

Death of a Dwarf

The Chronicles of Dorro (Book Four)

by Pete Prown

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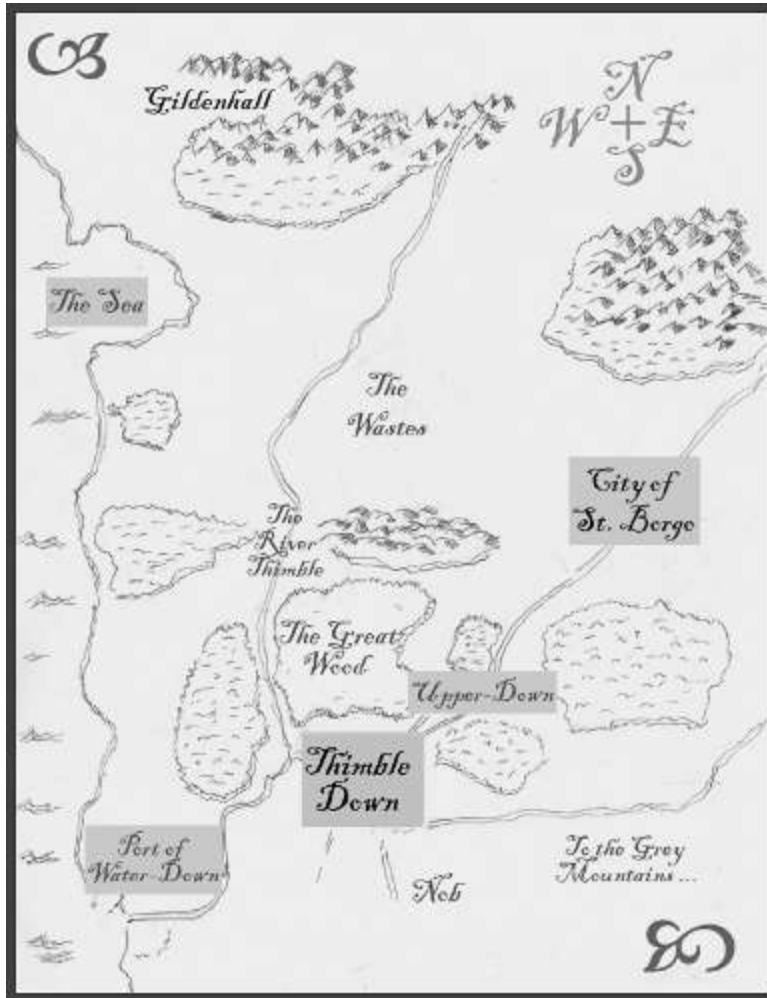
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Dramatis Personae

At the Library

Dorro Fox Winderiver: Bookmaster of Thimble Down (*door-oh, winn-da-river*)

Wyll Underfoot: Dorro's nephew (*will*)

Cheeryup Tunbridge: Daughter of the village seamstress

In the Village of Thimble Down

Sheriff Forgo: The law in Thimble Down

Bedminster Shoe: The village scribe

The Mayor: The mayor and magistrate of Thimble Down

Mr. Timmo: The metalsmith

Nurse Pym: The healer and midwife

Gadget Pinkle: The new deputy

Mr. Mungo: Owner and barkeep at the Hanging Stoat tavern

Farmer Edythe: A local farmer and aspiring politician (*edith*)

Minty Pinter, Dowdy Cray, & Bog the Blacksmith: Local tradesfolk

At the Smeltery

Hiram Bindlestiff: Proprietor of Bindlestiff's Smelting Works

Silas Fibbhook: His chief foreman

Stookey McGee & Mrs. Mick: Workers at the forge

From Gildenhall

Crumble, Wump, Two-Toes, Magpie, & Flume: Dwarves from the Northlands

Aramina: A lady with lethal skills

In the Burg of St. Borgo

Professor Taddeus Larkspur: A scholar of Ancient Dwarfish

Preface: The Autumn of Discontent

After the harrowing events of August, in the year of 1721 (recounted earlier, much to my dismay, in a saga entitled *The Lost Ones*), the transition from Summer to Fall in our village of Thimble Down was otherwise blissful.

Once the heat had dissipated, the clambering roses returned as resplendent as ever, while the tomatoes and eggplant reached their zeniths, along with squash, beans, radishes, pink and white cleome, and carpets of marigolds.

As usual, the folk in the village were bustling about, preparing for the inevitability of Winter and storing up as much of their garden offerings as possible. They were jarring, bottling, pickling, and fermenting by the hour, as well as saving finer examples of their horticultural handiwork for the upcoming Harvest Faire, held each year on the third Saturday of October.

Yet by the end of that month, things had gone awry ... *again*. Instead of quiet, charming Thimble Down, our small hamlet had descended into the chaos of industry and villainous actions. A Halfling moved into the village and brought with him a boisterous business: a large smeltery that specialized in the heating and fusing of metals and ores as well as the fabrication of specialized alloys. It was all very complex and profitable, and brought with it the need for many workers, which was good news for some.

Yet for others, the forge's smoky, smelly discharge was repellent and not in keeping with the gentle ways of our community. And thus the two sides came to a clash—and what a thunderclap it was—like two mountain rams butting heads in combat.

In addition to this, there were other matters that proved vexing: an unhealthy miasma spread through the village, bringing sickness and a rash of strange burglaries. There was also a political contest in progress, a rather uncivil one. All this, plus the arrival of strange visitors from the North made the Autumn of 1721, *A.B.* a wholly irksome and dark period.

Truly, at various points one could not say whether Thimble Down as we knew it would continue from one day to the next. We seemed forever—each and every day—on the verge of catastrophe.

And those were the good days.

Yours in literary kinship,

Mr. Bedminster Shoe, scribe, Ret.

*May 21, 1774, A.B.**

*[*After Borgo, the first Halfling King]*

The Harvest Faire

“Not bloody well likely!”

Heads snapped in the direction of the loud, bellicose voice, which turned out to be Mrs. Fowl, who was somewhere between laughing and hacking as she shouted those words. She was addressing Mr. Dorro Fox Winderiver and playfully poking a finger into his chest. He was flustered and tried to defend himself.

“All I said, my dear Mrs. Fowl, is that I’ve entered some lovely apple pies this year and I think I have a chance at beating you—for once,” noted the village bookmaster, trying desperately not to get humbled by a tiny old woman.

Mrs. Fowl cackled loudly.

“The day your crisps and pies beat mine will be the day I turn twelve again and begin doing cartwheels across the grass.”

At that, she hacked again, slapped poor Dorro on the back perhaps harder than necessary, and walked off to watch the judges at work throughout the Harvest Faire.

Nearby, Sheriff Forgo and Mr. Timmo, the metalsmith, were trying to stifle their own guffaws at this amusement, but weren’t doing a very good job. Neither were Wyll, Cheeryup, or any of another half-dozen Thimble Downers. Dorro, for his part, turned as red as a Flitwyck apple, pretending he hadn’t been humbled by a Halfling nearly half his height and twice his age. The Halfling stomped over to his friends, looking for allies.

“You’d have thought that old bat would remember who her best customer is. Why I’ve bought more pork pies, loaves of bread, and cakes from her than anyone in the village!”

“But Mr. Dorro,” chirped the wee voice of young Cheeryup Tunbridge, “the Harvest Faire is Mrs. Fowl’s biggest moment of the entire year. You can’t begrudge a sweet old lady her moment in the sun—she’s the best baker in the entire county. Besides which, you’ve already won twenty blue ribbons!”

“But still . . .”

“You’re being a little greedy, Uncle Dorro,” chided his nephew Wyll. “I know how competitive you get, but you’ve already done better than ever. Your apple ’n’ walnut tart was delicious, and your Candleberry apple cider is the best in the village.”

“Well perhaps,” Dorro brightened at the sound of praise. He added, “It was rather good this year, wasn’t it?”

“Yer a piece ‘o work, Winderiver,” laughed the Sheriff. “But I’ll grant you that the cider was outstanding. You know, this Winter, we should take some of that brew and make some applejack brandy for the cold days of February.” Next to him, Mr. Timmo—also an imbibor of Dorro’s strong spirits, which he only made in the smallest of quantities—nodded in agreement.

“Flattery will get you everywhere, Forgo, so fear not—I shall set aside a dozen baskets of apples for us to press and ferment this Fall. By mid-Winter, we shall be sipping applejack happily by the fire.”

“Hurrah!” shouted Forgo and Timmo in unison as the village’s Harvest Faire rollicked in full swing around them. There were Halflings young and old, tall and short, bustling around the newly rebuilt Hanging Stoat tavern, its bits of lawn now turned into a faireground for the event, always held on the third Saturday of October.

There were games of skill and games of chance; crafts and fine creations for sale; and more food than you can imagine, much of it made portable for the happily ambling village folk

“Come get yer braised rabbit on a stick! There’s nuthin’ more savory for yer tum,” shouted Mr. Parfinn, who was grilling game meat over an open fire of cherrywood logs. “And don’t miss the roasted eggplant spears, delicately flavored with olive oil, rosemary, and real sea salt from Water-Down!”

Nothing, however, was more exciting than the Judging, the crowning highpoint of the faire. Halflings from far and wide had entered their best fruits and vegetables, flowers, cooked foods, and handicrafts for consideration. And over in Farmer Edythe’s adjacent field, the best farm animals were being eyed (*“There’s no finer hog than my Esmeralda,”* shouted Farmer Duck. *“She understands every word I’m sayin’ ... and can play the mandolin, too!”*).

There were contests of strength and guile, as bulls pulled enormous sleds weighed down with logs and rocks, while dogs rounded up sheep and moved them smartly along. The Harvest Faire was truly one of best days in Thimble Down each year and, true to form, it had never rained on that day.

Wyll and Cheeryup ran off to play and have a nibble with the few pennies and tuppens Dorro had given each of them, while the gentlemen retired to a shady tree for conversation and a quaff of brown ale freshly brewed by Mr. Mungo to mark the opening of his new Hanging Stoat.

Checking his pocket watch, Dorro opened the conversation with an observation. “Sheriff, you seem distracted today. Still thinking of the lad?”

The lawman was quiet for a moment, but then spoke.

“Aye—he’s never far away from my thoughts,” said Forgo, looking up into the ash, hornbeam, and maple trees overhead. “I miss him more than I ever thought I would.”

“Bosco was a fine young deputy, Forgo,” added Mr. Timmo. “I know you’re proud of him, as is the whole village. And he saved a great many children from a horrible fate—maybe one worse than death.”

By this time the Sheriff’s eyes were brimming with tears, and he made no effort to wipe them away. One by one, they began spilling down his whiskery cheeks. “That he did. Bosco wasn’t my natural son, but he was the boy I never had. I shall think of him and his bravery every day for the rest of my life. He was a better Halfling than I ever will be.”

At that, Forgo bowed his head and let the tears flow freely for a few minutes. Eventually he snorted loudly, wiped his eyes, and carried on as if nothing had transpired. That was his way.

“Any news of Porge and Dumpus?” chimed in Timmo, trying to find a brighter subject. “You seem to have a hard time holding onto deputies, Forgo—you can always hire Mr. Mungo again!”

“No!” barked the Sheriff. “He was the worst deputy I ever had! But as for the other lads, from what Dump’s mother has told me, Porge and Dumpus are doin’ fine. The boys bought a piece o’ land well outside of town and are happily farming the earth. I’d say that by this time next year they will have all sorts of crops entered in the Harvest Faire and will walk away with a goodly number of the ribbons. I couldn’t be happier for ‘em.”

“Still, you’ll need a new deputy or two. Maybe in a few years my Wyll can join up, but he’s too young now. What are you going to do?”

“I’ve already interviewed a young feller—a certain Gadget Pinkle from Fell’s Corner,” said Forgo warily. “He’s not from the best of neighborhoods, but he’s a decent lad, as far as I can tell. He’s always tired—I’ve never seen a boy yawn so much.”

“He’s a growing fellow—give him time to get used to the work.”

“I do need the help. There’s been a rash of thefts all around Thimble Down lately. Tools, clothing, bits of tableware—even pies! This bugger has the nerve not only to snatch cool pies off of windowsills, but to creep into the kitchen and grab a piece of beefright out of the oven. That’s pluck, I tells ya!”

“If it is, in fact, a *he*. We’ve made that mistake before,” admonished Dorro, referring to Lucretia Thrip’s infamous attempts on his life not half a year earlier.

“Quite so,” said Timmo. “I have something to add to this conversation, Sheriff. Someone has been raiding my storage burrow. It sits in a small hillock behind my shop, and I store bits of metal for my work there: tin, copper, iron, and so on. I keep the heavy door locked, but I swear, someone keeps jiggering the lock and taking wares. Nothing too valuable, but with the arrival of that new smeltery, I was planning on using some of it for some special contract work they’ve asked for. I am quite vexed!”

“I’ve heard about that new industrial venture—best of luck to ’em, I say,” murmured the Sheriff. “Say, has anyone noticed all the coughin’ around here today? You’d think the flu has come early this year.”

“True enough,” noted the bookmaster. “The dart throwers kept missing their intended targets this morning because of all the hacking. Half of them were doubled over with a persistent ague.”

“Nurse Pym will have a busy Autumn, much less Winter,” said Mr. Timmo. “And she’s already run ragged with all the births, scrapes, and bruises of everyday life in Thimble Down. I dare say, *she* needs a deputy!”

They all burst out laughing, but it was cut short when a freckled, red-haired lad of eighteen or so ran up to them, completely winded and gesturing wildly.

“Sheriff! Sheriff! ... *gasp* ... the bandit struck again!”

“Calm down, Gadget,” said Forgo, lifting his bulk off the ground. “Did anyone see him?”

“Some folks saw a lad grab a few pies and take off behind the tents, like the wind. But not close enough to recognize ‘im! He’s headed towards Fell’s Corner!”

“Sheriff Forgo! My pies!” It was Mrs. Fowl, running frantically across the Harvest Faire grounds. “That weasel stole my blue-ribbon pies! The blueberry–rhubarb and the cinnamon–apple crisps, my best ones ever. I want you to catch that thief, Forgo, *dead or alive!*”

Boom Times

“Calm yourself, Mrs. Fowl,” said the Sheriff, slowly standing up. “We’ll go find this scalawag, but really—*dead or alive?* We’re talking about a feller that stole pies, not broke into the bank.”

Mrs. Fowl looked at the lawman like he was a moron. “I know you’re not the brightest creature in the world, Forgo, but my pies are works of art! If I catch that miserable crust criminal, I’ll stuff him with cherries and bake him until *he’s* a corpus hisself!” The normally genteel lady’s eyes were on fire.

Ignoring the insult, Forgo barked out a few commands. “Gadget, catch your breath and follow us. C’mon Winderiver—we’ve got a pie thief to apprehend.”

“Oooo, Sheriff, can I come too?” said Mr. Timmo with excitement. His life as a small metalsmith was quiet and often dull, so this was thrilling to him.

“Let’s go!” At that, the three Halflings bolted from the fairegrounds and up the road towards Fell’s Corner, the seediest neighborhood in all of Thimble Down. Within five minutes, they’d scoured the area and found no sign of the scofflaw, despite asking a few of the more sober denizens of that street. A second later, Gadget showed up, again wheezing and bent over double to catch his breath.

“Gents, this is my new deputy, Gadget Pinkle.” The deputy waved weakly before going back to his panting and groaning. He was thin and on the tall side, with bright red hair and freckles from head to toe. Dorro even wondered if he had freckles under his hair. “Lad, if you’re going to be my deputy, you’ll need to get in shape. I want you to start jogging and lifting bags of oats. That’ll serve you well.”

“Did you find him, Sheriff?” asked Gadget, finally finding a little wind in his lungs.

“No, you ninny. The thief is not here, nor was he ever. Are you sure he came this way?”

Forgo was beginning to have second thoughts about the young deputy, but remembered Bosco’s early days. He too had been an incompetent wreck, but had grown into one of the greatest heroes Thimble Down had ever known.

“Since we’re here, why don’t we swing by this new smelting enterprise everyone’s talking about. Timmo, would you introduce us?”

Not but a moment later, the trio was in front of what seemed a large cave opening. Some workmen were going in and out of the giant maw, while others were busily framing it in for the

colder days to come. The structure was really an enormous burrow, perhaps more of a cavern, but technically, was simply dug out of the side of a hillock. From its roof atop the hill, chimneys spouted out all manner of black smoke and steam, and the sounds of industry were in full gear. To the right of the huge opening was a hastily painted sign on a post: Bindlestiff's Smelting Works.

As Forgo, Dorro, and Timmo entered the dark factory, they were dazed by the loud noises and bright, flickering glare of fires within. One moment, they were outside enjoying the cool October day, and next they were in an underground labyrinth of flames, smoke, and mystery. The trio walked further into the void, trekking past giant vats of hot liquids, while musclebound Halflings banged on metal with huge hammers and hollered out commands at the tops of their voices.

"Watch out, Stookey—we're about to pour the iron batch! If you don't move, you'll be a piece of toast in seconds."

"*Bwwwwa-haaa*, Micky, I'd like to see ya try! No one's ever cooked Stookey McGee and no one ever shall!"

"You two lunkheads shut up and keep your mind on yer work. I don't need any more injuries; I need healthy workers. Unless, of course, you ladies would like to work somewhere else!"

"But *I am* a lady!" bellowed Micky.

"Oh, sorry, Mrs. Mick," said the foreman. "No, *errr*; offense meant."

The Halfling named Micky—formally, Mrs. Henrietta Mick—was a short, powerfully built woman who could hammer a piece of iron as well as any of the fellers. She picked up a hot pipe of iron with her tongs and began thrashing it with a mallet, sparks flying everywhere. Singing and whistling, Micky loved her work.

"This is wonderful!" exclaimed the normally placid Mr. Timmo. "My work at the shop is so quiet—this is like a circus to me. I've spent my whole life around metal, making household wares and jewelry, yet know so little about how it's made."

"That's because it happens under the earth, my friend."

The trio turned around to find a portly, well-dressed Halfling in coat, knee breeches, and vest, grinning broadly. "Welcome to my smeltery, Mr. Timmo."

"Ah, Mr. Bindlestiff! So good to see you again. These are my friends, Sheriff Forgo— and Mr. Dorro, who runs the library."

"Please call me Hiram. Would you perchance enjoy a tour of our facility?" The three nodded enthusiastically and began following Bindlestiff around the deep, dark space.

"As you can see over here, these large vats are for the smelting and refining of metal ores. We procure vast amounts of ore from the northern mountains and transport them here in wagons. Then we use our coke-powered furnaces to make refined iron, tin, aluminum, copper, nickel,

bronze, and zinc. Its brutal work, but the metal industry is the wave of the future! It's time for Halflings to come out from their dark burrows and step into the light of modernity."

"Do your workers ever get sick from the fumes?" asked the bookmaster.

"Far from it, Mr. Dorro. Indeed, all the fire and fumes kill hazardous germs and make this the safest place to work, aside from the odd Halfling who gets burnt to death or falls into a boiler. In those cases, at least their demises are swift and painless. They're just turned into cinders in the briefest heartbeat."

Dorro gulped at the image, but Bindlestiff just laughed. "Like I said, we have a hard life smelting ore, but someone has to do it, and my workers are happy and enthusiastic."

Somewhere over his shoulder the sound of a hacking cough echoed throughout the cave, but the industrialist paid it no mind.

"What are *they*?" said Sheriff Forgo, perhaps a tad too loudly. Sure enough, ambling across the floor of the smeltery were a handful of squat, barrel-like figures carrying long shafts of metal. They were mostly in shadow, but even when silhouetted by flickers of firelight, it was clear they weren't Halflings.

"Ah, those are our special guests from the North. They are, in fact—"

"*Dwarves*," blurted Dorro. "Actually, I've never seen one in the flesh before."

"Quite right, sir," continued Bindlestiff. "We need to get our precious ores from somewhere, and the Dwarves of the Northern Realm harvest the best from deep within the earth. Granted, it costs more than other minerals, but at Bindlestiff's Smelting Works, we use only the finest for our alloys."

"I must say, Hiram, I'm quite grateful you've asked me to take on some of your finer projects," said Timmo glowingly. "It's been a little slow in my shop this year."

"You came highly recommended, and, more than that, our work here is for bigger pieces of metal sheeting, rods, and beams. We need specialists like you for the delicate work. Delighted to have your services, Timmo. But I'm afraid that's all the time I have for you today. Here comes my foreman now—we're running a surprise inspection this afternoon and are eager to make sure everyone is pulling their weight. Even those Dwarves! Good day, gentlemen."

The trio all nodded farewell, but Bindlestiff was already on the move with his burly foreman. "Well, Fibbhook, are you ready to crack some heads? 'Tis my favorite part of the day!" He laughed as the pair departed into the murk.

Left alone, Forgo, Dorro, and Timmo made their way back to the sunlight outside the smeltery and had to shield their eyes from the jarring brightness. They were silent for a few moments.

"I don't know whether to be impressed or depressed," said Dorro, breaking the lull. "It's certainly grand to have more Thimble Downers working and prosperous, but at what cost?"

“I don’t see the harm, Winderiver—it’s a solid business,” added Forgo. “And it leaves fewer village folk sitting around drinking honeygrass whiskey and stirring up trouble. That’s good for me.”

“But I do see Dorro’s point,” squeaked Timmo, almost whispering and looking about furtively. “It’s a terribly dirty way to make a living. I don’t like all that black smoke either, despite the fact that I’m actually profiting from this enterprise. Worse, I’m not sure how I feel about that fact. In a weird way, it makes me feel—*dirty*.”

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