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Brackenstead

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Abstract

When the morrith trees started to thin and I no longer had to stoop and crawl, I nearly started weeping with relief. I'd been travelling through the Morrithwood for nearly five days, and all that was left of the rations for the journey there were a few scraps of deer jerky I'd been putting off eating.

Brackenstead

By

Myles Buchanan

When the morrith trees started to thin and I no longer had to stoop and crawl, I nearly started weeping with relief. I'd been travelling through the Morrithwood for nearly five days, and all that was left of the rations for the journey there were a few scraps of deer jerky I'd been putting off eating. As for the forest, well—morrith trees are pretty enough from a distance, hunched and gnarled and fairy-tale charming with their hollows and shadows, but try walking through them days on end, roots tripping you, morrith-needles attacking any exposed skin. All because Jerrin had decided Tourin Galad *had* to die in a remote northern village, that this was paramount to the rebellion's efforts. Probably more convenient to just ambush Galad's convoy a few miles outside the capital, I'd had the good sense to point out, but Jerrin shook his head before I'd finished speaking: I had missed his point.

"It's not enough to just kill him, Sora," he said. A few years ago we'd holed up in a system of caves just south of the Morrithwood, caves which seemed to exist for the specific purpose of amplifying Jerrin's overwrought speeches. "I want him toppling from a dais," he said. "I want a burst of blood in the morning air. I want the villagers to *see* it. To understand what we can do. What we *will* do. For them, for us. For the people of this land. You're the best we have, Sora, and—"

"All right, all right," I said. If you let him

get started with this sort of thing there was no slowing him down. "You don't need to sing me a ballad. I'm going to do it. Just don't expect me to be all smiles. Can I at least have a horse?"

Jerrin grimaced. "I'm afraid not. Dara and Terin are heading back for round two against the outland garrisons in just a few hours. And going on foot should be quicker anyway. Four days if you take it fast, and you'll have plenty of provisions. The main forest roads are clogged with Holorrom. Plus, isn't this exactly your kind of thing? It's right out of your gnomish storybooks. Journeys through the haunted forest. Quaint Morrithwood villages. And here I was thinking you'd be excited."

"Yeah, sure. It's the chapter about slogging through miles of identical wilderness I'd rather skip. Not to mention the chapter about getting searched at the gates and hanged in the village square."

Jerrin waved this aside. "Unimportant details," he said. Then he leapt up from his chair. "That reminds me—I have something for you." He produced a cloth bundle and slid it across the table to me. "Open it."

Inside was a shining silver crossbow.

"Dara picked it up during the raid. It's the latest Holorrom design. You can load four quarrels at once and fire them all in less than five seconds."

I picked it up and ran my hands over the chilled metal. "It's heavy," I said.

“Impractical.” But I couldn’t help smiling. “Less than five seconds?”

“Try it out if you don’t believe me.” He laughed. “Hellfire. I like you, Sora. I don’t think I say that enough.”

I could see the village gates in the distance and could hear the sounds of conversation on the main road, which was now only a quarter-mile or so to the west. The root-rutted forest floor became a soft path, and the morrith trees gave way to large oaks and laurels and thickets of rhododendrons with wide spaces of bright grass between them. I realized I was walking through the village’s quiet garden, and it reminded me so much of my old home that I had to stop for a moment and get myself together, putting my hands on my knees and looking down at a patch of flowering clover. Long before the days of the Holorrom, gnomes had made these gardens on the borders of each Morrithwood village, in the space between the tangled morriths and the first cottages. I used to run on similar paths with my little village friends, in a different village, long gone now.

Out from under the dense ceiling of branches the day felt warmer, and I remembered it was only the beginning of September. I’d lost some perspective under the morrith trees, done what Jerrin had warned against and ended up bound in memory. It was difficult not to think about a similar summer night, seven years ago, when I fled from a different quiet garden to the Morrithwood beyond while my old life burned. Not that I remembered much—I was eleven—just a lot of wind and rain, patches of coasting clouds overlaid with morrith branches. The glow of red where my village and family had been, quickly dimming as the fires ate through the straw and dried wood and the rain pounded it all down to soggy ash. The texture of twigs and moss through my moccasins. Of course I’d thought I’d seen

gnomes. It wasn’t hard to imagine them, with their white hair and crinkled faces and frail child’s bodies. I’d wanted to see them.

But no point in thinking about that now. What was this village even called? Something *stead*, like everything else in the north, but of course all I could think was Morstead, the name of my childhood village. I joined the convoy of wagons and carts and weathered woodsmen on the main road, the embankment of which was covered in layers of bracken. Ah yes. Brackenstead. How could I have forgotten?

Jerrin had been right—there was no security to speak of at the village gates. This was a good thing, since all I was carrying in the pack was a blanket, the Holorrom crossbow and ammunition pouch, and provisions for a speedy journey back south. Tough to piece together a cover story for that one. I looked at my feet apologetically and edged in behind a bickering family of five as the guards looked on. They were boys holding spears and wearing a few scraps of chain mail, just a few years older than me. I cringed at the thought of killing them, if things went sour, but there was no point in worrying about that now.

It hadn’t occurred to me how similar it would all be, the main market street and cobblestones and small thatched cottages. Even the late-summer breeze seemed gentle in its sorrowfulness, as if the world had some message for me. Yes, this is the way I used to think, as a spacey eleven-year-old. I took my time heading up the street. The merchants and food vendors were closing down their booths, making final transactions. One difference: tiny maple trees lined the streets, narrow trunks with smooth violet bark and leaves already full red. I watched two children climb through one of the trees, a boy and a girl so identical they had to be siblings. The boy looked back at me immediately and I looked away. The trees confused me. They

seemed too tidy and ornate. I wondered who had planted them and why.

“Raspberry tarts!” A short bearded man brandished a basket, and I was endeared in spite of myself. I shook my head but gave him a smile.

I found a room at one of the cheaper inns, which resembled an overlarge and misshapen cottage with a few extra levels crammed under its roof. But inside it was bigger and more popular than it seemed. The clamor of raised voices was overwhelming at first. Too many hours with no one but trees can fool you into thinking you’re the only person in the world.

The only room available was on the second floor. “Hope you don’t mind cozy,” the man behind the counter said.

“Not at all,” I told him. A few years before I would have only accepted a first-floor room facing the alley, with a window I could lock and easily open. What can I say? I’d grown careless in my old age.

At the bar I burned Jerrin’s funds on chicken and potatoes and gulped a mug of cheap woodsman’s beer, taking even breaths, my back turned to the other patrons. With nasty tangled hair and an unwashed face I figured I’d pass for a boy in the loose clothes I was wearing. My hope was to sip my drink, listen to the clash of happy voices and watch the sun get splintered apart by morrith trees, preferably without some off-duty village watchmen or (worse yet) earnest farm boy coming over to ask me where I was from. This plan really seemed to be working, and I was so spaced out that somehow I managed not to notice the hush that fell over the room and Tourin Galad himself, who sat down right next to me.

“Hello, young girl,” he said, not missing a beat. He was wearing a glittering silver mail shirt and a dark cloak. Like all the Holorrom his hair was black. By his face he couldn’t have been more than thirty-five, which

startled me a little. I’d been picturing an old man. And maybe if I hadn’t been caught up in nostalgia, hadn’t been sitting there piecing together details of a life there was no way for me to ever go back to, maybe then I would have had the good sense to dodge around the other patrons up to my room. I was tipsy enough that I probably could have bathed and fallen asleep reasonably quickly, woken in the morning ready to put the rapid-firing crossbow to use and get the hell out of there.

“Good evening, my lord,” I said. As soon as he broke eye contact I glanced behind him: two thickset silver-armored Holorrom, hands clasped in front of them. I wondered if they would sit me back down if I tried to leave.

“Aren’t you a little young for that?” Tourin Galad asked. He pointed to the half-full mug in front of me.

“I’m older than I look, my lord.” I offered. “Usually a bit cleaner, too. You’ll have to excuse me.”

Galad shook his head. “You don’t have to apologize. It’s not as if it’s exactly your choice.”

I knew his angle, of course. Tourin Galad had also been raised in a modest Morrithwood village, or so he claimed, and whenever he visited the smaller towns to make sure the woodsmen were thinking happy woodsmen thoughts and paying their exorbitant woodsmen’s taxes, he could be counted upon to buy some struggling pastoral type a warm meal at a local inn, or pay a wealthy family to treat a dewy-eyed orphan as their own. Easy enough to see through, you would think, but it seemed to work. If taxes were a little high, well, so what? There were orphans to feed. If the Alchemists Guild had to harvest a few more children than usual in a given year, well, at least Tourin Galad valued the life of the common man.

“Please pardon me, my lord,” I said, getting up from the stool. “I don’t want to

waste any more of your time.”

Galad reached out and took hold of my upper arm—not hard, but firmly enough that I couldn’t escape without doing something extravagant and cover-blowing, like breaking his wrist. “How about a loaf of wheat bread to share?” Galad said. “A young man I spoke with at the gates told me it’s delicious. But I doubt I could finish an entire loaf to myself.”

“Thank you, sir, but I just ate, and I couldn’t possibly—”

“Oh, none of that! You Brackenstead folk are far too unassuming. You’re hungry—so eat!”

“But my father says—”

“I’m sure your father taught you never to speak out of turn or ask for anything of a lord. But I’m offering this to you. There’s no shame in it. It is a lord’s gift.”

“If you insist, my lord. And thank you, very much.”

Why did I allow this to happen? I’m really not sure. Obviously this was nowhere near according to plan. I could picture the way Jerrin would lower his face into his hands when I told him about it, his incredulous laughter. Jerrin’s official protocol had me shooting Galad down the following morning, during his formal address. Hooded and cloaked, I’d be climbing back down to an empty alleyway, ditching the crossbow and rejoining the crowd while his bodyguards were still picking up the pieces. Then it was back into the forest and away. That was the ideal. But the inn was livening again, heads turning, people murmuring. I made some effort to shake my hair over the profiles of my face, but it wasn’t going to do any good. I’m still not sure why I didn’t run. You’d think I could have figured something out. I should have.

After the barmaid set a mug of beer in front of Tourin Galad and disappeared into the kitchen, he turned to me. “So, tell me about yourself,” he said. “How long have

you lived in Brackenstead?”

“Actually,” I said. “I’m not from Brackenstead.”

Tourin raised his eyebrows. I could see the exchange was already more complicated than he’d anticipated. “Not from Brackenstead,” he said. “Then where?”

“Well,” I said. “My village was a lot like this one. Morstead, it was called. It even had a Quiet Garden. But people came and burned it down when I was six.”

Tourin’s face clouded and I threw him my best look of sorrowful innocence. “I’m sorry to hear that,” he eventually said.

The barmaid came back with the wheat bread and a swirl of butter in a small ceramic dish. Plainly something was the matter with me. Why not a different northern village that the Holorrom *hadn’t* put to the torch? Why not a nice, boring summary of my piteous years as an orphan waif?

“I wondered,” Galad said. “Your speech is too proper for a beggar child’s.” He sipped his beer. “I suppose you lost your whole family.”

“I think so,” I said. “I never saw them after.”

He knew the truth, of course, even if he didn’t know I did. My village had been one of the few in the Morrithwood to show any real organized resistance. There were rebels everywhere, of course, mothers and fathers who picked up knives and brittle heirloom swords when the Alchemists’ Guild came for their children, isolated dissenters who could be shot down and hanged. But once it became clear there was real organization in Morstead, the Holorrom stopped bothering to single people out, didn’t even try to take the children they’d wanted so much. They simply arranged themselves around the perimeter of the village and sent flaming quarrels into the buildings and the people who came out of them. It surprised me how quickly things could be burned, how readily

my whole life had flamed and sparked and gone dark.

“And what have you done with yourself since?”

“Oh, not very much,” I said. “I go from place to place. I beg and find food where I can. Today I got enough extra to come to the inn. Mostly people are nice to me.”

“Mostly,” Tourin Galad repeated. He’d been frowning down at his plate but he looked up at me now. “Can’t be easy. Living day by day. I grew up in a Morrithwood village too, you know. Twenty, maybe thirty miles west. We used to explore the forest in the summer.

“We?”

“Just me and my friends. You know, children you fall in with because they’re your age in a small town.”

The hearth against the opposite wall had been built up and a group of Brackenstead villagers stood around it, firelight leaping between their bodies. Absurdly I felt content. I guess it was nice to talk about something other than filling some Holorrom dignitary up with crossbow quarrels or garroting a corrupt master of coin. And it obviously beat sulking under a bunch of morrith trees. Already the long hike to Brackenstead felt unreal, swallowed into the murk where all my memories seemed to go. I thought about the night before, trying to fall asleep, watching through a patchwork of dark branches and needles as a low moon slid across the sky, and it felt just as distant as everything else. I thought of the clover patch near my old house, the way the little flowers had seemed to glow in the hours before dark, and some playmate of mine who had loved them. I couldn’t remember her name.

I sipped the last of my drink. “Where are they now?”

“My old friends? I have no idea, truly. Still there, I would guess. Living their little lives. I haven’t been back since.”

“Since you were taken, you mean.”

Galad looked at me evenly. “You should be careful,” he said. “That kind of talk won’t do you any favors. You’ve lived long enough to have figured that out, I would think.”

“I’m sorry, my lord,” I said. “I forgot myself. It’s just—the way the other children talk. You hear things, and—”

He raised a hand. “You don’t need to apologize. Really. It makes sense. It’s how I would talk too, if I knew only what you knew. It’s a problem of information—you’re smart enough to understand that. You only see what must be paid. You don’t see the good that comes of it because it happens out of sight.”

“Not all of it,” I hazarded, and smiled at him. I figured I may as well cover my tracks, perform a little more of the clueless grateful orphan. “I would have gone hungry tonight if not for you. You’re doing a kind thing right now.”

He grimaced, glanced over his shoulder. “Hardly,” he said, and his voice seemed to change. “So I bought you a little food on the kingdom’s penny. It might seem like a generous act to you, I guess, but...”

“What is it?” I asked. I guess I figured I was just having fun. But I knew time was getting away from me. With every minute my cover story seemed flimsier, and my pack, wedged just below me, began to look more and more like what it was: a death sentence, if anyone found out what was inside.

Something of this must have shown on my face. “Is this how you normally talk to lords?” Galad asked.

“I don’t usually talk to lords at all, my lord.”

He laughed, looked away and then back at me, and finally gave me what seemed like an unwarranted smile. “Right,” he said. “Yet here we are.”

“Drinking the inn’s cheapest beer.”

“The inn’s cheapest and oddly delicious

beer,” Galad said, still looking at me. For a moment I wondered if he was going to excuse himself, but then he said, “Two more, please!” raising his hand, and the barmaid was taking the empty glasses away.

“You just need to drink more woodsmen’s beer,” I found myself saying. “They must be doing something bad to it in the capital.”

“It’s wine country up there, I’m afraid,” he said. “They disdain this stuff, though obviously they’ve never tried it.” He lipped foam from the top of the mug. “It all just rests on pretension.”

“I wouldn’t know, my lord.”

He laughed. “I suppose you wouldn’t. But I know you’d hate it.”

“You know?”

“Oh, you might be impressed at first. The flowers and fountains and the buildings polished till you can practically see your own hellstained reflection in them. But it’s fake, all of it. The buildings. The people. The wine you have to drink. You’d see through it in a moment.”

Finally I understood what was happening, the thing between us making everything seem so strange. He wanted me. It was obvious now—his shifted posture, the newly self-conscious youth in his features, the hope in his eyes. I had the impulse to giggle. Torchlight fluttered in the windows and patrons streamed into the inn, bellowing and laughing. I felt a cool gust of evening air. When I straightened in my chair I was startled by the heavy throb of alcohol, glimpsed Galad’s bodyguards in the corner of my eye and almost jumped. I had actually forgotten they were there. It was time to go. “My lord,” I said. “I really should be—”

“I was there, you know,” Galad muttered.

Something lurched in me. “You were where?”

“I squired for Morth Lowin. The general who led the attack on your village. If I’m thinking of the right one, anyway. I was just a

boy, younger than you are. Fourteen, I think I was. I’d never seen so much fire.”

He sipped his beer, looking down. “I didn’t do anything. Nothing other than put on Lowin’s armor and saddle his horse. And then guard him as...as it happened. There wasn’t—”

“There wasn’t much to do, was there?” I said. “Can’t have been a very challenging battle for the Holorrom. For us, though...” I looked at him. “Well. There was quite a bit of fire.”

“I wouldn’t have done things that way. It was unnecessary. Even Lowin looked a little pale. But I was fourteen.”

“Right. You said.”

I imagined how it must have looked from a distance, the first quarrels cutting down the night watchmen, the next striking straw and thatch. Faint smell of smoke in the night air, cries of alarm then terror then pain. A rising perimeter of flame.

He started to say something more, but a big red-faced man shouldered his way up to the bar and stepped between us. “You’ll pardon me, lords and ladies,” he bellowed. Apparently he didn’t realize who he was talking to. Galad’s bodyguards took the man by the arms and pulled him back. “You aren’t to stand between them,” one of them said. The man twisted in their grip, indignant, and I swept my pack from the floor and put the sole of my boot into the nearest guard’s hamstring, just above the greaves. The three men toppled into Galad and I ran for the door. Someone put a meaty hand on my shoulder and I threw an elbow behind me. There was a grunt of pain and the hand released me.

It was a busier night than any I could remember from Morstead. I walked quickly up the main street for a block or two, the miniature maples glowing in the torchlight, then dipped down a side street toward the village’s edge. The torchlight and voices

grew faint, and I wondered if they were produced somehow by the same receding source. I tucked myself into the shadow of a doorway and took a few minutes to get myself together. My heart was still going like crazy and it was hard to keep from laughing out loud. Galad, the lovestruck village boy. Galad, who'd been on the verge of inviting me back to his quarters to bathe and spend the night with him. I imagined him as an awkward fourteen-year-old, watching as the flames leapt up in Morstead.

After a few minutes I got to my feet and followed an alley toward the Quiet Garden. The guard patrolling the Garden's edge looked tired, moved along his route with a stoop. I slipped past him without slowing down. By now I figured things had calmed down at the inn. The man who had scuffled with Galad's bodyguard was fine, I figured—they didn't want a big ugly scene, not on the eve of his address. And Galad himself? Well, he was maybe a bit confused, probably irritated and a little disappointed, but, well. Orphans could be unpredictable, flighty. Anybody knew that.

I thought of the elder days, when white-haired gnomes had walked the paths, sung under the trees and rhododendrons and somehow managed not to get bored out of their minds. I walked the ruined paths, patches of disintegrated cobblestones just visible beneath the lichen and fallen leaves. I could still hear the voices of the villagers, the low hum of it, drifting. Already my presence had been forgotten.

I remembered being able to see my own house from the Quiet Gardens of Morstead, a mid-sized cottage at the village's edge. In the late afternoon my house always looked magical, my life magnified and sparkling in just the way I'd always wanted it to be. There was another girl who had used to go with me. We'd run down the paths, try to climb the

rock-frozen stumps of trees. When it was time for us to go, the last light would touch clover in the overgrown grass and make it seem to glow. "It's the clover hour!" this friend of mine would say, and I never understood what she really meant by it. She sort of sang it out, but sometimes it seemed like she was asking a question, as if she wanted to stay longer in the garden and was waiting for me to say that I did too. But we never did. By nightfall a part of me was ready to go back home. I wasn't sure what more there was for us out there.

Following what was left of the path I found a group of rhododendrons spaced apart in a clearing, leaves and the twists of their branches making shadows on the starlit grass. Their blossoms were already wilted, like the flowers knew autumn was on the way, but the leaves were green. Soon there would be sleet and snow, even in the beginning of autumn, and the leaves would wilt. I thought about ducking under the rhododendrons and spidering through their branches, climbing from one to the next like a squirrel, the way I had with that friend of mine. Her hair had been bright blonde, I remembered, nearly white by the end of the afternoon. I touched the bark of one of the rhododendrons limbs but it didn't climb. It would have been ridiculous.

I moved on. The Quiet Garden was ending, giving way to the close-packed morrith trees I'd just escaped earlier in the afternoon. I spread my cloak beneath the last laurel tree, sat down and took the rapid-firing crossbow from my pack. I thought silver was a good color for a weapon, and I liked how it gleamed in the dimness. I took four quarrels from the ammunition pouch and set them beside the crossbow. I lay back and looked up at the thin shadows of the leaves to wait for morning.