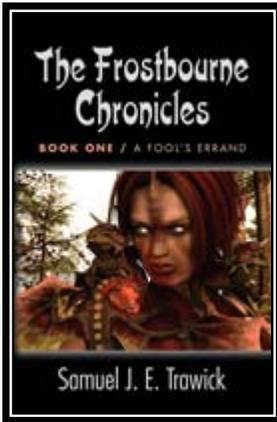


# The Frostbourne Chronicles

**BOOK ONE** / A FOOL'S ERRAND



Samuel J. E. Trawick



*The Empire is spreading war to The Woodland Realms and the Elves are in danger. It is up to an unlikely group of heroes from the high mountain village of Two-Bears Peak to save the Elves, each other, and the world. Barbarians, Dwarfs, Dragons, and Orcs. All the things a great story should have.*

## **THE FROSTBOURNE CHRONICLES: Book One - A Fool's Errand**

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## Prologue

The sun refused to shine under a cloudless sky. Silhouetted against the darkness, winged figures made their way through a blanket of forged night, in hiding, to a secret, long forgotten fortress high atop the foreboding razor sharp peaks. A flash of dry, conjured lightning should have cast a pale green pall on the creatures, but they seemed to consume the very light itself. Slowly and deliberately they climbed in the still air to arrive at the dark maw of a cave opening. This was their destination, the place of secret, the place where deals were done, and treachery abounded.

“Why have you summoned us?” Demanded the hooded figure that stepped forward of the woman seated on a black throne. “What gives you the right to despoil that seat with your unsightly flesh? Speak! Why have you called?”

The woman smiled a poisonous smile, the dark smile of one who knows something and revels in being the only one. She slid easily, languidly from the throne she had briefly usurped. “Forgive me masters.” She bowed low, but it was a mockery and they all knew it. “It is starting.”

“What is starting?” The others had gathered round in the darkened hall. Oily torches, which had sustained the living flame since before time itself was known, cast a sickly, chill light. They all dressed in black and were hooded except for the woman; her long blond hair fell in waves across her shoulders and spilled across her ample breasts. She alone showed her face at the gathering. “The war with the Elves, how?” The speaker demanded.

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The woman smiled. "I have my ways. The Empire is greedy, like a child that yearns for more candy, but sadly finds it out of reach; I simply guided their hand towards what they longed for." She licked her fingers provocatively.

She circled each member, each conspirator as she spoke, arriving back at the vacant throne. The woman brazenly put one foot upon the arm of the throne, exposing herself to the hip. "It is time for you all to live up to your end of the bargain, this seat will be mine!"

"Our end of the bargain?" The original protestor unwisely spoke up again. "What is this treachery you speak of? Do you really think we will allow your actions to continue? We only allowed you this dalliance because we thought you mad and it would keep you out of our hair."

The speaker stepped forward alone to confront her and froze in his tracks. His eyes rolled up into his head, exposing the whites as he began to convulse. Thick red tendrils snaked around his body as life left his limbs and his form began to change. Slowly, wings sprouted from his back and his cloak was torn away. His face twisted into a reptilian visage, claws replaced his well manicured nails. The transformation was complete and the speaker was quite dead.

The woman slid back into the throne and hung both legs over one arm of the cold ebony chair. She kicked them about playfully. "Wait, there is more." She pulled a powdery substance from a small pouch at her side and blew it on the lifeless form at her feet. The corpse twitched back to life and slowly stood. With a look from its' new master, the undead Dragon Servant shuffled slowly from the hall to wait with the others she had turned.

The lady sighed. "It doesn't last long you know. The stiffness will take him soon and then of course the rot. Pity, he will be able to feel his body as the maggots consume his flesh

and hasten his decomposition, but he will linger until I release him.”

“The Ten shall hear of this, they will know!” one of the hooded figures stammered.

“How?” she asked. “Are you going to tell them?” she glared threateningly.

“No, of course not. It's just, we have to be sure. They will know if we don't hit them all at once.”

“True, but that is no concern of mine. That task falls to you.” She stood once more. “You know what you have to do. Don't disappoint me!” the temptress usurper gave a dismissive wave. “Now, be gone from my sight!”

The sun still refused to shine as the figures, minus one, made their way back into the darkened sky. The task before them was a daunting one, but it must be done. They all knew that their new mistress would seek foul retribution on each if they failed. They flew off to the distant corners from whence they came to contemplate their next move. Whatever they did, it would have to be soon.



## Chapter 1

An early spring had come to the mountain valleys of the north. A crisp clear sky greeted a warming sun. Soon the icy grip of winter would relax and the snows would release their life sustaining essence on the valleys and plains far below. Life was bustling about on the peak as well as in the village. New flowers and green grasses, as well as the early planted crops were straining forth into the warmth of the sun. It was a typical day in the tiny settlement of Two Bears Peak.

Sons were up early chopping wood, daughters were gathering eggs and fetching water. In the small stone and wood huts, parents enjoyed a brief moment of peace before the day started. It was typical in all but the home of young Daenar.

The leader of the Frostbourne family had died two days before, killed by the great cave bear Salt, the focus of the Trials and guardian of the village. Old Salt had managed to get the upper hand during the ritual of Trials, which Daenar's father and several other men of the village were conducting for those of age. The trials of this year would live long in legend and memory. This time it had cost the village one of its more famous members.

The body had been cleaned, painted with the appropriate runes, and fresh clothes dressed the departed. After two days it was said that the spirit would release its claim on the flesh and finally move on to be counted in the Halls of Heroes. Tonight the earthly vessel would be cleansed by fire and return to

whence it came. That was the tradition of the Peoples of the North, a fine tradition that had lasted for centuries. All could be proud of the life of the elder Frostbourne and they would celebrate tonight. Young Daenar understood the importance of tradition, but he had just lost his dad and it all seemed so alien to him. He had of course seen the ceremony before, but this was different.

Daenar was barely seventeen years old the day that fate and the mighty bear propelled him to the head of the Frostbourne clan. Clan, that was a gross overstatement, the group Daenar found dependant on him was really more of an extended family. The Frostbournes consisted of two aged grandmothers, Daenar's mother, and two younger sisters.

Since the death of Daenar's uncle on his mother's side the clan had grown by two Aunts, one female cousin and her newborn child as well as three boy cousins all well under the age of Trials. All these people were jammed into two huts that had been connected by a large eating room and kitchen. In a flash of cruel claws Daenar's youth had been brought to a violent resolution and now he had many mouths to feed, clothe, and house. He couldn't help but think it would have been easier if he had fallen victim to the bear instead.

Although he wasn't yet eighteen, Daenar was tall and strong, as tall as his father had been. The harsh environment of the Peaks forced the children to mature rapidly or die, the mountain knows no pity. Only strength survived the peaks. He had long white-blond hair and piercing blue eyes as was the mark of his family. His face was dominated by a jaw of granite, whipped red and tough by the cold mountain winds. Daenar's hands bore the scars of farming as well as the hunt. His back was strong and his grip was like that of a steel vice. On his other side, more than once as a child he had been found weeping after slaying a deer or finding one of his chicks dead in its pen. Love,

sorrow, and respect were traits that ran deep in the mountain folk.

On more than one occasion Daenar had overheard his father deep in his cups bragging about his eldest and handing out challenges to the other men and their children. To Daenar's relief, none had taken up the challenge, not that he feared anyone in the village, he just didn't want to fight for no reason, saw no point in it. Daenar himself preferred not being the center of attention; he liked being second in line, doing what he was told and doing it well. In fact, he never wanted to be in charge of anything, it was something his personality didn't really allow for.

There were many in the village that thought perhaps he was a bit too timid except when the rage was upon him. His father and especially his grandfather had been known for their fierceness both in battle and everyday life. To see one of them in a full rage was breathtaking. Now was the time to step up and prove that he was truly the man his father said he would be. If Daenar failed in his responsibility he would forever dishonor his father and bring shame to the noble Frostbourne name. He would rather have thrashed every boy in the village than face this day.

Daenar left the preparation hut thinking it was a strange tradition indeed that left the eldest son to see to the body of the departed. He walked the solid, icy, rock strewn path that would soon be transformed into a sticky mess past his two tiny huts and on to the centre of the little village to where the Elder and her daughter lived. Elder was a title not unlike Chief or Lord. The title Elder did not necessarily imply age, especially in this case. The Elder was the individual that was seen as best suited to look after the interests of the village. When one Elder passed or stepped down, a new one would be chosen from a group of four that were deemed worthy.

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It was not unusual for small clans to band together to form a village. The village of Two Bears Peak was a type of haven for small and displaced clans and families. Some clans were so expansive that they formed their own village, but this was not the case with Two Bears Peak. Four separate clans formed the village. The Frostbournes, the Mounyads, the Darkfeathers, and the small family of Dawnlight had come together in past years for safety and protection from the mountain wilds. The last clan, the Dawnlights held only two members, Orlentia and her daughter Teppia.

It was customary when no males remained in a family that the surviving members would join another clan. Orlentia stubbornly refused to do so until her daughter was of marrying age. “When I am alone, then and only then will I give up my clan!” Her stubbornness as well as her knowledge of subjects ranging from hunting, war, and even farming had brought the people of Two Bears Peak to rely on and often seek out her counsel. Although at first she protested, deeming herself unworthy, when the preceding Elder stepped down, the people chose Orlentia without hesitation or opposition. There was something about Orlentia, that indefinable thing that made her special, unique. In Daenar’s eyes, her daughter Teppia had it too.

With the title of Elder came respect, and that was about all. Orlentia and her daughter lived in the same house as they did before the sickness had taken her husband and twin baby sons. When other members of the village sought advice it was not uncommon for them to offer food or some other gesture of respect, perhaps a fur or even a household repair. None of these were necessary, but it was tradition. At least they wouldn’t go hungry. It was the job of all Clan leaders to provide not only for their clan, but for the other clans in the village as well. So it also came to reason that if a clan did not contribute they would be

shunned and asked to leave the village. All members of the village went to bed with full stomachs before the leaders would eat. That was the mark and burden of a true leader, others first.

Daenar arrived at the Elder's house; in the tiny backyard surrounded by a short picket fence was Teppia, the Elder's daughter. On more than one occasion Daenar had let his eye linger perhaps longer than was decent on the young daughter of Orlenthia. Teppia had of course noticed, but never let on. After all, Daenar was quite a specimen and one of the few boys near her age that she could possibly be married to. There was something else about the young Frostbourne boy, something she saw that others didn't. She sometimes imagined waking up in the morning in their own hut, stoking the early morning fire and cooking breakfast for her Daenar and their children. These daydreams were fleeting however, life was hard and work was constant in Two Bears Peak. Orlenthia kept a wary eye on both Teppia and young Daenar, unlike her daughter, she wasn't convinced of Daenar's something else.

Teppia came to the edge of the fence when Daenar called, her raven black hair caught up in twin pigtails. "Oh, sorry, I was looking for your mother, I mean the Elder."

Teppia frowned. "You weren't here to see me?" She stuck out her bottom lip in a feigned pout.

"No, I mean yes, um..." Daenar stammered. He was saved by a woman's voice behind him.

"Teppia! See to those biddies! They're running all over the place; get to your chores girl!" She grimaced a bit and hurried off after the maniacal swarm of tiny chicks. Her mother was so embarrassing!

Orlenthia fixed a steady eye on Daenar. "What can I do for you young Daenar? All is prepared for tonight, the body cleaned and dressed?" Daenar nodded.

"It is Elder."

“Then why are you here?” Daenar’s gaze had drifted to the sight of Teppia rounding up chicks. Orlenthia cleared her throat. Daenar’s gaze snapped back. “You told Teppia you came to speak to me. Is this true, or are you just here to ogle my daughter?”

“Wha? Oh, you mean, well yes, I mean no, about the ogle thing! I need to talk to you, I need your advice.”

“And what advice can I give?” The Elder’s voice was almost as cold as her stare. In truth, she liked Daenar and mourned for the boy’s loss. In fact, she hoped that Teppia and Daenar would be wed and the destiny would be fulfilled before it was too late. Even now, the dawn of destruction was on the rise, time was limited. However, there were appearances to keep.

“It is about my vengeance Elder. The bear that slew my father and injured Ortik and Alain, what should I do about it?”

“The bear, the guardian of our village, one of the Two Bears in our name, that bear? What should you do?” Daenar nodded, Orlenthia had a way of making others feel inferior, even dumb. “You should slay the beast! You will take his power and be the new guardian of this village! I thought you were a bit brighter than this. Really, you disappoint me young Frostbourne, I expect more than this from you!”

She poked him in the chest with a sharp finger; it would have been between his eyes if he wasn’t so tall. “Use your head boy! In the morning you will go, you will go alone, and you will destroy that which has taken so much from us and from you!” The chieftain turned away from Daenar as she finished her mind on other matters. Daenar nodded again, started to say something, but thought better of it.

His walk back to the huts he shared with his family was not so heavy as the journey to the Elder had been. Now he had a purpose, that was something at least. He would slay the bear; he

would prove himself as the man his father said he would be, and he would be worthy to marry the Elder's daughter. Daenar would be chosen as the protector of Two Bears Peak!

Daenar paused, his chest tight. That was an awful lot of responsibility. How could he possibly accomplish all those things? What if Teppia rejected him? Oh gods! What if the bear killed him?! After all, it had killed his father and almost killed two other well seasoned hunters. What chance did he have, not even yet of the age of trials...alone. He knew he really shouldn't think so much. If possible he was now even more depressed than before his trip to see the elder, things changed quickly in the mountains. Daenar sighed.

A chill wind blew crisply, tugging against Daenar's homespun trousers causing them to flap against his ankles as he made the return journey. There were no real trees here in Two Bears, only some slightly misshapen brush, nothing that could stop the hurried mountain air.

His day would be full; he still had the daily chores as well as the additional duties that his father's ceremony demanded of him. As Daenar approached his house, his house, he had never thought of it being "his", just the place where he lived until he found his own place. Now, those two little huts surrounded by a frozen rock strewn yard and tiny garden were his. He pushed all other thoughts from his mind and started the daily chores to get the family and village fed. Tonight would be here quickly and tomorrow even faster.

Teppia found him out back in the water shed. Daenar was stripped to his waist and there wearing only his under clothes. His skin was bright pink from the icy cold water and vigorous scrubbing. He jumped and grabbed for his shirt in an attempt to cover up when Teppia appeared behind him in his private place. She only giggled and covered her mouth to keep from laughing at his obvious discomfort. "What are you doing here?" he

stammered more than demanded. Teppia moved closer as Daenar withdrew as far as he could, he stumbled as he somehow managed to trap his foot in a bucket and was only saved from toppling over by the fact that his back was now firmly against the wall. Teppia grinned and stepped closer. Somehow Daenar had lost his shirt in all the commotion and was practically naked, he covered what he could. Teppia continued to get closer and Daenar felt himself about to panic. No woman should ever see a man like this unless they were married and then only at certain times!

Daenar looked pleadingly at Teppia, she was beautiful, she looked nothing like the other girls of the village or any others Daenar had met in the peaks. Her hair was the color of a raven's wing and fell to her waist in long wavy curls when she didn't have it in flowing pigtails or bound tightly in a braid. He sometimes wondered what it would feel like in his hands, against his flesh. Although quite womanly in all the right places, she wasn't quite as heavy of breast or thick of hip as most of the women of Two Bears.

Perhaps in time, with a couple of children she would fill out. Daenar didn't care, he liked her just the way she was, had since she and her mother had come to the Peak. Right now none of that mattered; he was trapped and about to cry out for help! She stopped just before pressing against him, which might very well have killed him, and held out a thin leather strap with a tiny carved dragon skull on it.

"Wear it, wear it for protection from the spirits tonight, wear it for protection from the bear tomorrow, wear it for me." She turned, let Daenar take another look at her and left so he could compose himself.

He realized he had been holding his breath and let it out in a long sigh. In his hand was the dragon necklace, he stared at it, it was really authentic looking, the carver must have been quite

skilled. It even had tiny razor sharp teeth and large round empty sockets that stared blankly back at him, he could almost feel their gaze. Daenar recovered his shirt from the floor of the wash house, got dressed and laced the tiny skull around his neck. "For you," he whispered, "only for you." Daenar got back to his family dwelling without any more embarrassing incidents and prepared himself for the night.

The night began with his father in repose in the middle of the long house. The fireplaces were filled with logs and roaring as the feast began. Huge trays of meat, mutton, fish, fowl, and even a treat, Longhorn Elk were brought, still steaming from the community kitchen. Daenar was seated in the place of honor at the head of the table where lay his father. Yet another tradition that seemed quite odd, eating at a table with a corpse laid out on it. It was tradition to honor the new family leader as well as celebrate the life of the one departed. After everyone was stuffed to the gills with meat, bread and sweets, the ale began to flow. The people of Two Bears Peak had very rudimentary drinking games, in fact, they have only one. It isn't even really a game, everyone just keeps drinking and the last person standing wins.

As the merriment continued, Daenar would occasionally catch a glimpse of Teppia watching him. He continued to drink, his head was swimming, things began to blur and take on a milky hue, it would be a sign of weakness to stop. As the celebration reached its' peak, the sound of tribal drums began to pound rhythmically in the smoke filled hall. The women of Two Bears began a wailing cry for the spirits to come forth and accept this newly fallen hero into their presence to sit at the table of his forefathers. The combination of alcohol, the closeness of the smoky hall, and the sounds pounding into his head were too much.

Daenar felt the world around him shift as he fell into the murky depths. He then found himself trying in vain to block out the burning white light that surrounded him in a deafening silence. As his eyes adjusted he noticed a filmy, translucent figure fluttering in front of him. Slowly the figure began to take shape and come into focus. It was his father and behind him, several men that looked much like him. It was a group of his ancestors, his forefathers.

Daenar struggled to rise, but seemed bound to his chair. He was confused; others never spoke of these happenings if indeed it was a normal thing. His father stood proudly before him, his face scarred by the huge claws of the bear. "This is the oldest boy of the Frostbournes." His father gestured towards him and the others closed in to inspect the boy.

"Oh yes." They agreed. "He'll do just fine to carry on the name. Does he have a wife yet?" They all seemed very interested in this question.

"Not yet, but soon I hope." The others nodded.

"I just hope it isn't that skinny wisp of a girl Teppia that I always saw him mooning over." Daenar tried to protest, but couldn't speak.

"Hmm," one of the grandfathers spoke, "seems you hit a nerve in the boy." Daenar's father chuckled

"So I have, don't worry boy, we'll see that you are married to a fitting woman, that tiny thing doesn't have enough meat on her bones to last a single tryst, let alone one winter with a Frostbourne!" The spirits erupted in an echo of bawdy laughter.

"Daenar. Daenar!" He heard Teppia's voice from far away, like she was calling from under a heavy blanket. "Where are you?" She was getting clearer, closer. The spirits of his forefathers stopped laughing and began to look ill at ease. "Daenar, I'm coming, hold on, don't listen to them. They are not what they seem!" The spirits began to shift uneasily.

“Send her away boy; we know what is best for you!” Daenar fought for his voice, but still found none. His great-grand father was scratching his back with his dismembered left arm. Daenar felt a chuckle rise in his throat as he thought about how absurdly proud his forefathers were of their death dealing scars.

“Yes Daenar!” Teppia’s voice was clearer now. “They are nothing to be feared, that is the key, scoff at their pride and send them away!”

“Now boy,” Daenar’s father took on a serious, almost dangerous look. “You listen to me, this I can’t be any more serious about. Do not let that girl in here, we know what is best!” As his father was speaking his tongue slipped out of the toothless side of his jaw causing his voice to slur and end up sounding more like “Thwe knowths wath bess fur you.” The dragon skull Teppia had given him slipped from beneath his shirt and the spirits recoiled in horror. They began to fade, Daenar saw them for the cowardly beings they were and it caused him grief.

Teppia replaced his forefathers. Once again, Daenar struggled to rise, but found he was still held fast. The girl that seemed to be the subject of so much discussion moved closer to him. She hiked her skirt as she straddled him and sat on his lap. “Look at me!” she pleaded with him. “I am real! Look into my eyes and ignore everything else, they promise only lies! Those spirits are not what they claim to be, they are only twisted shadows of your noble line.”

Daenar couldn’t stop what was happening and wasn’t sure he wanted to. Teppia pressed her tiny body against his chest, he could feel her breasts pressing against him, she felt strangely cool. She lifted her head and kissed him. Daenar tilted his head to receive her kiss and noticed briefly that her eyes seemed gold and cat like. “You’ll be sorry boy” his father’s voice faded

away. Teppia pressed herself even closer, sucking hungrily at his lips.

Slowly the fading light of the vision was replaced with the smoke and noise of the hall, gone was the light, his forefathers, and Teppia. Alain placed a hand on his shoulder. Daenar glanced around; Teppia was nowhere to be seen. Daenar stood with the help of his father's friend and looked around.

"It is time." Alain whispered in his ear. He nodded. The other heads of households took their places around his father's corpse and with Daenar at the lead, they lifted him. Orlentia led the procession outside to where the pyre had been prepared. She spoke some words, calling to the ancestors, pleading with them to find this man worthy, his spirit strong. She placed the last of the burial runes across his forehead.

Daenar barely heard the words or even noticed as they placed his father on the great pyre of wood. Orlentia continued to chant as the drums echoed in the night. She poured oil over the corpse and nodded to Teppia. Daenar now noticed her, in the torchlight she sparkled and danced with shadows as she came to him and handed him the torch.

The drums fell silent; the only sound was that of the fire being whipped by the wind that bore down to hasten the passing of the earthly vessel. His hand tightened around the tiny hand of Teppia as she silently slipped it in his and she held him tightly as the fire grew into a mighty blaze that lit the huts and burned well into the night. She stayed with him, unmoving, until all had turned to ash. When the fire was no more she pulled him close and lightly kissed his cheek. He thought briefly of the vision and her hungry passion, this was better, her touch was pleasant. It was right.

## Chapter 2

Daenar woke the next morning with a pounding head. He hadn't won the game, but he certainly had given it a good try. His tongue was rough and dry. Blinking to clear his eyes, he looked around the tiny hut and noticed that he was the only one awake. The sunlight hadn't yet crept above the horizon and the chill of the night still hung close. With great effort, Daenar willed himself out of bed. He staggered slightly and then steadied himself, placing a hand on the rough trunk that acted as a table and dresser next to his bed.

The young Barbarian braced himself against the cold morning air as he stepped outside. A biting wind tore at him; the mountain air was just what he needed. After a quick trip to the wash house for an icy dunking and quick scrub he felt right as rain, well, maybe not as rain, but as right as he was likely to feel this morning.

Daenar made his way back to the house, being as quite as possible and grabbed his longbow and his father's great axe, his great axe, he paused, it was his great axe. It was really just a tool used for chopping wood, but would do for chopping bears as well. He wore no protection other than his thick woolen shirt and sleeveless leather vest against the claws and teeth of the great bear, only grit and determination would aid him in this battle. Doubt nagged at the back of his mind, but he pushed it aside, doubt would only mean his death.

As he closed the door behind him, his mother stepped out. "Here, take this with you." She handed him a small leather pack with a main compartment and several small pockets. "I packed you some food and a warm blanket, it's a long..." His mother's

voice quivered as she trailed off. Tears filled her eyes. Daenar took his mother's hand in both of his and squeezed. "I'll be back soon." His mother's hand fell limply as he released it. She knew it was quite possible that she would never see her son again...not on two feet and it was so soon after the passing of his father. Daenar didn't look back as he rounded the house and started out of the tiny village, looking back might make him want to stay even more.

Smoke from several small cook fires greeted Daenar as he neared the small rocky pass that served as a kind of natural fortress for the village. There were several tents set up just the other side of the defense. Daenar had seen traders, hunters, and other adventurer types before. It was not uncommon for traders and peddlers to come through; they had even seen gypsies with their magic and dancing a time or two.

The people of Two Bears Peak were excellent trappers and also harvested the mighty Blackwood that grew high above the village and often acted as guides in the peaks. The Blackwood was used for exquisite furniture as well as bows and even armor plating on great sea going vessels. The ermine, rabbit, and even squirrels grew thick luxurious furs, so it was quite common for traders to visit. These men however were no traders. These were soldiers, trained military men and they seemed armed and ready.

As Daenar approached, one of the men motioned to another and an older, rough looking man ducked inside a tent after a brief glance at the young lad. Moments later a thin, smiling young man that seemed to think he was in charge burst out of the tent. "Greetings my new friend!" he called. Daenar was cautious, but nodded in greeting. "Please!" the man motioned him over in a welcoming gesture. Daenar took the invitation and cautiously entered the camp. He noticed that two of the men had ducked out of sight as he entered. He could only surmise they

had gone to alert someone or had slipped into hiding. Daenar nodded in satisfaction, they didn't know what kind of threat he posed and that was fine with him.

The man was short and thin, quite diminutive of stature, but well muscled. When he moved Daenar could see years of training as well as natural ability in his gait. This small man was a warrior, but it also seemed he was a diplomat. "I am Sutibain, Captain Sutibain. Please, have a seat." The top of the man's head was a good six inches below Daenar's chin.

"I'll stand if it's ok with you." He replied.

"Certainly!" the man beamed. "Although I fear I may get a cramp in my neck from looking up all the time." Daenar gave a half grin and sat in the offered chair. "Ahh, that's better isn't it!?"

These men were all small and thin of stature, they were dark, a deep reddish brown, but not from the sun. They all had black hair that was kept back in long pony tails that were tied high in the middle of the back of their heads. They had curiously shaped eyes, slanted and almost seeming to squint. Daenar was sure he had never seen people like this before. Some wore armor as did his host. The armor was strange and made from overlapping strips of black leather with some type of metal fastened to them. Captain Sutibain had a golden clasp on his left shoulder that held his long cloak in place. The gruff looking man and the two that had ducked out when Daenar arrived made an appearance. Their armor was different as were their attitudes.

"Captain, we have not been properly introduced."

"Oh, sorry," standing, "this is Banisia, my first officer and personal detail." Banisia did not even bother looking at Daenar.

"You shouldn't invite just any rabble in, it isn't safe." Banisia stood half a head taller than his Captain, but still much shorter than Daenar. Probably large by the standards of his

people, he was maybe half as wide as Daenar. His armor was of metal, steel perhaps, it was black and inlaid with gold. The two guards on either side wore similar armor inlaid with silver. They both carried long spears with what looked like curved swords on the end, Naginata, Daenar later learned. Banisia himself carried two long curved, thick bladed scimitars. Daenar stood and both of Banisia's hands strayed reflexively to his protruding hilts.

"That's enough Banisia!" Sutibain stepped between the two men. "He is my guest!" Banisia relaxed slightly. He looked down at his Captain with barely veiled disgust

"As you wish." He turned his back, an insult that Daenar was not familiar with. "Come." The other two followed.

"Sorry about that, he's...well, a bit much."

"I must be going."

"No!" Sutibain commanded. Daenar gazed at the slight man. "I mean, wait, please. I wanted to ask a couple of questions about this place." The Captain's personal assistant brought a pot of steaming hot tea and two small cups. Sutibain filled the two cups and offered one to Daenar. The hot liquid was quite refreshing and filled his body with warmth. He set the cup down while Captain Sutibain spoke.

"This is a truly marvelous country! You know, I volunteered for this expedition as soon as I heard about it!" He stood beaming at Daenar. Not knowing what to do, Daenar stood in silence waiting for him to continue. "Oh, forgive me, I'm just so excited! You see, I have never seen mountains before! I come from a land of grass, great oceans of grass as far as the eye can see. The land I am from is almost perfectly flat! This is amazing to me! And I can say with certainty I have never met a person like you! Tell me, how old are you, you look young, are all the people here built like you?" Daenar managed to speak as the Captain paused to breath.

“I am not quite eighteen years old. I will be fully grown and muscled in my mid-twenties. I am a little larger than average for my age, but there are many that are much bigger than I. There are also the Half-giants, they aren't really giants, but people in these mountains started calling them that because of their size, a good two heads taller than me and half again as thick. Some people think they are part Ogre, but they seem nice enough. They are quite placid; I wouldn't want to upset one though.”

Captain Sutibain had sunk into his seat. “Unbelievable! This is turning out to be greater than I expected!”

“What is it you want here?” Daenar asked.

“Oh, my manners, forgive me again.” He again offered Daenar a seat. Daenar declined. “I am here to recruit.”

“Recruit what? What does that mean?”

“Oh, I am going to offer people in these mountains a job in the Imperial Army.” Daenar shook his head. “No wait, the pay is, well, it is at least fairly regular. And there is travel, imagine the places you could see in the army. The Empire is growing, lots of positions opening daily!”

“I can't help you. I have responsibilities to attend to here, now, I must go, thank you for the drink.”

Sutibain sighed. “Ok, is there someone I should talk to in the village?”

Daenar looked back over his shoulder, “It's called Two Bears Peak, it is my home, talk to Orlenthia, but don't expect much.”

He left the strange group of men behind; the wind blew colder as he moved out of the protection of the narrow pass. It was a day's walk at least, in good weather. Daenar eyed the cloudless sky. At least for now the weather seemed willing to cooperate. He turned his attention to the task at hand, or more accurately, the path at hand. Not quite two miles from where he

left the visiting soldiers a small divergence in the path took him higher up the side of the mountain and closer to the bear.

As Daenar climbed higher up the craggy path, the great Blackwood forest began to grow around him. One or two small trees greeted him at first and then the path leveled off a bit as the trees towered overhead. Inside the great wood, protected from the wind Daenar felt ill at ease. He had hunted in these woods and played here as a child, accompanying his father on many an occasion, the wood brought life to his people.

Today, things were a bit different. Perhaps it was the foreboding at the back of his mind about his upcoming encounter with Old Salt. Perhaps he still found the men outside the village a bit odd. Most likely it was the fact that there was not a single sound within the wood.

Even protected from the wind, Daenar was filled with an unnatural chill. He stopped and scanned the immediate area. It looked clear. At least what limited range the trees allowed looked clear. It was strange, no birds, no whirring insects, not even a squirrely squirrel made their presence known. It could be because Daenar had disturbed them and they were now in hiding, nestled in dens, watching unseen from a high branch, or just holding their breath as Daenar tended to do at times like this. He could be the reason, could be, but he doubted it.

There was a small clearing with a stream that he and his father always stopped at while in the woods. Daenar stopped at the same spot, without his dad for the first time. He sighed; it was all part of the process he guessed. He got a drink from the icy stream and dug in his pack to see what his mother had packed. There was a nice hunk of cheese and two loaves of her famous sour bread. Well, it was famous in Two Bears Peak, or at least everyone said they liked it. He rustled around a bit more and decided that meat was up to him. Oh! Look at what else was packed! Daenar grabbed up his favorite from the pack,

wrapped in an insulated travel cloth were two thick pieces of cinnamon bread.

Cinnamon was a rare spice to be found in the village; it came from some far away land and was used only for the most special of occasions. Daenar felt his chest tighten. Once again the weight of responsibility threatened to crush him. He shrugged it aside and stuffed most of one slice into his mouth. He closed his eyes and basked in the delicious glow of the cinnamon, mixed with just the right amount of sugar. When he opened his eyes, he was surprised.

“Wahl, ya just gonna chase dat down with water?” There, standing in front of Daenar was a being, about four feet tall and thick as the stump he was standing on, holding two mugs in his little chubby hands. “Wahl? Ya gonna invite me over or are ya gonna sit there bein’ rude?”

Daenar swallowed. “Um, sorry, please.” Daenar motioned to a smooth rock nearby, the one he used as a child since he now occupied the one his father had always sat on.

“Ahhh, that be mar like it!” The hairy Dwarf plopped down beside Daenar, made himself comfortable and rubbed his grubby hands together. “Now! What be that delicious fragrance that caught me attention?”

“Um, this?” Daenar still had a bit of his cinnamon bread in his hand.

The Dwarf raked his great black beard that had somehow engulfed his face out of the way and sniffed. “Ah yes! That be it!” He handed a mug of quite strong smelling ale to Daenar and looked expectantly at the young Barbarian. Reluctantly, Daenar fished the other slice of bread from his pack and handed it to the little Dwarf. “Ahh, thank ye kindly, Gauwfn.” The Dwarf choked down a mouthful and continued. “Gauwfn is me name incase ye were gonna ask...which I noticed ye didn’t.”

“Oh, I am Daenar, and you’re welcome.”

“Ha! Don’t ya try en lecture me on manners lad! I was gonna get around to that! I was just tryin’ ta finish it first as ta not be impolite an such!” Daenar chuckled. “What ya laughin’ fer?”

“I’m not; you took offense where none was offered. You already said thank you.”

Gauwfn stopped for a moment, shrugged, “Guess I did, wahl, anyhow, it was great!” He burst into loud laughter. Daenar thought he might now know why the wood was so quiet.

After Gauwfn finished rolling around and entertaining himself, he suddenly sat bolt upright. “Ya got anymore of dat bread?” he asked hopefully.

“No.” Daenar replied flatly. “That was the last of it.”

“Pity.”

“Yeah.” They sat in silence until Daenar became uncomfortable with the Dwarf’s close presence. “Is there something else I can do for you?” he asked.

“Gauwfn.”

“What?”

“My name is Gauwfn, you forgot.”

“I did?”

“Sure ya did, ya paused at the end of yer question trying ta remember my name.”

“No,” Daenar replied calmly, “I paused to wait for your answer.”

“Oh.” The Dwarf nodded and got busy sitting again. This obviously wasn’t working; Daenar began to question the Dwarf’s sanity.

“It has been nice visiting with you Gauwfn, but I must be off.” Daenar stuffed his few items back into his pack and stood to leave.

“Because it be so peaceful out here.” The Dwarf blew at an unruly beard hair that was wielding a twig like a dagger and was trying quite successfully to poke out his eye.

Daenar sighed, “What?”

The Dwarf sat up. “You were gonna ask me why I was here in the woods instead of in some dank, dirty cave.”

“I was?”

“Course ya were! It be the proper thing ta do after all, and yer the curious type, ain'tcha?”

Now that Gauwfn mentioned it, he was a little curious. He had seen Dwarves before, they regularly traded with them, but he had never seen one alone, or in the woods for that matter. “Truth be told,” Gauwfn looked around suspiciously, “I got a secret. Wanna hear it?”

Daenar, with his better judgment screaming in the back of his mind, gave in. “Please, yer, um, I mean your secret is safe with me.”

“I be closetfobic.” Tears filled his eyes at the revelation. “I tried not ta be, but I it can't be helped, I can't be down,” he shivered, “in that hole.” Daenar looked on helplessly as Gauwfn mewled and wailed in self pity, hiding his face in his massive beard. “Dontcha even look at me! I be not a Dwarf! Ancestors forgive me! I be shamed!” At this point Gauwfn rolled off the stump he had jumped up on to tell his story. With a thud, he lay in the leaf litter, sobbing and rolling back and forth quite pitifully, crying for the ancestors to grant him a quick death. Finally, his beard seized the opportunity to wrap tightly around his throat.

The insane Dwarf, Daenar was quite sure of it now, grasped the offending beard in both hands. “I've had about enough of you!” He pulled with all of his might, stretching the beard even tighter around his throat. His eyes bulged with fury and loss of oxygen as he realized the ancestors seemed willing to grant him

that death he had asked for. With one final burst of energy, he snatched the beard loose. The only problem was that he had been standing on the other end. The beard, in its final attempt, knocked Gauwfn's feet from under him and deposited him in a gasping heap on the forest floor.

Daenar waited for Gauwfn to recover and rake a few of the dead leaves from his hair and beard. The Dwarf hopped back on the stump and seated himself. "I'm sorry, closetfobic?" Gauwfn looked up with red rimmed eyes.

"Youp, it be a disease in me head. I be afraid of close places. That be why I like the forest, it be nice an open."

"Oh, yes claustrophobia, I have heard of that. I thought you had a fear of closets."

The Dwarf glared at Daenar with burning eyes. "Don't presume ta be tryin' ta teach me! Fear of closets...of all the...well, come ta think on it a bit, I suppose one could get caught inside if say a brother or two were ta creep up and shove ya in and close the door! Why lad, they be death traps! Thanks fer the warnin', I'll keep an eye out!"

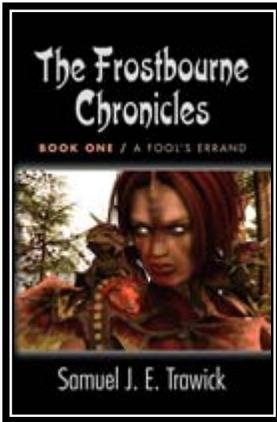
Gauwfn brushed himself off. "Ya been good to me lad. Ya didn't have ta be. Ole' Gauwfn remembers things like that. Be seein' ya lad. No, no, I got places ta be, didn't really have time fer this chat, but I don't be mindin', the company been good, and the bread delicious."

As Daenar watched, somewhat amused, the Dwarf straightened himself up a bit, took a few steps into the woods and vanished from sight.

Well, one thing was for sure, the mountains never ceased to amaze. There was enough light left in the day to make it a few more miles. That distance would bring him to the edge of the wood. As Daenar moved deeper along the trail, the traditional sounds of the forest began to spring to life and he even saw a couple of ruddy colored squirrels playing high overhead. The

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forest seemed normal once again. It must have been that unusual Dwarf that upset the balance, at least that is what he chose to believe. As the darkening sky edged closer to black, Daenar found a suitable spot to bed down for the night. He would get only snatches of rest, the bear would haunt his sleep tonight.



*The Empire is spreading war to The Woodland Realms and the Elves are in danger. It is up to an unlikely group of heroes from the high mountain village of Two-Bears Peak to save the Elves, each other, and the world. Barbarians, Dwarfs, Dragons, and Orcs. All the things a great story should have.*

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