



The SAVAGE CAVES

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Prologue... The huge enchanted mace smashed into the side of the little goblin's head hard enough to send teeth riding a spray of blood through the quivering shreds of its ruined cheek. The goblin's name was Rvnj, and he fell to the cave floor in a wet heap.

Tzrg held his breath, eyes glued to the enormous hobgoblin who had just killed Rvnj for sneezing. The enormous hobgoblin had an equally enormous name: Rezrex. It was a name that was hard for goblins to say, just like it was hard for goblins to resist him.

Rezrex opened his wide mouth and laughed silently. His chest rose and fell in shuddering spasms. Tzrg and the other goblins could only watch in stunned, terrified silence. This went on for a long time, and all the while Tzrg forced himself not to make eye contact with any of his fellow goblins. He knew they were looking at him, waiting for him to do something, hoping he would put an end to this mission, which they all knew was a bad idea. Some of them were maybe even hoping he would do something about Rezrex—kill him or something. Of course, such a thing was impossible.

Rezrex was in charge because Rezrex decided to be in charge, and if anyone had anything to say about it, they would join Rvnj in a bleeding heap on a cave ledge, just like Rvnj joined Fkfk, Mrwk, and Nfjt who had been killed by Rezrex in the few days after the hobgoblin had first arrived in the caves of the Stonedeep Tribe.

When Rezrex stopped laughing he narrowed his bulging eyes and sneered, holding one long, thick finger in front of his lips and hefting the mace. The weapon was the most beautiful thing Tzrg had ever seen, and he had trouble keeping his eyes off it. It was made of half a dozen different shiny metals Tzrg didn't recognize. It didn't glow or burst into flames or conjure ghosts or anything, but it looked like it must be magical, so all the goblins just assumed it was. Rezrex seemed fine with that assumption.

Tzrg joined the other goblins in nodding their understanding and promise to Rezrex—they'd be quieter for the rest of the mission. Rezrex must have believed them, since he didn't kill anyone else, just waved them up into the dark shaft that twisted farther and farther away from Stonedeep territory. The shaft was taking them straight up to the home of the Cavemouth Tribe.

The goblins, strung together on ropes made from hive spider silk, had followed Rezrex a long, long way up the shaft. The hobgoblin came to a stop well over eighteen feet below the Border Sink, which marked a sort of no-goblin's-land between the Stonedeep and Cavemouth tribes. Rezrex turned and caught Tzrg's eye. He waved and pointed up, then flashed three fingers. Tzrg knew that if he pretended he didn't understand, which was his first impulse, Rezrex would kill him and try one of the other goblins. He made himself not sigh and stepped quietly up toward the hobgoblin, grabbing two goblins he knew to be good dark-fighters as he passed them. They approached Rezrex, and the hobgoblin swung aside, waving them on into the darkness ahead.

As they passed, Tzrg couldn't help but be amazed at the size of the hobgoblin. Rezrex was impressive, indeed. Twice as tall as the tallest goblin Tzrg had ever seen, Rezrex outweighed any goblin by more like three times. His arms—all muscle crisscrossed with bulging veins under his rough, hairy skin—were as big around as Tzrg's waist. His skin was darker than Tzrg's, who was the same dull orange as the rest of his tribe. Rezrex looked more red than yellow, with dark reddish-brown fur along his forearms, chest, and jaw line. His face wasn't quite as flat as Tzrg's, his nose thinner and more defined, his ears still pointed but smaller. Tzrg had heard that hobgoblins looked like a cross between a goblin and a human, but since Tzrg had never seen a human, he couldn't be sure if that was true or not.

Rezrex's clothes weren't too much better than Tzrg's, mostly

animal hides and leathers mixed with stolen or found items. Rezrex wore pieces of what must have been armor. The idea of that fascinated Tzrg. The hobgoblin could be hit and not get wounded.

But it was the hobgoblin's eyes that Tzrg found most unsettling. They were smaller than any goblin's but shone with an evil intelligence that scared Tzrg as much as the mace did.

Rezrex scowled at Tzrg, who realized he'd been staring at the hobgoblin. Tzrg hurried off before his face was smashed in. The two goblins he'd brought with him, Nlnz and Frsj, were smart enough not to look at Rezrex. They just moved past him as quickly and as quietly as possible.

Tzrg knew why Rezrex had sent them forward. The hobgoblin must have heard something. Ahead of them the shaft narrowed to maybe seven feet in diameter and slanted at an angle that made climbing a whole lot easier. Considering that the Border Sink—a small crystal pool on a sharp-sided ledge fed by a cold waterfall from the surface—was just above them, it was surprisingly dry. The uneven floor turned up on each side to form natural shelves that ran along the length of the tunnel at about a goblin's height. The walls were smooth, layered with flowstone that made them slippery in spots. There were no sharp edges.

The shadows atop the shelves were deep—a good place to hide and set up an ambush. Tzrg, having never been this far from Stonedeep caves, didn't know if there were side passages leading out from the tops of the shelves. If there were, it would really be a perfect ambush point—you could throw a couple of javelins, and if things didn't go your way, you could get the hell out of there.

Tzrg tightened his grip on his javelin and pressed on, his ears twitching forward so he could hear better, his nose drawing in whatever stray scents might help, his eyes wide to see as deep into the shadows as he could. The three of them knew how to climb without making too much noise. Water was dripping somewhere

far above, and a nice juicy cave beetle scuttled along its way above his head. Tzrg resisted the temptation to eat it. The crunch of the bug's shell in his mouth might give them away.

Tzrg felt a hand on his arm and turned to see Frsj, who pointed to the shelf on the right side of the tunnel and nodded three times. Frsj had good eyes and an even better nose. Tzrg looked in the direction Frsj had pointed.

There was a sound like a female whispering, and Tzrg felt a breeze brush past his right arm. Another sound, a dull thump, followed quickly, and Tzrg turned to see a javelin protruding from Frsj's chest. Frsj was looking down at it with a confused expression. He didn't seem to be in any pain. He just hung from the rope he had tied around his waist at one end, and to Tzrg and Nlnz at the other.

Tzrg screamed two words: "*Bwlnk gbn!*"—an order to attack—and ran deeper into the tunnel as two more javelins swished past to clatter down the shaft behind him.

Nlnz followed close, almost tripping Tzrg just as they both saw the goblins hiding on the shelf. There were three of them, pressed into the shallow space on the side of the tunnel. They were hefting javelins, and without bothering to take the time to aim, Tzrg tossed his own javelin at the middle ambusher.

Tzrg's javelin went wide of its mark but sank into the shoulder of the goblin next to Tzrg's target. The enemy goblin squealed in pain and reached up to curl his fingers around the shaft of the javelin still sticking out of his shoulder. Nlnz's javelin clattered off the cave wall behind the middle goblin, who seemed confused and offended at being the obvious target of choice. It was nothing personal, of course, it was just that if you aim for the middle of three and miss, you might hit one of the other two. It was an old goblin tactic that had succeeded for Tzrg this time.

The first goblin in line lifted another javelin, and Tzrg jumped

at him. It wasn't something Tzrg was normally apt to do, but these were desperate times. Compared to the folly of the whole mission, jumping at an armed opponent who had the twin advantages of the high ground and familiar territory wasn't so foolish.

Tzrg wished he'd remembered to pull his dagger before he landed on the middle goblin. Instead, they started wrestling. Tzrg was lucky at least to the extent that the middle goblin didn't know how to wrestle either. They were all elbows and grunting. The added weight of Frsj on the end of his rope didn't help Tzrg.

The goblin on the right pulled the javelin out of his shoulder with a wet *pop!* and a high-pitched wail. Nlnz followed Tzrg's lead and jumped up onto the shelf as well. With javelin in hand, Nlnz managed to slip off the side of his opponent's guard, avoiding the ambusher's stab at him with the sharp javelin. Nlnz sank his own sharpened stick into the ambusher's throat. There was a gurgling sound, and the goblin died just as Tzrg managed to get his dagger free.

Tzrg pushed back against his opponent's face in order to get his arm in between them and stab the middle goblin. That saved Tzrg's life—the wounded ambusher jabbed between Tzrg and the middle goblin, obviously aiming at Tzrg. Instead, the already bloody javelin that once belonged to Tzrg found its mark in the side of Nlnz's face. It dug a deep, nasty, ragged furrow in Nlnz's dull yellow skin, and blood burst out of the wound. Nlnz made a deep, sick sound as he died.

Tzrg sliced through the spidersilk rope that joined him to his two dead friends, then he reached out and grabbed the javelin with his left hand and stabbed the middle goblin in the ribs with the dagger he held in his right. The dagger was a little rusty and not as sharp as it once was, but it was a fine weapon, made by elves and stolen by Tzrg's great-grandfather before Tzrg was born. It was the knife of the chief of the Stonedeep Tribe and had been carried by

Tzrg's ancestors for generations, until Rezrex came and made himself chief.

The middle goblin didn't die at first, but he stopped fighting. Tzrg took that time to slash out to his side, cutting the wounded goblin's throat so that a waterfall of blood washed over the shelf. The dead goblin released his grip on the javelin, and Nlnz's limp body fell away in the other direction.

Tzrg, still holding the javelin, slid backward off the shelf and called, "*Mjk nlvdv!*" to warn Rezrex and the other goblins of the falling bodies.

The middle goblin came with him, landing flat on his face while Tzrg managed to land on his feet.

Tzrg slid down a few feet and sheathed his dagger. He took the javelin in both hands and drove it into the Cavemouth goblin's back. The enemy goblin twitched once and was dead. The sight didn't please Tzrg. There was no going back now that Cavemouth blood had been spilled. There was a war on, and it was a war that no one but Rezrex wanted. Though he had accepted the fact that he wasn't as smart as Rezrex and so wasn't sure he'd ever understand why Rezrex would start a war with the Cavemouth Tribe, Tzrg was curious. The idea that a different hobgoblin, an enemy of Rezrex's, had taken over the Cavemouth Tribe had occurred to Tzrg. Then there was the idea that maybe Rezrex wanted the Stonedeep Tribe to have all the vast caves for themselves. Or maybe he was just setting the two goblin tribes against each other for fun, just to see who would win.

Working hard not to slip on the blood-slick stone, Tzrg turned back and was soon face-to-face with Rezrex. Tzrg met the hobgoblin's gaze for just a second before looking down. Rezrex barked out something in the hobgoblin language. Tzrg didn't understand that complex, strange tongue, and he wasn't sure if Rezrex was scolding or congratulating him. Tzrg just kept his mouth shut.

Rezrex laughed, pulled a young goblin warrior up, and waved him into the tunnel. A few more goblins followed, then Rezrex, the last couple goblins, and Tzrg took up the rear. As they passed him, Tzrg could see the fear and confusion on the faces of the goblins. They didn't know what Rezrex had in mind for them either, and they were afraid they were going to find out the hard way, as if they hadn't already.

Tzrg was no better with numbers than any goblin, but he was smart enough to count to eighteen. By his count, only three Cavemouth goblins were dead, and already, thanks to Rezrex, more than three Stonedeep goblins had spilled their lives on a cave floor for the hobgoblin's mysterious cause. Though both tribes had more than eighteen goblins, Tzrg was pretty sure that the Cavemouth Tribe was the bigger of the two.

Rezrex was sending them out to be killed, leaving fewer goblins back in the home caves to protect the females, the young, and the hive spider queen.

What was the most confusing part of the whole thing for Tzrg was the fact that the Stonedeep Tribe was as rich as Tzrg could imagine a goblin tribe being. They had a healthy, happy hive spider queen, who kept her drones obedient and plentiful. The goblins always had enough spider meat to eat, and the drones hunted and gathered cave beetles, blind fish, and other delicacies. The caves were secure, with no tunnels leading deeper and only one way up into Cavemouth territory. The Cavemouth Tribe provided a buffer against any incursions from the surface, and the Stonedeep Tribe stayed home, deep underground with their hive spiders, ate well, made little goblins, and took good care of their caves.

Tzrg, deep in thought, had let himself fall behind. When the first sounds of battle echoed around him from behind the Border Sink waterfall above, his blood ran cold. He stopped, listening to metal clang against metal, bones crack, goblins scream and die, and

Rezrex shout orders in his oddly accented Goblin. The sounds echoed in the tight confines of the shaft until they made Tzrg's ears ring. The goblin was sure he could hear the screams of females.

Tzrg took a deep breath, tightened his grip on his javelin, and joined the fray.



“We’ve made good time,” Regdar said, turning to look at Jozan. “The village should be just over this next hill, and we have a few hours of daylight left.”

The priest nodded.

“We could continue on,” Regdar suggested, “camp along the road.”

Jozan patted the neck of his dappled mare and smiled. “They warned me about you in Lianne,” the priest said.

Regdar felt his hackles raise. “They warned you about me, Father?”

Jozan coughed out a laugh and said, “They told me you liked to do things the hard way.”

“Did they?” Regdar asked.

He was not amused. Regdar didn’t think he chose one “way” or another. There was little to fear along the road west from the frontier town of Lianne to the city of New Koratia. How hard could one night outside the confining walls of a smelly old inn be? Regdar slowed his horse and looked over at the priest. Jozan’s polished

scale mail glinted in the sun, a heavy mace—a real weapon, Regdar was pleased to note—hung from the side of his saddle. Around his neck, strung on thick twine, hung a wooden carving of a stern-faced sun—the symbol of Pelor.

There was something about this priest that Regdar liked. Maybe it was the fact that Jozan looked more like a soldier than a priest, or maybe it was that he was closer to Regdar's own age than any man of the cloth Regdar had ever met. After six years in the Duke's infantry, escorting a lone priest of Pelor—the god Regdar most honored himself—was easy duty. Regdar didn't feel like someone was standing just over the next hill waiting to kill him. He wasn't thinking about the tragedy that had sent him into the army in the first place. He was just riding west through good, clean, hilly country on a good horse, with good company.

The hard way indeed.

"What else did they tell you about me?" Regdar asked.

"They said you know how to use that gigantic sword of yours," Jozan said.

Regdar shrugged, feeling the weight of his greatsword shift on his back. Of course he knew how to use his weapon. He was a soldier.

"They also told me you don't talk much," the priest went on, "and that you don't have many friends."

Regdar looked over at the priest sharply enough to startle his own horse. He had to turn his attention to calming his mount, so couldn't see the priest's reaction. Regdar felt sweat drip from his forehead. It was hot, and his own suit of scale armor was getting heavier. The horse was sweating too, and tired. It was a strong animal, but Regdar, in full armor and with all his gear, was a heavy load.

"Fine, then," Regdar said, "we'll stop at Fairbye for the night."

They came up over the top of the hill riding side by side, and

Regdar could see the little hamlet of Fairbye nestled in the valley below. There were only a couple dozen buildings in all, mostly small wattle-and-daub houses. The village was surrounded by modest fields, vegetable gardens chiefly. A herd of sheep dotted the fields on the other side of town, where the hills started getting bigger as they stacked up against the feet of the high mountains beyond. After a night in Fairbye it would be another day on the road to the entrance to Two Winds Pass, another three days or so across the mountains, then half a day to cross the fields outlying New Koratia.

Regdar snapped his reins and, Jozan behind him, rode at a slow run toward the little village.

Before they even passed the first outlying buildings and turned onto the main street of the town, it became apparent to Regdar that they'd ridden into the middle of something.

"Festival?" he asked Jozan.

The priest rode up next to him, and they both slowed their horses.

"Perhaps," Jozan said. "It looks like the whole town has come out for something."

A handful of shops and a surprisingly large inn were clustered around an ill-defined town square. In the center was a large communal well and a crowd of peasants numbering almost a hundred. Regdar thought Jozan was right when he said that the whole town had come out. The crowd had as many women as men, some quite old, and no shortage of children of all ages. They were all dressed in the simple homespun clothes of the peasantry, and most of the men were holding various farming implements.

Something about the crowd's attitude made Regdar uncomfortable, and he could feel Jozan's unease as well.

"I don't think this is a festival," the priest said, just loudly enough so that only Regdar could hear him.

The fighter nodded and stiffened in his saddle. He wanted to draw his sword, even dismount in order to be ready for whatever was about to happen but was smart enough to know that riding into this sort of scene with naked steel might only make things worse. Still, he could feel his skin tingle and his senses hum with heightened attention.

The villagers were all facing the same direction and listening to a voice still too distant for Regdar to make out. He quickened his horse's pace and heard the word "... guilty!" followed by a rousing cheer from the assembled villagers.

The peasants were facing a crudely constructed gallows on which stood a rotund man dressed in a shimmering silk coat. The man was sweating profusely in the afternoon sun, his hair wet and unkempt. Though the coat was expensive and well tailored, it was obviously old and made to fit a much smaller man. A little girl was standing next to him. Regdar could barely see her head sticking out over the heads of the crowd.

"Hang the bitch!" an old woman shrieked—answered by another ear-ringing cheer from the mob.

"The little girl?" Regdar said, turning to Jozan and beginning to reach for his greatsword.

The priest held up a hand, and Regdar stopped.

"That's no child," Jozan said. "They mean to hang a halfling."

Regdar turned back to the gallows, and as he moved closer still he saw that Jozan was right. Standing next to the portly orator was a halfling woman whose tiny build made her look like a human child. She wore elaborate leathers and had her long, auburn hair tied tightly back. Her hands were bound behind her, and a noose dangled limply from around her neck and was tied to the top of the gallows.

The fat man strutted back and forth on the platform in front of her, waving his hands in an attempt to quiet the still-cheering crowd.

“Good citizens!” the man shouted, and the crowd quieted just enough to hear him. “Good neighbors, we are not murderers here. The halfling woman who calls herself Lidda has been accused of thievery of a most egregious sort—one count after another—”

“What’s a count?” a man yelled from the crowd.

This brought about another round of cheering from the assembly, and it took long enough for the round man to quiet them that Regdar and Jozan were able to ride to the edge of the crowd. Only a few people on the edges of the mob noticed them, but they all recognized Jozan as a priest of Pelor and bowed to him in the accepted manner.

Lidda rolled her eyes, and Regdar was amazed at how relaxed she seemed. He got the distinct impression that the woman had been in this situation before.

The crowd quieted a bit, and the fat man was just about to say something when the halfling called out in a clear, unwavering voice, “I will devote my life to finding the true thief. I will clear my name and the names of my family and friends, the names of my acquaintances both personal and professional, and will endeavor to repair any damage done to this fair hamlet by the heinous deeds of this brazen criminal. This I swear, by the three heads of the hydra at the center of the stars!”

Regdar felt his breath catch in his throat and realized that the whole mob was similarly silenced. The halfling was glancing from villager to villager, moving only her wide, nimble eyes.

“Oh,” another old woman growled, “let her swing already!”

There was a burst of laughter and applause from the mob, and the fat man in the old coat threw up his hands, his chubby fingers wrapped into tight little fists.

“What are the charges?” Jozan asked in a voice just loud enough to be heard over the crowd.

The rotund orator stopped just before shouting some order or

proclamation, and when his eyes found Jozan, he visibly reeled. The man almost fell on his face in his rush to bow, and Regdar watched as every head in the unruly mob turned to look at Jozan.

Regdar was horrified by the sudden attention of the lynch mob, and his hand went to the pommel of his greatsword. He was convinced the villagers would turn on them, but they froze, all eyes glued to the priest. Most of them sketched slight bows and whispered to each other that Pelor had sent a priest to bless the hanging. Regdar doubted that was the case. He took his hand off his sword.

“The charges?” Jozan asked again.

The fat man, obviously flustered, called out, “A priest of Pelor! Come to bless today’s justice!”

The crowd applauded but with a measure of reluctance this time.

Jozan called back, “Pelor does not bless lynchings, Mister . . . ?”

“I am the burgher here, Father,” the fat man replied. “Tomma is the name, sir.”

Jozan rode forward slowly, the crowd parting before him. Regdar stood his ground and seemed to go largely unnoticed by the villagers.

“What has this woman done,” the priest asked, “to deserve a death sentence, Burgher Tomma?”

“Ah,” the burgher replied, obviously delighted to recount the charges. “The halfling has stolen numerous items of personal property from numerous goodly townsfolk and farmers on numerous occasions, good priest . . . ?”

“Jozan,” the priest said. “But that you could hang her numerous times then, Burgher.”

The crowd was split as to whether or not to cheer that, and the resulting confusion made Regdar smile.

“Thank you, Father,” Lidda said. “Maybe you could just smash my head in with your mace and get it over with.”

A man in the crowd shouted, "Do it, Father!"

A few of the women gasped, and Jozan turned on the man, his face a cold mask. Regdar had never seen Jozan look like that before. The priest was more than angry, he was mortified—struck momentarily dumb with rage.

"Um . . ." the burgher said.

"There is a justice in the world," Jozan said, his voice clear and steady, "that is greater than the rule of the mob. If this woman is guilty of a crime, let her be judged in the proper venue. Let her meet her accusers, and let her have a chance to defend herself before her neck is snapped."

"See," Lidda said to the burgher's back. "I told you you can't just string me up you fat f—"

"Hold your tongue!" Jozan commanded. Regdar was impressed by the fact that the accused did indeed silence herself. "You may still swing, child, if you're as guilty as they—"

"*Help me!*" a wild, panicked voice screamed from the other side of the crowd. The mob of villagers turned, and this time Regdar drew his sword.

The crowd reacted as one, bowing in on one side as if something had struck its edge and bent it back. Regdar, from astride his horse, could see a boy, no older than fifteen, rushing into the crowd and being held on his feet by a pocket of concerned villagers. The boy was a mess, drenched in sweat and covered in dirt. His clothes were torn, and he held the broken half of a shepherd's staff.

"Spiders!" the shepherd cried.

Regdar slipped off his horse, scanning all around for any sign of whatever it was the boy was afraid of—spiders or otherwise. He saw nothing threatening, and for safety's sake he sheathed his sword before he got to the boy's side. Regdar reached out and helped a few of the villagers lower the shepherd to sit on the hard-packed dirt of the village square.

“Get him some water,” Regdar said to one of the villagers, a young woman who appeared to have her wits about her while the others were still caught up in the tensions of the moment.

The woman rushed off for water, and Regdar crouched next to the shepherd. There was a disturbance in the crowd, and Jozan pushed through the parting farmers to join Regdar at the boy’s side.

“Is he injured?” the priest asked.

Regdar examined the boy quickly and saw no blood or any sign of injury beyond a few scrapes. Jozan was looking at the boy even more closely, so Regdar didn’t bother to answer.

“Spiders,” the boy gasped, not looking at anyone in particular. “Big, huge, brown spiders . . . I’ve never even heard of spiders that big.”

“Are you injured, son?” Jozan asked. “Were you bitten by any of these spiders?”

The boy blinked and met Jozan’s steady gaze. He was shaking. “Am I dead? Are you Pelor?”

“Hey!” the halfling called. “Can I go now?”

The crowd responded by screaming “*No!*” at the top of their lungs. Regdar’s attention was torn between the mob and the shepherd.

“No, son,” Jozan told the boy, “I’m not Pelor. Just a humble priest anxious to hear your tale.”

“Spiders,” the boy repeated without pause. “They attacked the sheep. They bit one apart and dragged it away in pieces, then more came and attacked another one . . . and I got the hell ou—sorry, Father. I ran away. I don’t think they were chasing me. I can’t . . . I can’t . . .”

The boy began panting, hyperventilating.

The fat burgher came through the crowd, a pungent stench following him, and he rushed to the boy’s side. “Gürn,” he said. “Gürn, my son, is the flock safe?”

“Poppa?” the boy replied, though he could hardly breathe.

Burgher Tomma put a hand on the boy’s shoulder and asked, “Is the flock safe, son? Are the sheep safe?”

“Big . . . giant . . . spiders . . . attacked them,” Gürn answered. “I don’t know how many were . . . taken.”

“You let them—” Tomma gasped, his pudgy face draining of color so that Regdar thought they’d need to send someone for water for the burgher.

The woman appeared with a cup of water and handed it to the shaking boy. Burgher Tomma took it from his son and drank it down greedily, the fat man gasping for air along with his son.

“Not the sheep,” he said. He looked up at Jozan, his eyes pleading. “The sheep are our whole lives. Without them, we have nothing. The whole village depends on them.”

Gasps and whispers pulsed through the mob in waves, and Regdar watched all their faces go as pale as the burgher’s. Regdar had been to villages like this one—villages that depended on one herd of livestock or one field of crops for their entire existence.

“Regdar,” Jozan said, “have you heard of spiders big enough to carry off a sheep?”

Regdar nodded and said, “I’ve heard tales, but I’ve never seen one.”

Jozan stood and turned all the way around, scanning the crowd. “Are you expected in New Koratia?” he asked Regdar.

Regdar shrugged. “I had intended to see my mother,” he said, “but she wouldn’t know when to expect me. Why?”

“Burgher Tomma,” Jozan said, “we’ll see to these spiders for you.”

The fat man sagged with relief, and his eyes puffed and filled with tears. “Oh . . . oh, Father. How can we ever thank you . . . you and your man . . . ?”

Regdar wasn’t quite sure what he was hearing, but it sounded suspiciously like he had just volunteered to ride off after giant

spiders to save someone else's sheep. The crowd appeared horrified and relieved at the same time, and none of them looked like any use in a fight.

"We'll take the halfling with us as well," Jozan told the burgher.

The fat man looked at him as if the priest had suddenly sprouted green fur and a bug's antennae.

"It will afford me an opportunity to question her thoroughly," Jozan said. "Otherwise I will have to question her here and deal with your spider problem in a few days' time."

"Take her," Burgher Tomma gasped, forcing a smile. "For Pelor's sake, take her."

"Yeah," Lidda called from the gallows, "let's go get those spiders, darn it. I love sheep."