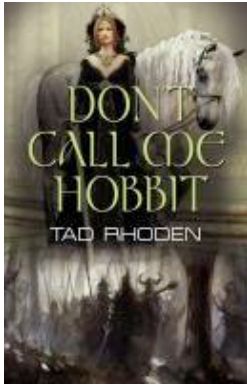


A woman in a black, ornate gown and a crown stands next to a white horse. The scene is set in a grand, stone-walled interior. Below the main image, a circular reflection shows a battle scene with soldiers and a horned figure.

DON'T
CALL ME
HOBBIT

TAD RHODEN



As fifth son of the king of the Fen Countries, Aram is a prince with little to no prospect of ever becoming king. Apprenticed to his sea captain uncle, Aram doesn't believe his shipmates stories of an island kingdom populated by dwarves until they dock there. The dwarf clans can never agree on anything, and so choose to have a mortal king. While Aram is a guest at the palace, the king is assassinated and Aram is blamed. There is nothing to do but flee. While on the run, he finds refuge among the dwarves and becomes a military advisor to a dweorgan revolution. Of course there's a fugitive princess, conflict, and obstacles.

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DON'T CALL ME HOBBIT

A Novel

Tad C. Rhoden

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CHAPTER 1--COTTON SAILS AND A CLEAN BOTTOM

“Damn your hams, pay attention and haul on that sheet when you’re told!” As captain of the ship, Abinidi shouted a lot. Recently he had been shouting more. “I’m beaching that pair of dead weights in the next port” he mumbled none too subtly. The targets of his displeasure had signed on hurriedly under the names Lazz and Plett. They seemed suspiciously anxious to get out of port, but three of his hands had jumped ship, leaving Abinidi short handed and pressed for time, so he had asked no questions. Both of them were lazy and inattentive; and the big one, Lazz, often fomented trouble.

Pity, Abinidi thought. The big hand had proved a valuable man in a battle, which was the main purpose for which Abinidi had signed them on. He had enough hands to handle the sleek caravel. Half dozen men would do, but he carried twice that to fight pirates. It was one of the reasons his ship always returned when the thriftier weren’t so dependable. His other extra expenditures weren’t so easily observed. Trade was a competitive business, so he didn’t share his knowledge. Linen sails stretched and would not hold their shape. It was all right if they formed a bag when you were running before the wind. But when you needed stable sails to point as close into the wind as possible, it was disastrous. Abinidi had observed that cotton cloth held its shape well, even when stressed across the bias of the weave. He still used linen for his square sails for running down wind, but Abinidi paid to have his triangular

lateen sails made of the precious cotton cloth. With a size applied to the fabric to seal the weave of his lateen sales he could point closer into the wind than any other ship.

Abinidi's other secret was to keep the bottom of his ship clean. As a boy he had observed that his boat sailed faster when he removed the marine growth from the bottom. He now had his crew careen his ship and clean the bottom regularly. He'd rather outrun pirates than fight them, but when he couldn't, he had sufficient hands to face them. Abinidi made his noon sight of the sun with the cross staff, and when the lateen sails were trimmed to his satisfaction on their sharply inclined yards, he gave the order "Hoist the steering oar; she should hold the course now." It was no secret that skilled sailors could steer a ship using only the sails, but it wasn't nearly as responsive as when a steering oar was in use.

Aram released the tiller projecting sideways across the extended poop deck from the stock of the steering oar secured almost vertically to the side of the hull on the right rear quarter of the ship and Stven helped him tilt the ungainly oar clear of the water. The steering oar was in reality no more than a shaped board at the end of a stout shaft. It was really a misnomer to call it an oar. Because it was customarily suspended over the right side of the rear quarter of the ship, this had become known as the steer board side, later contracted to starboard. On smaller craft using leeboards, the only suitable location left to place them was the left side. The term leeboard side had evolved into larboard, now being supplanted by the term portside, this being the side positioned against a dock when in port to avoid damaging the steering board on the right side. This entire verbal scramble usually left landlubbers unfamiliar with nautical jargon wondering which shell the pea was under.

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Aram's dark page boy cut hair marked him as a royal member of court, and contrasted sharply with Stven's plebian straw colored bowl cut. The two had become friends and frequent companions since the beginning of the voyage. They would appear unlikely associates; Aram agile and graceful in the movements of his light frame, while Stven was heavily muscled from a childhood of hard labor that had made him rough and deliberate in movement. But each absorbed from the other, Aram exchanging culture and education with Stven's rough worldly knowledge and experience.

Aram was fifth prince of the low Fen Countries, which placed him far enough down the line of succession to expect little promise in a court having a tight fisted exchequer. His father the king felt that the time had come for Aram to leave the shelter of court and see more of alter-earth. Before he could protest, Aram found himself a crew member on his uncle's caravel, a loose family tradition through which it was hoped he might become a successful ship master as uncle Abinidi had done. The royal family is not fallow in the Fen Countries.

"Wouldn't want Princie Boy there to be overworked, didn't have to steer too long did we" Lazz said pettishly.

"Avast! Belay that" Stven whirled on him. "Captain's already told you. Enough."

"Were you not second captain, Princie wouldn't have your skirts to hide behind." Lazz said churlishly.

Stven advanced toward him. "While I am second captain, we'll behave as ordered."

"One day we'll meet ashore farmer." Lazz found himself standing alone, Plett edged away as if wanting no part of the confrontation.

“Any time off-ship, big fellow. Meantime you’ve been told to address Prince Aram in the respectful manner due his station.”

Aram edged between them, facing Lazz. “I don’t need him to defend me, while we’re crew members we’re equals. If you’ve a complaint with me, feel free to settle it like you would with any sailor!”

“Whoo, aint Princie Boy the fierce one now” Lazz smirked down at him, being a full head taller.

Stven stepped between them, placing his open hand against Aram’s chest and pushing him back, he faced Lazz closely. “Get you below, ere thee get thyself flogged, you dumb oaf!”

The three stood silently like dogs over a bone until Lazz sneeringly replied “aye aye, *Sir*,” and slunk away, realizing that Plett had abandoned him.

“Hope I never have to back my words against him ashore,” Stven whispered to Aram as they leaned against the weather rail surveying the sea, “the man’s big as any ox in alter-earth.”

“Yes, but he’s clumsy” Aram commented.

“As am I also, if you haven’t noticed.” Stven smiled depreciatingly.

Aram drew a tubular object from his doublet and increased its length by extending a smaller tube from within it, placed it to his eye, and scanned the horizon.

“How many of those did you bring?” his friend inquired.

“Half dozen. I gave one to uncle Abinidi, but I should be able to sell the rest for a goodly profit.”

“See any mermaids?”

“Lazz is right, you are a foolish farmer. I don’t believe in mermaids; or sea monsters, nor giants nor fairies, dwarves, hobbits, goblins, trolls or any other of your wild sea stories.

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Nowhere in all of alter-earth"; Aram clapped his friend good naturedly on the shoulder. "You'd tell me anything you thought I might believe."

"Think you so? We put into Dweorgenslund and I'll show thee dwarves, and thee'll eat thy words."

"Oh verily? Like unto the unseen sea monsters and mermaids thee claimest. "Aram mockingly imitated Stven's rustic, formal and error ridden mixed manner of speech. "Get on with you. I should expect such from a farm lad who still believes alter-earth is flat.

"Aram, *your highness*. One can see that it's flat. All the Fens are flat. Look about you, the sea is flat. All is flat but the mountains and the sea bottom."

"Then why can't we ever see the edge of it? Here, look through my far-looker. You can't see very far. Climb the mast and you can see farther. No one ever sails off the edge of it; there's always more. Go far enough and you'd go clear round it. When you sight a ship, you see the tops of the sails first, then it gradually rises above the horizon. Now why is that? Because it's round, my worldly bumpkin."

Stven stared at the deck. "I don't know why that is. You are learned and seek to confuse me."

"And you seek to feed me tall tales my good friend."

"Very well Aram. Thee shalt see. Any way, were it round, people would fall off the other side of it. Surely you see that."

"I give up. It's true what they say about silk purses and sow's ears. We each are what we are." Aram shook his head hopelessly as captain Abinidi approached and addressed Stven.

"We'll hold this course through the night until we've cleared the southern end of Dweorgenslund. There's nothing on its eastern coast but cliffs. A few small fishing craft are launched off the beaches, but there's no decent harbor where a

ship could land cargo. Even if there were there's no city for trading. We'll sail up the western coast to Righ Town. It's the capital city of Greater Dweorgenslund; they've a good harbor and we can careen there between cargos. I don't like to trade in Lesser Dweorgenslund; they charge exorbitant tariffs and are miserly traders in the bargain. If you need anything I'll be in my cabin. This old man needs a nap."

"I'm still having difficulty with the big man, Lazz," Stven reported apologetically.

"One more day," Abinidi replied. "I'll be putting him ashore in Righ Town. I suppose his trained dog Plett will follow him, so we'll be looking for crew. Think you can manage him that long?"

"Aye sir," Stven replied. "As long as be necessary."

"And you Aram?" Abinidi turned to him. "Is the big man still pestering you?"

"I'm all right uncle. This next place, Dweorgenslund? What do we trade there?"

"I'm glad you take an interest" his uncle stepped closer as if sharing precious counsel. "It's a vast island divided as two countries, Greater Dweorgenslund is the northern two thirds, Lesser Dweorgenslund the southern third; one fascinating and profitable, the other...less so. They are trading centers for many because of their location, and the northern country is a rich and productive land in its own right. They'll want the silks we bring. I've been entrusted with some rubies to swap for the emeralds they have there. Possibly some one will have brought diamonds and pearls and we can deal. We have tin from the Cloudy Isles, and brass. They'll offer olive oil and spices; profitable to all. The western side of the country is a wide tropical plain and the eastern is high cold mountains running clear to the sea on the southwestern cape." He

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stopped, realizing that he had offered much more than Aram wished to know. "You'll see lad. You'll see much."

Through the night the wind veered several times as they rounded the land and the sails had to be trimmed to hold their course. Abinidi made cross staff sights of the polar star. By morning they had veered north and the land had become visible to starboard. After they cleared the mountainous cape, Aram could see beaches and tilled fields and vast groves in his far-looker tube. By morning of the second day a city was visible. As they neared the harbor entrance Captain Abinidi ordered the sails lowered and the sweeps manned. They rowed into a broad harbor with long beaches, backed by a large city on a vast alluvial plane with snowcapped mountains in the distant background. The sweeps were just large oars, but it took two men to handle each one. With three sweeps to a side, the captain was the only one left to man the tiller and guide them close enough to the stone quay to draw in the sweeps and throw lines to those ashore to begin to secure the ship.

As Aram tossed a coiled line he noticed a short man. He was very short, barely coming to a normal mans chest. He had a large head and torso and disproportionately short arms and legs. Then he noticed another in the crowd...and another.

"Told you," Stven said knowingly behind him.

CHAPTER 2--DWARF, DWARVES... LOTS'A LITTLE PEOPLE

“Dwarf! Dwarves,” Aram turned and gasped at Stven. “Lots’a little people. Lots and lots of ‘em!

“Whoo, aint Princie Boy excited,” Stven grinned victoriously at him. “Believe me now?”

Aram gaped at the quay as the mooring lines were sorted out. Every fourth or fifth person seemed to be a dwarf. The ship was finally positioned with its left side to the quay so not to damage the steering board. Protective fenders were placed and mooring lines adjusted. A boarding plank was rigged and officials dealt with.

Abinidi motioned Stven and Aram toward him. “I’ll handle the unloading of our trade goods. Take Aram ashore; keep him out of trouble and show him Righ Town. That’s why he’s with us.” He handed Stven a hand full of coins, “Put these in your purse. The two of you get some shore cooked chow and whatever else amuses you lads.” He laid an affectionate hand on each of their shoulders. “Be back aboard tonight. We careen and clean the bottom in the morning.”

“Well come,” Stven tugged at Aram’s doublet “lest the day pass us by. What do you want to see, there is so much.” They delayed only long enough to don their short-swords. Stven belted his to his waist while Aram wore his strapped diagonally across his back on a shoulder strap.

Stven led him to the market area. “How far does the city go?” Aram asked him.

“Too far to walk in a day. You’d need one of their ponies.” Aram had periodically seen stout but small shaggy haired ponies.

“Would they carry me, or would I have to carry them? He asked depreciatingly.

“Don’t be fooled,” Stven cocked an eye at him “they can run for hours, and they winter wild in yon snow covered mountains where the horses we know would die. They’re just as deceptive as the dwarves of this land. These dwarves are as strong or stronger than any of us.”

As they walked they met a conspicuous procession traveling the street in the opposite direction. A dozen dwarves walking two abreast were all armed. Three had spears with wicked looking points of flaked obsidian, eight had spears with bronze tips and one of the dwarves carried a halberd. They all wore heavy quilted leather jerkins and leather kilts. Their feet were wrapped in sheepskin with the wool facing in, secured with leather straps wrapped from their ankles to just below their knees. Each carried a short sword or battle axe in his belt. But more conspicuous about their group was the woman who preceded them.

Though barely half a head taller than they, she was obviously no dwarf. Aram’s grandfather, who referred to women often and enthusiastically, would have referred to her well waved long hair as honey blond. She wore a knee length tunic of nondescript color, belted at the waist with a wide leather girdle with a flap covered leather pouch on the left side and a dagger on the right. Her cloak hung off her shoulders on a strap secured at her neck, revealing that the belt emphasized well defined hips. Above her sandaled feet, the knee length skirt revealed the knotted calf muscles often characteristic of compact people. Her green eyes were separated by a short

slightly upswept nose over a dainty mouth. The overall effect was far from displeasing.

She approached with an air of confident authority and gave Aram a slight smile as he stepped aside to let them pass. Aram felt that an elderly dwarf with a well trimmed graying beard at the head of the troupe glared at him, as if suspecting undue familiarity, but he couldn't be certain.

"Did you see that?" He said to Stven as they watched the procession disappear down the street.

"And wouldn't I be blind not to. And I saw she favored yourself a bit lad."

"She can favor me anytime she likes." He gave Stven a playful shove. "She seemed so sure of herself. Who is she, and what was that procession?"

Stven raised his eyebrows and shrugged. "I'd be having no idea, but you'd be sure of yourself too if you had that gang of little ruffians backing you. That's more dwarves than I've ever seen in one group on the city streets."

"You mean they're more numerous outside the city?"

"More numerous you say? By the gods yes. That's all there be outside the city, it's their country lad. Here in Righ Town is the only place regular people are allowed to live. And I'm told that's only because of the king."

"What do you mean because of the king? It's their country, but their king lets people outnumber them here in the city? Is this another of your tales?"

"Nay lad. The king be a man. They'll not have a dwarf king. I witan nay myself why, but as thy uncle told thee, we're among a strange land here. Come now, there's so much to see."

As Stven led him through the streets Aram saw that the city was an eclectic collection of buildings of mud brick, frame with wattle and daub, and occasionally just a vendors

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tent or canopy. Some roofs were thatched and others tiled, a few were planked. There seemed to be no plan or conformity, and streets and alleys appeared to have simply occurred aimlessly. Were it not for Stven, Aram thought he might have become quite disoriented.

After a time Stven returned them to the market. They were approached by two scantily clothed women with heavily painted faces offering to sell their favors. "Sire, no" Stven said. "I bring thee back to thy uncle with the pox, he'll flay me. Come along a little further, see the palace. Please."

"But you're supposed to teach me seafaring, isn't that what sailors do?" Aram chided.

"Not this sailor. Tell me you jest Aram."

Aram remained silent, enjoying Stven's discomfort until they reached a position in the market where the palace could be viewed on a hill above them. It was an immense rectangular structure of white marble surrounded by a colonnade supported by numerous fluted columns with bas relief figures at the bases. Aram was certain the structure exceeded a hundred cubits in length. His far-looker tube brought him a closer view, he could see that the columns were actually tilted and tapered to compensate for the distortions of the eye, and everything seemed to be dimensioned to the divine proportions of classical architecture. He could also see writing below the bases of the columns which he presumed told about the bas relief sculptures.

"It must have emptied an entire treasury" he said to Stven, with his viewing tube still to his eye.

"It's a rich land. Who can know? Let us go. There is much more to see."

They saw areas where things were manufactured and processed. They saw the exchange where the emeralds of the

land were traded. They saw street performers and walked and looked until they confessed their fatigue

“I know a good place to relax” Stven said. Would you want to go to a dwarf tavern I know? It’s owned by dwarves and a lot of them go there, and they have almost any beverage you can think of.”

“Do they have food?”

“Must have, how could you run a tavern without food?”

“Lead on shipmate.”

Stven walked down a series of streets. Almost immediately after turning into an inconspicuous alley, they were confronted by a voluptuous female dwarf. “Aye sailors, how about a good time, bet you never had a dwarf; do you both for a talent?”

“Be a rare day when we see a talent, but ‘er’s a bit to tide you over luv.” Stven placed two coppers in her hand.

“Well bless you, you big handsome devils. Fair winds n’ smooth seas to you both.” She did an attempt at a curtsy. “Change your mind...well, you know.”

“And why did you do that?” Aram asked.

“Dwarves are thick in this part of town, I’m not wanting any trouble here.”

“Gosh, we could at least have gotten something for our money, ‘*you big handsome devil you*’. That’s the second time now. Anyway, I thought she was rather nice.”

“Now who’s having who on?” Stven shoved him hard enough to make him stumble. “In here.” He indicated a low door beneath a sign depicting a red unicorn on a building with leaded bottle glass windows which admitted light but blurred all definition to the point of being useless for viewing,

Aram ducked his head and followed Stven through the now opened doorway. Closing the door behind him, it took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the dim light, after which he

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still couldn't see into the more shadowed parts of the room.
The open beams barely cleared their heads.

CHAPTER 3--UNHAPPY REUNION

The room seemed to be filled with dwarves sitting mostly on three legged stools around tables. All the tables were filled except one large trestle table at which one young dwarf sat alone. An unstrung bow and a quiver of arrows leaned against the table. His jacket had archer's padding on the left sleeve and shoulder.

A familiar voice came to them out of a shadowed corner. "Well, aint it Princie Boy and his daddy now." As their eyes became accustomed to the dim light they could see Lazz and Plett in a corner. Lazz's large frame looked incongruous perched on the dwarf sized stool.

Stven took a step toward him. "You look like you're crapping in a bucket. What are you two doing ashore?"

"Any damned thing we like. If it's anything to yah farmer, the old bastard paid us off and beached us, so piss on yah."

"Be keeping a civil tongue" Stven advanced placing his hand on the hilt of his sword.

"Hey! Hey now!" The serving maid entered the room as several dwarves began to stand up and reach for weapons. "There'll be no trouble or we'll settle it for you! Come sit over there at the large table. Grenskye'l share, he's friendly."

The serving maid was a slim young red haired dwarf with narrow blue eyes and pointed features giving her a pixyish appearance. When they were seated across from the young dwarf with the unstrung bow she approached the table. "What can I get you, sailors? Hey, I remember you," she indicated Stven, "you've been here before, quite a while back isn't it?"

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“Aye mum,” Stven answered respectfully. “It’s been a bit. I apologize for the disturbance. The big one and us were shipmates, and not good ones at that.”

“Och, don’t be telling me. That one’s been nothing but trouble. I’ll be happy to see the back of him and his mousy friend anytime.”

“Would you still be having that good mead mum, I’d fancy a tankard of it if you have.”

“We can be doing that. And you sir?” she looked at Aram. “I don’t remember you, first time in Dweorgenglund? We’re famous for our wine, like to try it.”

Aram agreed to the wine. As the girl went for their drinks, Stven addressed the young dwarf. “That’s a fair fine looking bow.” It was reverse curved, laminated of bone and sinew over ash with bronze fittings. “Would you mind if I looked?”

The dwarf passed it to him. “My father gave it to me. I think it’s a hint that I’m old enough to be out and providing.”

Stven stood and placed the end of the bow at his instep as if to string it, raising his eyebrows questioningly at the dwarf. The dwarf nodded assent. When strung, it formed the graceful tandem S so admired in a reverse curved bow.

“And what would you be knowing of archery?” Aram asked him.

“Best in my village, as a lad I were, smarty.” Drawing the bow, he exclaimed “Whoa , that’s powerful. Can a man, well, your size...?” Standing up, the dwarf took the bow and drew it fully before unstringing it and leaning it again against the table.

“Oh” Stven said. “I’ve never tried a back curved bow. Is it better?”

As their drinks arrived the dwarf answered. “It’s a little trickier, but it seems to have a smoother draw and the arrow drops less at a distance. Let me ask you a question in return. I

saw you two in the market. I've heard of a thing in foreign lands that makes things closer. Was that what you were looking through?"

"Aye" Aram drew the far-looker forth and passed it to Grenskye. "It's available for trade if you're interested."

Before he could examine the far-looker, the door opened and the girl and troupe of dwarves they had seen in the market filed in. Seeing that all the seats were taken except the large table, she approached their table, and apparently being acquainted with him, addressed Grenskye. "Grenskye, as this is the only space available, could we join you and your friends?" Grenskye replied in a language Aram did not understand, and the dwarves began leaning their spears against the wall and sat down. Stven and Aram scooted closer together to make room and the serving maid approached.

The girl undid the flap of the pouch on her belt and extracted a leather bag heavy with coins. Undoing the drawstring, she placed several coins on the table and told the serving maid "Give them whatever they want." She gave the impression that she was accustomed to authority.

This was followed by a round of conversation in the unfamiliar language before she left to begin several trips bringing serving trays of mugs filled with the variety of beverages the dwarves had ordered.

Turning, she addressed Aram with no introduction. "I remember you from the market. You wear sailor's cloths, but from your bearing and hair I'd guess you're no sailor. Am I correct?"

"I'm from The Fen Countries."

"And you're obviously no page." She continued probing. "The royal family, perhaps?"

"Well...yes." Aram did not elaborate, he did not want to seem pompous to this attractive girl.

Stven had no such inhibitions about defending Aram's position, in fact, feeling it his duty, he volunteered "He's the fifth prince of our land mum. His father, King Olma, sent him on this voyage with us, though I'm witan no why."

Uncomfortable with the revelation, Aram hastily added. "It's really nothing. I can get a meal and a bed at the palace and little else."

"I apologize for my informality, prince." There was a change in her manner of address. "My name is Alhiana. Would I be overly bold if I asked yours?"

"I am called Aram, and my friend, *who tells too much*, is Stven"

Nodding to acknowledge Stven, she returned to Aram. "You speak our language well, foreign prince."

"Your tongue is not so very different from ours, you would be understood in our land. But as you speak of language, let me ask, what is this language I hear all of you speaking?"

"It's Dwarfin to you, Dweorgen to them. Don't try to learn it, they won't teach it to you."

"But then, how do you come to...?"

"I was raised among them."

"I thought people couldn't live among them."

"Let's discuss that another time" she dismissed the subject. "I've been told The Fen Countries are mostly coastal swamp. *How* can people live there?"

"We build dams around it and pump it dry with windmills." Aram explained. "Do it enough generations and you can dry out a lot of land. Where the sea is shallow you can even claim that."

"How clever your people must be. What is that you have?" She indicated the far-looker on the table in front of Grenskye.

“Oh, may I,” Aram asked Grenskye, taking the far-looker from him. “It’s a device made by craftsmen in my country. It makes things look closer. One holds the small end to the eye and points it where you want to see, then adjust the length of the tubes to the best vision. I think you’d find it quite startling if you stepped outside and looked far away with it.”

“I’d like to” she arose, extending her hand “May I?”

Aram stood up and they both walked to the alley in front of the tavern. “Here, let me adjust it for you,” he said, looking and extending the tubes before handing it to her. “Now look at that tall rooftop in the distance there. He pointed.

Holding it to her eye, she exclaimed after a moment, “Oh my, that’s incredible. How does it do that?” She redirected her gaze at different objects, then followed a bird in flight.

“Charming the trollop are we Princie Boy?” Aram lowered his gaze to find Lazz confronting them with drawn sword. “I’ll be having that bag of coins now, pretty thing.” He nodded toward Alhiana’s purse.

Her hand went to her dagger, Aram stepped back and reached over his shoulder to draw his short-sword. Assuming an on guard position, he stepped forward, saying “You leave her alone.”

“Don’t try to be the hero pretty boy, your farmer daddy’s not here now.” Lazz feinted then lunged. He was untutored, but an accomplished brawler. He had the size and strength to utilize a heavier blade effectively. Aram knew he would have to get inside Lazz’s greater reach. He backed as Lazz unleashed a running fleche then Aram ducked and riposted, nicking the larger man’s sword arm, which would have normally ended a fencing match. With a growl the big man swung a powerful over head chop. Aram held his short-sword up and backed the end of his blade with the other hand as his

arms-master had taught him. It stopped the blow, but the impact broke his bronze blade.

Backing away, he saw a staff someone had left by the tavern door. He grabbed it and faced Lazz again. The next chop nearly severed the staff. Aram knew this couldn't continue. He jabbed the end of the staff at his opponent's midsection, momentarily knocking the wind out of the large man. Then the world reeled and his knees folded. He found himself on his back. He knew he had been struck from behind.

A hand was on his forehead holding him down, and there was a knife at his throat. "Stay down or I'll have to be cutting your throat, won't I now." It was Plett's voice.

Lazz removed the heavy bag of coins from Alhiana's purse and sheathed his sword. Saying "Let's see what else the lass' got," he grasped the neck of her tunic and ripped the front of it to her waist, revealing what Aram's grandfather would have enthusiastically described as a fine figure of a woman. "Nice floppers girl" he reached forth and fondled one of her exposed breasts..

Lazz emitted a sudden howl and whirled. There stood the youngest of the dozen dwarves with blood dripping from the flaked obsidian point of his spear. There was a gash in Lazz's haunch. "Why you damned runt!" Lazz reached for his sword and advanced. The dwarf stood his ground with his spear extended, obviously ready for more.

"Lazz, give it up man," Plett removed his hand from Aram's forehead and, standing up, dropped his knife. They were faced by the business end of eleven spears and a halberd, each with an angry dwarf on the other end.

The older dwarf with the well trimmed beard seemed to be the leader. Raising his spear, he retrieved the bag of coins from Lazz and approaching Alhiana, said something in

Dwarfin to her which seemed solicitous. She gave a reply and covered her nakedness with her cloak.

The dwarf returned to Lazz and calmly said “You fool, you have molested a royal personage. Come with us! Resist and we’ll kill you.

As Lazz and Plett were marched away, Alhiana said to Aram “I hope I shall see you again. I must go with them now,” and followed behind the dwarves.

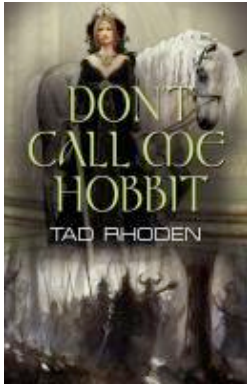
“Well *Princie Boy*, I’m nay keeping thee from trouble, am I?” Aram had been unaware of Stven’s approach, “I knew not until the dwarves ran out. You did right well against the great oaf. Hence, please try not to get thee slain.”

“Dammit! I don’t know who she is.” Aram said exasperatedly.

Grenskye retrieved the far-looker from the ground where it had fallen and peered through it at several things. “Available for trade you say?”

They went back into the tavern and returned to their table. “I’ve this uncut emerald I was going to sell.” Grenskye produced the stone and a deal was struck.

“I’ve not had supper. Are you lads hungry? Mayla’s got a stew and biscuit’s that will coat your ribs. And I think we’ll not be wanting for drink.” Grenskye nodded toward the full mugs the dwarves had abandoned on the table.



As fifth son of the king of the Fen Countries, Aram is a prince with little to no prospect of ever becoming king. Apprenticed to his sea captain uncle, Aram doesn't believe his shipmates stories of an island kingdom populated by dwarves until they dock there. The dwarf clans can never agree on anything, and so choose to have a mortal king. While Aram is a guest at the palace, the king is assassinated and Aram is blamed. There is nothing to do but flee. While on the run, he finds refuge among the dwarves and becomes a military advisor to a dweorgan revolution. Of course there's a fugitive princess, conflict, and obstacles.

Don't Call Me Hobbit

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