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Highwayman

A Novel of corona

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God's Year 74

(Seventy-four Years After the Death of Blessed Abelle)

Harkin cracked the whip with an urgency wrought of sheer terror. His companion and friend slumped at his side, a spear buried deep in his side, bright blood flowing freely and staining his brown woolen tunic a dark and ugly red-black.

“Come on, run!” Harkin urged his team, and he cracked the whip hard again. He couldn't help but consider the terrible irony of it all. He had been taken from the front lines of battle – a war that had been raging since he was a very young man – and given the seemingly safe job of driving Prince Yeslnik about the growing lands of Greater Delaval. And now this, to be caught and killed on the road!

The horses dug in and pulled hard, but an undeniable pull dragged on the coach. “Orrin, you hold on!” Harkin cried to his injured friend, and he shifted his hands just enough so that he could pull back the slumping man, who seemed as if he would tumble from his seat.

Harkin glanced all around frantically; he heard Yeslnik Delaval shout out, though the words were lost in the tumult. He heard Yeslnik's wife Olym scream in fear. When the coach hit one straight and flat stretch of the tree lined road in the southeastern reaches of Pryd Holding, the driver dared to stand quickly and look back. Sure enough, the coach was dragging a tangle of logs. “Ah, you cunning beasts,” he lamented of the powries, for the bloody-capped dwarves had hit the coach with some sort of grapnel, affixed by rope to the log tangle.

Harkin's mind tumbled through the possibilities. He knew that he had to do something; it was only a matter of time before those bouncing logs caught on a tree or some other obstacle at

the side of the road and either stopped the coach or, more likely, tore it apart. He couldn't go back to free the grapnel while they were charging along, of course, and he couldn't stop and hope that these were simple robbers.

He knew the truth. He had seen the bright red berets. He had heard the grating voices and the guttural shouts. These were powrie dwarves, and powries didn't offer quarter. Powries knew no mercy.

"Come on, then," he called again to his straining team, and he cracked the whip once more.

Good fortune got them through the straight run without any serious entanglements, but Harkin knew that he had come to the end of the clear road. Now the flagstone path twisted and wound about many stones and trees, down into dells and sharp-cornered turns over ridge tops. "Bah!" he snorted in dismay, and he pulled back hard on the reins, bringing the coach to an abrupt halt. Before the wheels had even fully stopped turning, Harkin looped the reins about the bench seat and leaped to the ground. "Stay inside, my Prince!" he cried to Yeslnik as he ran past the door's open window and around the back of the coach.

He followed the rope to the grapnel, and found it secured underneath the carriage. Cunning powries, indeed! They hadn't hit the coach with a spear or anything like that, but rather, had set a trap in the road to hook it from beneath.

Harkin started to bend and even dropped to one knee, instinctively starting under the frame to free it, but the mere thought of crawling on the ground, so vulnerably, with powries closing about, had him gasping for breath. Instead, he drew out his short bronze sword and began hacking at the rope with all his might.

“You fool! What are you doing?” cried the Prince, coming forth from the coach, leaning out and hanging on the now-opened door. “Why have you stopped? I am the nephew of the Laird of Delaval!”

“We cannot go, my liege,” poor Harkin tried to explain. He hacked with all his strength, and finally the rope snapped. Yeslnik saw it and cried out in dismay, and then he saw a spear come arcing in, to hit the coach right near to Harkin.

“Get back in, I beg you, my liege!” Harkin cried, and this time Yeslnik didn’t argue.

Harkin scrambled about the coach and back into his seat. If he could just get them moving...

The reins were not there.

Harkin’s gaze went forward, to the nervous team, and there, between them, he saw his doom. For there stood a powrie, a smile on its leathery and wrinkled face, white teeth showing behind the long hairs of an overgrown red mustache.

“Ye lookin’ for these, me lord?” the dwarf asked, and he held up and jiggled the reins.

“Aye, but ain’t yer horses tired from yer stupid run?”

Harkin could hardly draw breath as he heard other dwarves moving about the sides of the coach, for the powries’ reputation surely preceded them. They were not here for treasure, other than human blood.

The dwarf in front dropped the reins to the ground and drew forth a long and curving knife with a wicked serrated edge. “If ye don’t fight, it won’t hurt as much.”

Harkin’s mind whirled – he didn’t want to die, certainly not like this! “Wait!” he cried as he heard the coach creak behind him and knew that a dwarf was beginning to climb. “I got

something for you. Something that'll get you all the blood and money you want!"

The dwarf in front held up his hand, and the one creeping near to Harkin stopped.

The poor driver heard the coach door open then, and a moment later, he heard Yeslnik's wife scream, followed by a protest from Yeslnik himself.

"Aye, that one," Harkin improvised. "He's noble blood, and his Laird'll pay whatever you want to get him back. Money and people – it won't matter to Laird Delaval, as long as he gets the safe return of his precious nephew."

"Hmmm," the dwarf in front mused.

Harkin could hear more movement and shouting from behind, but no sounds of battle yet joined. The dwarves were waiting, he believed, and prayed.

"What're ye thinking, Turgol?" asked the one in front. "Ransom? That be our game?"

"Nah," said the dwarf to the side and behind Harkin, and the man nearly fainted when he realized how close this second one actually was to him. "Lots o' work in that, and we're to rile up a Laird? Nah, kill 'em now, I say. Three humans to brighten me cap."

The dwarf in front began to nod and to smile all the wider, and he opened his mouth to speak.

"O, wrong answer," came a voice from the side, and up above, a human voice and not the grumbling chant of a powrie. Harkin and the dwarves turned that way, their gazes drifting up, up, up, to the higher boughs of a wide oak tree.

And there he sat on a limb, a smallish man dressed head to toe in a shiny black outfit of some exotic fabric. He wore a cap, flopped over to one side and rather like a powrie beret, except that this one was black as night, and a mask covered more than half his face, with holes

cut out for the eyes.

“If it was just a business deal – a good one – then perhaps I could have wandered along on my way without interfering,” the surprising man said. “But since you insist...”

As he finished he shoved off and came flying down at the coach.

“By the gods!” Harkin cried, and he fell back, throwing his arm up in front of him defensively, expecting the man to go crashing right through the coach.

The powrie behind Harkin shrieked as well, but instead of retreated, lifting up a heavy battle-axe.

The dwarf roared and swung as the man descended, trying to bat him right out of the air, but amazingly, the axe whipped past below the falling man, as if he had somehow slowed his fall, and he didn't crash through the coach, as he surely should have after falling from so far on high, but rather, touched down firmly right behind the swinging blade. He fell as he hit, absorbing the impact with a forward roll angled to the right, again following the swing of the axe, and he came up all tangled with the dwarf – at least as far as the dwarf was concerned. For the man's balance as he rolled fast up to his feet remained perfect, and his hands caught the dwarf in a completely twisted stance, so that when this strange fellow continued his forward movement, leaping from the coach, the dwarf had no choice but to go flying away with him.

Again the man landed in perfect and easy balance as the powrie crashed down hard beside him, sprawling out on the ground, its axe flying away.

“Not a graceful sort, now is he?” the man asked a pair of powries standing before him, their mouths agape. He jabbed his elbow back as he spoke, for he had cleverly landed himself right beside the open coach door, and a simple shove from that elbow had it swinging closed. “I

beg your pardon, Prince Yeslnik, but if you would please remain inside while I finish my business out here.”

The two dwarves recovered, roared and charged, and the man lifted off the ground, springing a forward somersault right over them. He touched down in a short run, turning about as he went and drawing from his back the most magnificent sword that any of them, man or dwarf, had ever seen. Its blade gleamed of silver, shining in the morning light, and tracings of delicate vines ran the length of it. Most wondrous of all was the hilt, all silver and ivory, and carved into the head of a hooded serpent.

The powries swung about and rushed right in, one thrusting a spear, the other stabbing with its own sword, a weapon of bronze.

Two quick, sharp raps, turned both those weapons aside, and the man retracted his blade to his right, spun it end-over-end suddenly in his hand, and then it disappeared behind him.

The foolish dwarves kept coming.

Out from the left now stabbed the sword, forward, a quick tap to the side to push the dwarf’s sword harmlessly wide, and then ferociously ahead to stab the powrie in the chest. The man came forward as the same time, turning at the last second so that the thrusting spear flashed past. He caught that spear shaft in his free right hand as he stepped closer to the dwarf, tearing free his sword from its falling comrade. Too close to use the weapon effectively, the man tossed the sword up into the air, and predictably, the powrie’s eyes followed its ascent.

The man hit the powrie with three short left jabs. Short but amazingly hard, and the dwarf staggered back a step, dazed.

The man caught the sword as it dropped and flashed out his hand, smashing the pommel

into the dwarf's face. He had to turn, then, as another dwarf came at him, and as he did, he flipped the sword in his hand and stabbed straight out behind him, plunging the magnificent blade through the stunned dwarf's chest so forcefully that its tip exploded right out through the creature's back.

The man let go of the blade again, his hands moving in a side-to-side blur before him to confuse the next attacker. Somehow those flashing hands avoided the stabbing knife, and the man's right hand came across, palm slapping the blade out to the dwarf's right, while the lightning fast fighter brought his other hand under the dwarf's arm and backhanded it out even further. He never broke the touch of his hand against the dwarf's forearm, though, and he rolled his arm over suddenly, grabbing the dwarf's arm by the upper wrist and pulling it across between them. His free hand snapped over the dwarf's and he bent hard at the wrist, overextending the dwarf's ligaments and bringing a howl of pain. The man pressed on, a sudden and brutal jerk that took the strength from the dwarf's fingers, and he slid his hand down, pulling free the knife.

"You only get one chance," he said, throwing the dwarf's arm out wide, retracting his right hand, with the knife, while he slapped his opponent across the face with his free hand, once and then with a backhand, grabbed the dwarf by the hair and forcefully tugged straight out.

The dwarf growled and started to punch, but his momentum was backwards, his head driving right over.

Presenting the man with a clear line to an exposed throat.

The knife slid in, turning the growl to a gurgle, and the man pushed on.

The dwarf wasn't punching anymore, but was frozen in place, staring up at the morning sky, its arms out to the sides and twitching.

The man was already gone anyway, leaving the dagger in place.

Another dwarf pursued, with several others circling as if to cut the man off, for it seemed as if their enemy was unarmed now.

The man remedied that as he came upon the dwarf still skewered with his sword, kneeling in the dirt, quite dead. The man dove into a sidelong roll right over the dwarf, catching the sword's hilt with his leading hand. When he landed on his feet on the other side, with two powries rushing up before him, he had sword in hand and put it to sudden and devastating work, launching a series of short back and forth slashes before him, striking at their weapons in succession. Somewhere in the side-to-side blur, he struck out, once and then again, and one of the powries staggered back, bright blood erupting from its shoulder and chest.

Now the man's sword went into a tight circular motion about the remaining dwarf's extended sword. He had the dwarf watching the dazzling display, he knew from its spinning eyes.

A fatal mistake.

The sword went around, then changed its angle inside the dwarf's blade, and with a sudden shove and a cry that came from somewhere deep inside, the man threw the dwarf's weapon out wide, stiffened the fingers on his free hand as he stepped forward, and thrust that free hand straight out, his fingers driving through the powrie's windpipe.

The dwarf shuddered and staggered back, all its body jerking in death spasms.

"Who shall be next?" the man asked, spinning about and bringing his sword into a series of left and right diagonal cuts.

But none of the remaining dwarves wanted anything to do with this one! They were off

and running, scattering to every direction.

The man laughed and looked to the coach, where the Prince of Delaval was peeking out and slowly opening the door, and where the unnerved driver was staring at him from above.

“They always run when half are down,” the man calmly explained. “If only they would play it out to the end, they might find me growing tired.”

As he finished, he launched into a series of leaps, twists and strikes with his sword, a barrage that would have likely taken down any ten enemies standing too near.

“Or perhaps not,” the man said with a salute.

“Who are you?” Prince Yeslnik asked.

“My reputation has not preceded me? I am wounded.”

“The Highwayman,” Harkin said.

“Why, thank you for that,” the man in black replied. “I would hate to think that all of my hard work these past months had been for naught.”

Prince Yeslnik slid out of the coach. “Your reputation does not do you justice, my friend.”

“Why, thank you for that.”

“You will be rewarded,” the Prince stammered. Behind the Prince, the Highwayman could see his female companion staring out at him from the coach, leaning toward him eagerly.

So predictable a reaction from these “fair” ladies of court.

“And pardoned,” the excited Prince went on, “for any crime of which you have been accused. You will live the life of a wealthy and free man! From one end of Honce to the other.”

“As if that was yours to give,” said the man. “Tis a big place.”

“Then in Delaval Holding at least,” Yeslnik said. “You may walk freely in Delaval.”

“I have no desire to travel to Delaval.”

“Well...”

“But a reward does sound fine, and so I will take it....now.”

Yeslnik seemed unsettled by that, but he composed himself quickly and turned to the packs tied on the back.

“A hundred silver coins, then,” Yeslnik offered.

“I prefer gold.”

The Prince glanced back at him, a momentary flash of anger betraying his true feelings.

“Gold, then, a hundred pieces.”

“Surely you have more than that. You did come to collect your uncle’s tithing from Pryd Holding, no doubt. You know – we both do – the blackmail Delaval exacts upon the people of Pryd to keep them free from the advances of Laird Ethelbert.”

Prince Yeslnik stood up very straight and steeled his jaw. “Name your price then.”

“Why, all of it, of course,” the Highwayman said.

The Prince scoffed.

“You see, I lied when I told the powrie that he gave the wrong answer. I agree with him! Taking you hostage for ransom would be a terrible choice.”

There was no missing the threat in those words, and Yeslnik’s bluster seemed to melt away.

“All of it,” the Highwayman repeated, “and be glad, stupid Prince, that I have no need for human blood. My mask is black, you see.”

He walked over past the Prince then, and right up to the woman who was hanging half in and half out of the coach. How her green eyes sparkled as he neared, and her breasts heaved with excitement.

He reached up as if to stroke her face.

And tore the bejewelled necklace from her neck. She gave a little shriek, lifted her hand over her tiny mouth and her eyelids batted as if she would swoon.

“Surely a beauty as profound as your own needs no baubles,” he said sweetly.

She stammered and tittered and the Highwayman glanced back at Prince Yeslnik, offering a look of pity.

“Such substance,” he said as he turned back to Lady Olym, masking his sarcasm beneath a voice that seemed husky with awe.

She sucked in her breath and brought her hand up before her mouth again, and this time, the Highwayman took a closer look at the shining emerald ring she wore. He took that hand in his own and kissed it.

Then he took the ring.

The woman didn't know whether to protest or to swoon, obviously, and behind him, the Highwayman heard the growing growls of Prince Yeslnik. He offered a salute, to one and then the other, then seemed to fly away, a great leap that brought him to the top of the coach. He glanced at the driver and his slumping companion, then moved over to closer inspect the wounded man.

The Highwayman closed his eyes and placed a hand on the wound. His focus brought warmth to his hand, and that warmth lent some healing to poor Orrin.

“You turn about and get him to Chapel Pryd,” the Highwayman instructed Harkin. “The brothers will help him – his wounds are not as grave as they seem.”

The man nodded stupidly.

The Highwayman bowed to him, turned about and bowed to Prince Yeslnik, then leaped again, even higher, to the low branches of the tree from which he had come.

In that flash of time, in a matter of only a few minutes, he had arrived, had rescued, had robbed, had healed, and was gone.