knew well: fire stopped that regeneration process.

Trolls didn't like fire.

More torches were quickly passed up to Dagna and the four others and the trolls fell back, but only a step.

"Forward, then, for Fender and Bonnerbas!" Dagna cried, and all the dwarves cheered.

But then came a shout from the other side of "Trolls in the tunnels!" and another warning shout from directly behind Dagna.

All the tunnels were blocked. Dagna knew at once that his dwarves were surrounded and had nowhere to run.

"How deep're we?" the general shouted.

"Roots in the ceiling," one dwarf answered. "Ain't too deep."

"Then get us through!" the old dwarf ordered

Immediately, those dwarves near to the center of the tightening ring went into action. Two braced a third and lifted him high with his pickaxe, and he began tearing away at the ground.

"Wet one down!" Dagna yelled, and he knew that it was all he had to say to get his full meaning across to his trusted comrades.

"And tie him off!" came the appropriate addition, from more than one dwarf.

"Galen Firth, ye brace the hole!" Dagna roared at the human.

"What are you doing?" the man demanded. "Fight on, good dwarf, for we've nowhere to run!"

Dagna thrust his torch forward and the troll facing him hopped back. The dwarf turned fast and shoved at Galen.

"Turn about, ye dolt, and get us out o' here!"

A confused Galen did reluctantly turn from the fight just as daylight appeared above the area to the left of the cooking fire. The two dwarves supporting the miner gave a great heave, sending him up, where he caught on and scrambled onto the surface.

"Clear!" he reported.

Galen understood the plan then, and rushed to the hole, where he immediately began hoisting dwarves. After every one he had to pause, though, for



the dwarves up above began handing down more wood for the fire.

Dagna nodded and urged his line on, and the five fought furiously and brilliantly, coordinating their movements so that the trolls could not advance. But neither did the dwarves gain any ground, and Dagna knew in his heart that his two companions, Fender and Bonnerbas, were surely dead.

The tough old dwarf pushed the grim thoughts from his mind, and didn't even begin to let them lead him back down the road of grief for his lost boy. He focused on his anger and on the desperate need, and he forged ahead, warhammer and torch flailing. Behind him, he felt the heat increasing as his boys began to strengthen the fire. They'd need it blazing indeed if they meant to get the last of the group clear of the tunnels and up into the open air.

"Down in front!" came a call aimed at Dagna and his line.

As one the five dwarves sprang ahead and attacked ferociously, forcing the trolls to retreat a step. Then again as one they leaped back and dropped to the ground.

Flaming brush and logs flew over their heads, bouncing into the trolls and sending them into a frenzied scramble to get out of the way.

Dagna's heart fell as he watched the effective barrage, though, for beyond that line of confusion lay two of his kin, down and dead, he was sure. He and the other four fell back, then, moving right to the base of the hole, just behind Galen, who continued to ferry dwarves up.

The tunnel grew smokier and smokier with every passing second as more brush and logs came down the chute. A dwarven brigade carried the timber to the fire. The brush—branches of pine, mostly—flared up fast and furious to be rushed across to drive back whatever trolls were closest, while the logs were dropped onto the pile, replacing already flaring logs that were scooped up and hurled into the enemy ranks. Gradually, the dwarves were building walls of fire, sealing off every approach.

Their ranks thinned as more scrambled up to the surface, as Galen tirelessly lifted them into the arms of their waiting kin. Then the scramble became more frantic as the dwarves' numbers dwindled to only a few.

The dwarf beside Dagna urged him to go, but the crusty old graybeard slapped that notion aside by slapping the other dwarf aside—shoving him into Galen Firth's waiting arms. Up and out he went, and one by one, Dagna's line diminished.



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Up came a huge flaming brand—Galen passing it to Dagna—and the old dwarf took the heavy log, handing back his hammer in exchange. He presented the log horizontally out before him and charged with a roar, barreling right into the trolls, the flames biting his hands but biting the trolls worse. The creatures fell all over each other trying to get back from the wild dwarf. With a great heave, Dagna sent the flaming log into them. Then he turned and fled back to where Galen was waiting. The human crouched, with his hands set in a clasp before him. Dagna hopped onto those waiting hands, and Galen turned, guiding him directly under the hole, then heaved him up.

Even as Dagna cleared the hole, and Galen instinctively turned to meet the troll charge he knew must be coming, dwarf hands reached into the opening and clasped tightly onto Galen's forearms.

The man went into the air, to shouts of, "Pull him out!"

His head and shoulders came out into the open air, and for a moment, Galen thought he was clear.

Until he felt clawed hands grab him by the legs.

"Pull, ye dolts!" General Dagna demanded, and he rushed over and grabbed Galen by the collar, digging in his heels and tugging hard.

The man cried out in pain. He lifted a bit out of the hole, then went back in some, serving as the line in a game of tug-of-war.

"Get me a torch!" Dagna cried, and when he saw a dwarf rushing over with a flaming brand he let go of Galen, who, for a moment, nearly disappeared into the hole.

"Grab me feet!" Dagna ordered as he went around Galen.

The moment a pair of dwarves had him securely about the ankles, the general dived face first into the hole behind the struggling Galen, his torch leading—and drawing a yelp from Galen as it brushed down behind him.

Galen frantically shouted some more as the torch burned him about the legs, but then he was free. The dwarves yanked both Galen and Dagna from the hole. Dagna held his ground as a troll stood up, reaching for the opening. The old dwarf whacked away with the torch, holding the creature at bay until his boys could get more substantial fire to the hole and dump it down.

Heavier logs were ferried into position and similarly forced down, blocking the opening, and Dagna and the others fell back to catch their collective breath.



A shout had them up and moving again, though, for the trolls had not been stopped by the clogged and fiery exit. Clawed hands rent the ground as the trolls began to dig escape tunnels of their own.

“Gather ’em up and get on the move!” Dagna roared, and the dwarves set off at a great pace across the open ground.

Many had to be helped, two carried even, but a count showed that they had lost only two: Fender and Bonnerbas. Still, not a one of them wanted to call that encounter a victory.