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Henwyn in a Hole

"Ghooooooof!" said Henwyn.

It was an odd thing to say, but since the ground had just given way beneath his feet and he had gone plummeting down and landed in blackness at the bottom of a deep, dark hole, it summed up his feelings pretty well. "Ghooooooof!" he said again, more thoughtfully, and rolled over on to his back. High above him he could see a raggedy-edged patch of daylight, which he guessed must be the opening through which he had fallen. Everything else was as black as midnight.

"Skarper?" he shouted.

Skarper was Henwyn's best friend. That was unusual, because Henwyn was a young human being, fair haired and honest-featured and really not bad looking if you liked that sort of thing, while Skarper was a goblin: a spindly, foxy-faced creature with yellow

eyes, long ears and a ginger tuft on the end of his tail. Friendships between humans and goblins were a thing unknown. But all sorts of unusual and unknown things had been happening in the Westlands during the past year and a half. Most people put it down to the comet called the Lych Lord's star, which had come swooping back out of the depths of space to waken with its silver light the old magic which still lingered in the secret places of the land.

One of the most secret places of all was the great ruined fortress of Clovenstone, which had always been home to Skarper's goblin tribe, and where Henwyn lived now as well. It was from Clovenstone that the two friends had set out that morning, crossing the tumbledown Outer Wall and climbing up into the steep, stark valleys of the Bonehill Mountains. The cloud maidens who sometimes flew over Clovenstone had told Henwyn of smoke they'd seen, and fires by night, up in those uninhabited hills. It had sounded to Henwyn like mystery and adventure, and since he fancied himself as a bit of an adventurer, he had decided to investigate. He had persuaded Skarper to come with him. "Think what good practice it will be for next spring, when we set off on real adventures!" he had said.

And if adventures mainly consisted of getting bored



and footsore then it was good practice indeed, for that was all the pair had achieved by mid-afternoon, when they stopped for a rest at the top of an especially steep ridge.

"Well, there's nothing here," Skarper grumbled, rubbing his blistered paws. "Nothing but rocks and rain and those great, grey, slithery slopes of scree. Even the wind sounds bored. Listen to it, droning and moaning up in the crags there. Those potty cloud maidens must have been imagining things. Can we go home now?"

Henwyn wasn't listening. He was pointing down into the valley on the far side of the ridge. "What's that?" he asked.

"What's what?" said Skarper.

The valley looked just the same to him as all the other valleys they had seen that day: steep-walled and overhung by crags, with a milky river twisting along its floor, far below. But halfway down this valley a tall upright shape rose among the littered boulders.

"It's just an old tower," said Skarper.

"Not a tower," said Henwyn. "A chimney! Look! There's smoke coming out of the top of it!"

Skarper squinted. There were a few faint wisps billowing around the top of the tower or chimney or whatever it was, but he wasn't sure that they were wisps of smoke. He thought they might just as easily



be scraps of the low cloud, which kept sinking down to brush the crags and drop cold rain on him.

"I'm going to take a closer look," decided Henwyn, and he jumped up and set off downhill in a clatter of dislodged stones.

"All right," said Skarper. "I'll stay here and guard our stuff." And he took the pack which Henwyn had been carrying, put it beneath his head for a pillow, and tried to pretend that he was back in his own snug little lair at Clovenstone.

In the darkness at the bottom of his hole, Henwyn sat up. There was a scent of wet earth, which you would expect at the bottom of a hole, and a faint smell of smoke, which you wouldn't. He heard a faint, far-off thudding sound. At first he could see nothing, but then he slowly began to make out wooden pillars and rafters reaching away from him into the dark, like ribs. It was not a hole that he was in; it was a tunnel. It stretched away in front of him for twenty paces or so, then turned a corner. From around that corner a dim, reddish-orange light was coming – and it was growing brighter.

The chimney had been very disappointing. Three or four times the height of a man, it stood all alone on

the hillside. Sometimes one of those pale wisps of smoke emerged from its top. "Hello?" Henwyn had shouted. He had put his ear to the chimney, but he couldn't hear anything. He had walked all round it, wondering if there might be an opening; perhaps a little door for chimney sweeps to use. There was nothing.

Around the base of the chimney the thin mountain soil was scarred and churned. Many footprints showed there, and there were heaps of newly cut stones left over from the building work. Those, and the odd flutterings of smoke, were the only things which told him the chimney was not an abandoned ruin that had stood there for a hundred years.

Henwyn walked away, looking for more clues. He had gone about ten paces when, without any warning, the ground gave way under him. That was when he had plunged into the tunnel.

Up on the ridge, Skarper thought he heard something. A rattle and a sort of "Ghooooooof!" He opened his eyes and sat up. He could not see Henwyn. His friend was probably round the back of that stupid chimney, he thought. A pleasant smell reached him, coming from inside Henwyn's pack. He undid the straps and stuck his head inside it. He was so busy rummaging that he



did not hear the little muffled cry of "Skarper!" drifting up the hill.

"Ooh!" he said. "Pies!"

The first thought that flitted across Henwyn's mind when he saw that fiery glow around the bend in the tunnel was *Dragons!* But no; that could not be right. Dragons did not build tunnels with pit-props and rafters. Anyway, this was not big enough to be a dragon's lair. The main thing was to stay calm, not to panic. "There are no monsters here, Henwyn," he told himself firmly.

Just as he said it, a monster came around the corner.

It was so large that, at first, Henwyn did not understand that it was a living creature. It looked more as if a small building with lighted windows was pushing its way through the tunnel towards him. Then he realized that the lighted windows were horn-paned lanterns, mounted on straps and harnesses which criss-crossed a blunt, furry head and powerful shoulders. By their light Henwyn saw the creature's huge, claw-fingered hands, its wet pink nose, its mouth opening to let out a gust of hot, foul breath and a terrible shrill cry: "Eeeeeeeeee!"

"Eeeeee!" went Henwyn in return. When he was safe at home he always felt pretty brave, and found

it easy to imagine himself fighting off monsters, but when actual monsters needed fighting he tended to feel much less certain of himself. He fumbled his sword out of its sheath, and the creature's tiny, half-blind eyes caught the flash of lantern light reflecting from the blade. It halted, a monstrous thing in mole-shape, snuffling at Henwyn's unfamiliar scent.

Henwyn glanced behind him to where the tunnel disappeared around another bend into shadow. He wanted to run from the terrible beast, but how could he know there was not something worse waiting for him in the darkness there? Besides, he did not want to stray too far from the hole he had dropped in through. What if that was the only exit from this horrid burrow, and he never found his way back to it?

Gruff voices were shouting. He looked back at where the monster mole crouched, and saw more lamps appearing, held by small figures who came scrambling over the creature's head or pushing past its flanks. Some had hold of chains attached to its harness and were tugging at them, trying to make it move forward again.

"What's afoot?" Henwyn heard one shout.

"Summat's frighted the diremole!"

"There's summat blockin' the way!"

"Roof fall?"





"Tunnel worm, maybe?"

"Nay, it's a person!"

The lantern bearers strode forward, through the vapour of their monster's hot breath. They were short and stocky and most had bushy beards. They wore close-fitting caps of iron or leather; dirty tunics; big boots; broad belts stuffed with tools. None of them was more than three feet tall.

Dwarves! thought Henwyn wonderingly. They were as common in the olden tales as goblins, but he'd never heard of anyone who'd met them in real life. Still, he'd never expected to meet goblins or trolls or giants in real life and he had run into all of those things since he arrived at Clovenstone, so he was not too astonished. And unlike goblins, trolls and giants, dwarves were not meant to be evil; in the stories they were always honest, sturdy creatures; swift to anger, maybe, but skilled smiths and miners.

Of course! That was it! He had fallen into a dwarf mine!

He lowered his sword and said with a smile, "Greetings, noble dwarves! I'm Henwyn of Adherak!"

The dwarves held up their lamps to shine on Henwyn's face. Their leader came closer. A candle was mounted on his leather skullcap and strands of wax had run down from it to hang like icicles from

his bushy eyebrows and the rims of his big ears. He glowered up at Henwyn.

"This ain't a *person*," he growled. "It's a dirty *bigling*!"

The pie was very good. It was one of those meat pies with a whole egg baked into it – by magic, it seemed to Skarper (who didn't know much about cooking). He ate it and then looked at the other pie and wondered if that one had an egg in it too. He decided to take a few bites, just to find out.

It did, and he was just wiping the last of the crumbs from his mouth with the back of a paw when a word came into his mind. *Dwarves*. It was a long time since he'd read it, but he knew it had appeared in a few of the ancient scrolls he'd read in the bumwipe heaps at Clovenstone. The dwarves had been miners, dwellers in the deep places under the mountains. They had harnessed the great diremoles of the north to dig their tunnels for them, and they'd been fierce enemies of goblinkind, fighting terrible battles against them in the dark beneath the fells. And dwarf mines had chimneys, in order to let smithy-smoke out and fresh air in.

"Henwyn!" he shouted, leaping to his feet with a pie-y belch and scampering downhill. "Henwyn!"

*

"A bigling," growled the dwarf again. Behind him, his companions pulled out knives and hammers, and hefted pickaxes. "A sneaky bigling, come sneaking down here to spy on us. Where are your friends, bigling? Or did you come alone?"

"Quite alone," said Henwyn, sensing that these short strangers did not like him. "And I'm not a spy. Why would I want to spy on you? Whatever you're up to down here with your giant mole, it's your business, not mine. I'll be on my way. . ."

Just then it began to rain small stones and clots of soil. "Roof fall!" shouted some of the dwarves, scrambling backwards. But it was not the roof falling, only Skarper. With a shrill cry of "Bumcakes!", he dropped through the same hole that Henwyn had made and landed on top of the dwarf chief.

There was a moment of confusion: shouts of pain and anger; dwarves milling about; lanterns dropped. The giant mole went into a panic again and the dwarves who held it were almost dragged off their feet as they fought to control it. Shadows leaped madly up the tunnel walls. As Skarper scrambled off the dwarf chief, some of the other dwarves saw him and started to shout, "Goblin! Goblin!"

"He's all right," Henwyn tried explaining. "He's with me!"





That didn't seem to help.

"Run!" shouted Skarper.

Henwyn looked up helplessly at the little scrap of sky that showed above them, like a torn blue cloth stuck to the tunnel roof. There was nothing for it, though: Skarper was shoving him urgently along the tunnel into the dark, and behind Skarper all the dwarves who were not busy trying to control the skittish mole were surging forward, raising their picks and shovels menacingly.

So Henwyn did as he was told and ran, following Skarper along the twists and dips of the mysterious tunnel, through darkness so deep that it was like being blindfolded. Luckily for Henwyn he was young and sure-footed and his legs were long. As for Skarper, running away was what Skarper did best. They soon outpaced the stocky, panting dwarves.

The tunnel branched, and branched again. The sounds of pursuit grew faint, but they ran on, until they began to hear other sounds, and a red glow filled the tunnel ahead of them. They slowed, peeked cautiously around a corner, and looked out over an immense cavern, into which a dozen other tunnels opened. Scores of dwarves were at work there, attacking the rocky walls with picks and drills, climbing rickety wooden ladders to reach

higher levels, loading shiny rocks into huge baskets. More of the gigantic moles were busy there too, some dragging the filled baskets away on sleds, some with heavy iron shovel blades lashed to their blunt heads, bulldozing heaps of spoil aside. The whole scene was lit by the glow of an enormous forge which had been built at the far end of the cavern. Dwarf children were feeding dried mole droppings into the furnace, while strong-armed dwarf smiths hammered out new pickaxe blades, drill bits and iron hats.

Luckily the dwarves were far too busy to glance up and see Henwyn and Skarper gaping at them, and the din of their work drowned out the two companions' voices.

"There are loads of them!" said Henwyn. "I thought dwarves lived in the far north. What are they doing under the Bonehills?"

"They must be on the move," said Skarper. "I 'spect it's all this new magic, mucking things up again. Come on, we'd better find our way out and get back to Clovenstone. Princess Ned should hear about these diggers. I'm not sure what they're up to but they're bad news, I think."

"Good idea," said Henwyn. "I shall be glad to see the sky again. And all this running about in burrows

has given me an appetite. Once we're safe away from this mine we'll stop and eat those pies."

"Pies?" said Skarper guiltily. "Ah. . . There's bad news about those, too."

