



*Childhood of a
Fighter*

by Marc H. Wyman

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A Gushémal Story

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The axe's broadside slammed against the elf's head, driving the blue-skinned man straight into the wall. His sword clattered uselessly to the ground, his friends staring baffled at the hulking warrior who towered over them. "If you say one more word about my mother," the blonde warrior told the unconscious elf – and his friends, who were more likely to remember –, "there'll be real trouble. I am Gabe of the Ryelneyd. Never forget the name."

"D-d-don't worry," one of the other elves said, "we won't."

They hurried to gather up their comrade and leave the inn. The din of conversation resumed, with not few of the patrons casting surprised and grateful glances the warrior's way. Gabe ignored them and returned to the table where his friends sat.

Cornell of Cayaboré pointed to a mug on the table. "We got you a new ale while you were busy, and – Flink, that's Gabe's! Stay away from it!"

A tiny alreu instantly shot down from the table where he had been peering intently into the mug. "But, sir," he complained, "I only wanted to make sure it's all right! Maybe the innkeeper was distracted when he filled the ale, and so I thought that Gabe should only have the best, after he got rid of the elves. I mean, they have been insulting everyone in here for an hour, and so –"

"Flink..." Cornell sighed tiredly.

"It's all right," Gabe said as he sat down and reached for his mug. "Thank you for being so attentive, Flink. Why don't you keep an eye on the innkeeper to make sure he doesn't make any mistakes. While he's still upset, mind you."

"Certainly I will!" the alreu piped proudly and raced away.

The wizard Barandas gazed after the creature with a snarl. "Tiresome little thing," he muttered. "Remind me why we put up with it."

"Well," Cornell said, "not everybody can be as kind and good-natured a companion as you."

Gabe grinned happily when Barandas answered with a cold stare that could have frozen the entire Elfadil Desert.

The stare did nothing to diminish Cornell's smile as the Cayaborean took a long draught from his own ale, before he turned to the barbarian warrior. "Say, Gabe, I didn't know that you understand elventongue. How come?"

Gabe shrugged. "There are many things you do not know about me, my friend."

"There is plenty of time," Cornell replied and leaned back in his chair. "I'll pay for the next round."

The warrior sighed heavily. Memories flowed into his mind, memories of times that were as remote from this pleasant little tavern in the Topay Coalition as the cold, icy Robhovard where he grew up. Gabe did not say very much; there were things he was unwilling to explain – but the memories played in his mind, and he saw it all clearly...



Ryelneyd

The first years of his life were spent among his nomadic tribe, the Ryelneyd, who travel the chilly plains of Robhovard, often following a herd of thymbairs. His father, Karungal, was a warrior of high standing in his tribe, a distant cousin of their chief Vetora. His mother had died when he was a year old, giving birth to a daughter who never lived beyond her second month.

Still, those were happy years – and their end was so abrupt that Gabe never learned what exactly befell him. One day his father hurried home, ahead of the hunting party he had been with, and told his nine-year old son to put on his fur coat and accompany him. He put the boy on his horse, rode with him to a cave near the Deep Gorge and told him to wait there. “What is wrong, father?” Gabe cried. Karungal smiled, put a piece of dried meat and a waterskin in his son’s hands. “I made a mistake, son. Vetora will demand I pay the price, but I don’t want you to pay for what I have done.” The boy was confused, asked for further information, but his father shook his head. “Wait here. If I come back, we’ll be moving north, away from the tribe. Perhaps to Dargozhan...” – “When will you come back?” Karungal shrugged, unsheathed his blade and left the cave.

The day passed without his father returning. Gabe heeded Karungal’s command to stay in the cave until daylight began to fade and the cold of the night loomed ahead of him. The boy knew that his fur coat would be little protection, so he carefully sneaked out of the cave to find wood for fire. None was near his hiding place, and Gabe ranged out a bit further, taking care to keep the cave in sight – in case his father was coming back.

When he found a grove of trees, he gathered the wood he would need. Then a thought struck him, and he decided to climb one of the trees so he could keep a better lookout for his father. Gabe had always been an avid climber, no matter that he rarely could exercise. Half a minute later he was sitting on a branch and scanning the countryside.

He saw his father. And knew that Karungal would not be coming back. Nearly a mile away, battle had taken place. The corpses of several warriors of the Ryelneyd were scattered about, along with some of their horses. The others must have fled. At the distance, Gabe couldn’t possibly recognize his father, but his instinct told him that one of the bodies had to be Karungal.

And then his heart froze once more when he saw other people approach to look at the carnage. Thieves! Without thinking, the boy slid down from the tree, grabbed the sturdiest piece of wood he had gathered before and ran.



Elves

“It was that one,” Le’hare said and pointed to the body of a tall warrior. “He killed the others, then he died from his wounds.”

His father, Toriel, frowned. "Looks like he tried to crawl away. Over there..." His voice trailed off when he saw a small boy run towards them, swinging a branch and shouting a warcry. "Interesting," he said calmly.

"Should I?" Le'hare half drew his sword from its scabbard, doubtfully looking to his father.

"Don't be silly," Toriel admonished, as he slid his bow from his shoulder and nocked an arrow. A moment later the arrow took flight, headed straight for the human boy – and knocked the branch from his hands.

The boy screamed in surprise, then he ran on, undeterred.

Toriel returned the bow to his shoulder, nodded to his son and knelt down, waiting for the human.

"Don't you dare touch my father!" the boy shouted, the first recognizable words. Then he threw himself at Toriel, pummeling the elf with his little fists.

Quickly, Le'hare stepped in, pulled the child away and bound him in his own powerful arms. The human yelled furiously, tried to escape from the hold, in vain.

"Calm down, child," Toriel said. "We do not wish to hurt you or anyone else."

"Blue-skinned devils! I don't believe you!"

"Of course you don't." The elder elf sighed. "My name is Toriel Belos'cha, that is my son Le'hare. May I know what you are called?"

The boy stared at him. "I am Gabe, son of Karungal! He's the best warrior of all the Ryelneyd! He'll hurt you bad, if you... if you –" Gabe's voice suddenly cracked, his eyes went wide as he saw his father's body. Saw the blood that drenched the snow, the cold, empty gaze.

And his fury dissolved into sobbing tears.

Toriel nodded to his son. The younger elf let go of the boy who practically fell into Toriel's waiting arms, crying into his breast. "It is all right, Gabe, son of Karungal," the elf said and slowly stroked the boy's hair. "Cry freely."

An hour later, in the twilight of dusk, the elves buried the fallen in the nearly frozen ground. Into the earth over Karungal's grave, Toriel inserted a pinecone and whispered a few words. "Next spring, a sapling will be here," he then told Gabe. "A few years later it will grow into a majestic tree. I know that because your father's soul will live on in the pinetree's wood. It will be as tall and imposing as your father has been."

The boy's eyes were glazed, red from tears, but he heard every word as he sat on a rock, clutching Karungal's sword and an amulet in his hands.

"Let's go home," Toriel said and reached out his hand towards Gabe. The human stared at the hand empty for a while. Then, hesitantly, he grasped it. The elf smiled.

Together they went to the small farm where the elves lived, cutting a meagre life from the rough surroundings. In the summer they ploughed the land, grew nourishing plants, but in wintertime all their food came from the hunt. It was enough for Toriel, his wife Yelarnyi, and their four children. Le'hare, the eldest, had been gone for a decade, to find a mate, but he had come home alone. None of

the women he had met on his journeys had been willing to accompany him to the dire Robhovard, while he could hardly imagine living his life anywhere else.

Gabe was welcomed with open arms by Yelarnyi, who knew right away that the boy desperately needed food – and loving companionship. Hearing what had happened on the plains only invigorated her efforts to shovel food into the small human.

Le'hare's siblings were less trusting, especially the youngest daughter, Caeryl. She had just turned thirty-two – still a child's age for an elf –, and she immediately resented the human in their house. Not because he was human. All that Caeryl saw was that she no longer was at the center of attention, and all because of a tiny human boy. Worse, she had to yield her own bed to the boy! When it came time to sleep, he comfortably rested in *her* bed, while she had to squeeze in next to her sister. Unfair!

At night Toriel and Yelarnyi sat by the fireside. They drank *eychion*, a strong tea that was a favorite of elves (and little appreciated by other species). "He has no family," Yelarnyi commented.

"Definitely," Toriel nodded. "Judging from what I've seen out there and from what I know of his people, all relatives were slaughtered well before the sun rose to its climax today."

She sipped from her cup, looking curiously over the rim at Toriel. "So there is nobody who will take care of him?"

Her husband laughed softly. "I know that tone, my love! You have already decided what to do, haven't you? And I had feared that four children in the house were enough for you!"

"So it is settled?"

"It is." Toriel put his cup aside and planted a kiss on his wife's cheek. "We'll be taking care of the boy as if he were our own."

Yelarnyi smiled in satisfaction – then she grasped her husband's head to return the kiss.



A New Home

It took until the next summer before Gabe smiled again. For a human it would have been interminably long, but to the long-lived elves, it was but a short while, and they rejoiced at the resilience of their foster son.

Yelarnyi had taken to teaching him the numbers and letters. Patiently she repeated all her lessons, while Gabe clearly was more interested in what Toriel told him of hunting and the tales Le'hare recounted of his travels abroad. But Yelarnyi was patient if she was anything. By the time the fields thawed enough that fresh seeds could be planted, Gabe managed to haltingly read from a storybook. When the first, hardy wheat began to show, the boy gave up using his fingers to add numbers. And by the time their fields showed golden splotches of wheat, he ran through the fields, counting every one of the plants.

Earlier in the year, Toriel began to show Gabe how to properly hold a bow. The child was hesitant. "Is it really better than a spear, Master Toriel?"

The elf grinned. “Remember the branch I knocked from your hands? A spear couldn’t have reached that far.”

Gabe’s reply was to think hard for a moment, then he clasped his hands firmly around the wood of the bow and tried his best to imitate Toriel’s position.

The life of the elves that Gabe now shared was tough, yet it was replete with satisfaction and not little joy. They took pride in their tilling the earth, took pride in fashioning a life for themselves out of the poor resources that Robhovard offered. The idea was strange to young Gabe – and the thought of one day ploughing the ground himself appalled him. When one day he said so, Le’hare laughed. “Father,” he coughed between laughing tears, “isn’t that just what I told you forty years ago?”

All things being equal, it would have been a good life for Gabe. Would have, if it weren’t for Caeryl who did all she could to make his existence painful. Hiding mud in his bed, telling him that monsters were waiting in the basement for tasty human meat, tearing up the pages of writing he had so carefully prepared for Yelarnyi – there was little too outlandish for Caeryl, as long as it proved trouble for Gabe. While he stoically accepted the punishment during the first months – riling Caeryl only more –, in the summer he started to retaliate, by shoving the elven girl into mud holes, shooting arrows at her dolls, and devising more elaborate plans most of which he immediately put into action.

Every time Caeryl ran to her mother, complaining about the evil human boy. Yelarnyi smiled and interfered only when the battles got too rough. She hadn’t spent the last century as a mother without learning a thing or two about children.

Gabe became ever more deeply part of the family. Sometimes the others forgot that he was human, expecting him to carry heavier loads than one of his species ordinarily could. And he saw no reason why he should not be as strong as Le’hare or Toriel. As a boy, he surely *had* to be stronger than a *girl* like Caeryl. For that reason he did his best to carry as much as the others, and his muscles grew accordingly. After three years with the family his body has bulked up so much that he looked considerably older than his twelve years – but more importantly, he managed to keep up with the elves.

One of those days, Yelarnyi wiped a tear from her eyes and turned to her husband. “He is growing up so fast, husband of mine. In less than a decade, he’ll be leaving our home, and in a century...”

Toriel put his arm around her shoulders. “It’s much more than he would have had otherwise. And we must be grateful for every minute the gods grant us.”

At that point Gabe slipped in the field. When he got up again, his clothes were dirty from the mud – and immediately Yelarnyi ran out to scold him for being careless and drag him inside to be cleaned. Toriel smiled, watching the spectacle. “Every minute,” he repeated, then went out to the field to finish Gabe’s work.



Caeryl

“Mother told me to look after you,” the elven girl muttered.

“Be quiet!” sixteen-year-old Gabe shushed her from the top of the tree where he was trying ferociously to balance his nearly seven feet tall frame, all the while steadying his bow. Three caribous were gnawing a patch of grass some five hundred yards away.

Caeryl huffed, “You don’t think you can hit them, do you? What does it matter if I –“

“Quiet!”

The elf cast an angry glance at the human, folded her arms before her chest. She had celebrated her thirty-ninth birthday a month earlier and considered herself an adult now. (That opinion was neither shared by her parents nor by Gabe.)

Up on the tree, the human felt a breeze start up. In the wrong direction, carrying his smell straight to the caribous! Quickly he focused his mind, took a deep breath – and released it along with the arrow. The projectile flew straight out, gliding with the air currents he had calculated. Then it hit one caribou’s neck and sent it sprawling to the ground. The others ran off in sudden fright, but Gabe raised a whooping cry of joy. “Did you see that, Caeryl? I did it! That will be a feast! That will –“

He had no chance to finish the sentence for the bough under him suddenly broke off, tumbling the big human to the ground. The other branches tore off skin, then he crashed into the hard earth.

“Hah!” Caeryl shouted with glee. “Big, stupid man. Think you can climb trees, right? Right?”

She paused, waiting for her foster brother to respond – but no answer came. “Gabe?” she asked tentatively. He wasn’t moving. *“Gabe!”*

Suddenly all glee was wiped from her mind as she ran to his side and carefully turned him onto his back. His nose was broken, blood flowing from a crack just over his eye. But he was breathing! Ragged, halting – but there was a breath!

Something was wrong with him, obviously. Desperately she forced herself to remember what her mother had taught her about wounds, then she carefully probed Gabe’s body, sliding her hands under his thick furs. He moaned painfully when she touched his ribs. “One’s broken,” she realized. Right away she started to look for material to fashion a cast from. Stabilize the chest, then think about a litter to carry him home without moving the broken rib about. Who knew whether it was about to cut into his lungs or his heart?

Just as she was finished binding his chest tightly to sturdy logs, Gabe came back to. “What... are you doing?”

“Saving your life, idiot,” she said.

“And the caribou? Where is it?”

Exasperatedly Caeryl stared at the silly human. “You broke a *rib!* What do you care about the deer?!”

“I shot it, it’s mine!”

“If anything, it’s ours,” she shot back, “because you can’t possibly carry it back home with you, can you?”

Gabe's eyes burned with fire – and then he realized his upper body was burning in quite different flames. “All right,” he acquiesced grudgingly, “ours.”

A moment passed, then Caeryl shook her head and marched across the plains to the caribou, loaded it on her shoulders and carried it to where the fallen human lay. “There,” she muttered, dropping the carcass onto his legs. Instinctively he clawed his hands into the beast's fur. “Good,” Caeryl said, “hold onto it.”

In the evening, a supremely tired Caeryl reached their home, dragging Gabe – and the deer – on a make-shift litter behind her. The long trek dragging the heavy weight had exhausted her, but before she collapsed, she announced proudly, “We're back, and we've shot a caribou.”

That same night Le'hare left to track down a priest who lived some thirty miles to the north, a hermit who reluctantly agreed to cast his healing spells now and then, demanding a heavy payment in supplies and equipment. Two days later he returned with the cleric in tow, and the priest set to work instantly – while reciting the list of goods he expected in return.

It would take Gabe several weeks to fully recover. After all, the cleric was not powerful enough that his magical powers could have restored the human to full health, rather he just patched up the most serious damage, ensuring that Gabe *would* recover. During the time that he was bed-ridden, Caeryl kept looking in on her foster brother, watching his sweaty, pale face. Never did she stay longer than a few minutes, but she returned so often it seemed that she always was around the human.

At one time, Gabe toiled to raise his head and cast a severe glance at his adoptive sister. “Waiting for the stupid human to die, are you?”

She didn't answer at first, returned his gaze with the same severity – then she shook her head and muttered, “You *are* stupid, human. Now sleep. And get better, hear me?” He didn't, actually, for he had slipped into sleep, but her last words somehow snuck their way into his dreams and he wondered what they could possibly mean.

When he was strong enough to leave bed, Caeryl grumpily lent him a hand. “The deer was terrific,” she muttered in explanation. “I just want to see if you can get another one.”

“I thought,” Gabe answered as he got to his feet, “that *we* got the first one.”

“Oh. Right.”

They spent more and more time together afterwards, tending the field, going on the hunt (where in fact they came back occasionally with another caribou). Caeryl still teased him, but overall they found – to their surprise – that they were enjoying each other's company.

Enjoying it so much that they did almost everything together. Gabe even helped her prepare food, despite his grumbling that a man should not be doing a woman's work. She, on the other hand, helped him in keeping his bow, string and arrows in prime condition.

Toriel and Yelarnyi were watching them closely, at first glad that the two had finally given up on fighting, then with concern as they realized long before the two youngsters what was truly

happening. “There’s going to be trouble,” Toriel muttered often when he saw Gabe and Caeryl together.

But they stayed quiet, waiting with the eternal patience of elves.

And one day, several months after the incident with the caribou, Gabe and Caeryl discovered that they had fallen in love with each other. Neither quite understood how or when it had happened, but it was true. “Master Toriel,” Gabe approached his foster father later on, holding Caeryl’s hand, “what are we to do? It’s not... right, is it?”

“Well...” the elf said, drawing the word out as long as he could, wishing that Yelarnyi were by his side. Unfortunately she had retired early that night, and he could not draw on her wisdom. “By what I know about humans,” he eventually went on, “you’re of age to take a wife, Gabe. So is Caeryl. Neither of you is related, so... I guess the question is whether you think it is right.”

The young people looked at each other. With unusual shyness Caeryl said, “Father, what about our ages? I age so much slower, it’s...”

Gabe pressed her hand tightly. “I am a mayfly compared to her, Master Toriel. At best I can hope for forty more years, while Caeryl has more than four centuries ahead of her. Master Toriel, I’m afraid that I will hurt her so very much.”

“By being human?” the elder elf asked and shook his head. “Gabe, you are what you are. I knew that when I took you in, and it never mattered to me. This should be up to your sis-, eh, to Caeryl.”

She frowned, feeling the closeness of Gabe, the warmth of his hand around hers. “Every moment I have with him is like a year of joy. Life without him is unbearable.”

“Looks like it’s already been settled, Gabe,” Toriel smiled.

The human nodded. “It does.”



Encounter

The next two years were a happy time for the family. Gabe built a small house for Caeryl and himself, right next to Toriel’s. It held only two rooms, a bedroom and a main room that doubled as a kitchen – rarely, since they usually ate with the rest of the family. To Yelarnyi’s joy, Gabe added a bookshelf in the living room. The first book he put on it – and for a while the only one – was the storybook with which she had taught him to read. It was a small house, but Gabe had taken care that more rooms could be added later, when his family would expand.

It would happen soon, he was sure. He could feel it in his bones. A child – son or daughter, it didn’t matter. He was looking forward to it, to passing on his knowledge, his legacy. And he was afraid. What knowledge did he have? What legacy was there, save that of a farmer who had forgotten all about the many places he had visited with his tribe?

Gabe pushed the thoughts aside, concentrated instead on his work, especially the hunt. It was still the most enjoyable – aside from his time with Caeryl, of course.

After a year Le'hare announced that he would be leaving again. He had been getting more and more nervous lately, spending a lot of time gazing at Gabe's house. "I think," he explained at dinner, "that I would like to build my own place next to *his*." He grinned, pointing at the human. "Why should he have all the fun?"

Le'hare packed his travel bags, with plenty of help from the entire family. As he was about to leave, Gabe came from his house and handed him a large package wrapped in leather. "My father's sword," he said calmly. "It will serve you well."

"Are you sure?" Le'hare asked.

Gabe nodded. "You will need it more than I will, brother."

The elf took the sword, unwrapped it and tied the scabbard to his belt. "It will see honor and glory. I promise... brother."

Le'hare had been gone for a year when Gabe found that he could have used the sword. It was late summer. Harvest time was coming in a short while, which would require all his attention for several weeks. Before that would consume his days, he decided to go hunting again, just range out for a day or two. Without Caeryl; she was feeling ill and preferred to stay in bed.

The chilly air was refreshing as he walked across the morning steppe, bow over his shoulder, the carcass of a snow hare strapped to his belt. Its fur would make a nice cap, the meat a splendid stew – Caeryl was a master at preparing hare.

Gabe was looking for a larger quarry. A caribou herd was somewhere close, and so was a group of thymbairs. He grinned. As if he alone could down one of the monstrous thymbairs. His arrows would bounce off the tough skin, that was all. If he could hit an eye, send the arrow straight to the beast's brain... Well, maybe he'd give it a try, from a safe distance. Now *that* would be a story to tell his children! "Would you like to hear about how I took down a thymbair single-handedly? Again?"

Noise issued from beyond a hill to his left. Horses.

In an instant the bow was in his hands. Wild horses might have come nearby, now that it was summer, but it was more likely shaggy unicorns. You'd never want to be surprised by one of the murderous creatures and their ebony horns.

Then he heard voices. Gruff shouts exchanged, in a rough dialect of meantongue that he hadn't heard in ages – but he recognized it immediately. Ryelneyd! His own tribe!

Gabe relaxed and lowered his bow. The horsesteps and voices were coming closer. How should he approach them, he wondered. It had been so long since he had been with his people. Nine years. In a strange way it felt as if the time shouldn't matter, as if nine years were but a brief moment. The elven heritage he carried inside him had effectively skewered his human sense of time.

Before he could make a decision, two riders crested the top of the hill and looked towards the lonely hunter. Gabe raised his hand, called a greeting. The riders exchanged glances and laughed. Then they spurred their horses, came closer.

"Greetings, warriors of the Ryelneyd!" Gabe repeated, nodding at them.

"Look, Taresh, it's one of the farmers!" one of the riders cried.

Taresh chuckled. “Didn’t know there was humans about here. Prob’ly just painted his face pink and bobbed his ears, right, Wagner?” The first rider laughed. “Tell me, farmer, what’s your name?”

Now let them tremble, Gabe thought and relished the moment when he said, “I am Gabe, son of Karungal, warrior of the Ryelneyd.”

He had thought they would drop their offensive behavior, welcome him as one of their own. Perhaps he would have had to show his father’s amulet as proof, at best. Gabe was eighteen years of age, but the latter half of those years he had spent at the farm, with the same four people around him. As far as the world was concerned, he was still as naïve as the young child that saw his father lie dead in the snow.

And so his eyes widened with surprise when he saw Wagner sit up straight in his saddle. “Karungal?!” he shouted. “The one who stole Vetora’s first wife? Taresh, the chieftain has forbidden speech about him. You remember?”

“I do!” the other rider cried, ferocious joy lighting his eyes. “By Keshmire, he’ll reward us greatly!”

Both drew their swords at the same moment. Gabe’s instincts took over in a moment, realizing that there was no time to use his bow, and that his dagger would be useless against mounted enemies. He did not even remember that he had considered the riders friends a few minutes earlier. Instead, with all his force, he charged Wagner’s horse, tackling its legs.

The horse screamed in shock, went to the ground. Wagner flew off his saddle, the sword spinning out of his hand. Gabe dived for it, grasped the handle in the same motion as he rolled back to his feet and blocked Taresh’s attack. The blades met, their clangor echoing across the plains.

“Ryelneyd!” both fighters cried at the same instant, the irony lost in the emptiness of the steppe.

Taresh slammed his sword at Gabe. The boy parried, hardly wondering about the ease with which he handled the two-handed blade. Instead he thrust it forward, out of the parry, and straight into Taresh’s furcoat. The Ryelneyd warrior hammered the handle of his sword against Gabe’s head – too late. Blood spurted from the wound, a bubbling cry issued from Taresh’s mouth, then he tumbled from his seat.

Gabe whirled about, spinning his blade so he might block any blow from Wagner.

The other warrior was back on his horse, but he wasn’t attacking. His boots were slamming into his horse’s sides, driving the beast into a gallop away from Gabe.

He kept his sword up, watching as the Ryelneyd disappeared in moments from his sight. For a while his eyes were riveted to the horizon, then he shrugged, sighed and went to the body of the downed warrior. His horse was still standing nearby, nipping obliviously at a few bushels of grass. *Not very loyal*, Gabe thought.

And then he realized that he had killed a human being for the first time. Worse, one of his own tribe. Taresh’s dead eyes stared at him with an accusation he could not find a reply to.



Departure

"I don't like it," Toriel said as he heard Gabe's story some hours later. "It's been nine years, and they still attacked you. That sounds like a serious blood feud your father has stirred up."

They were sitting in the living room of the main house. Caeryl sat beside her husband, held his hand. Her two siblings, Cyarest and Bleshtárín, were preparing the evening meal in the kitchen, while Yelarnyi stood at the window. It seemed as if she wasn't paying attention to the conversation, that she was watching the fields outside the house and waiting for the wheat to call for harvest. The truth was that she knew what was about to happen, and her heart was breaking.

Gabe slowly nodded. "One of the riders claimed he had stolen Vetora's first wife. That is almost like stealing his horse."

"His horse?" Caeryl protested. "*Almost?!?*"

He chuckled meekly. "My people put different values on these things. A horse will save you in the steppe, while a woman might only slow you down."

"And I suppose you feel the same?"

Gabe cocked his head. "Well, they *are* my people."

Before any fight could ensue, Toriel raised a hand. "Stop it, you two. This is important. Gabe, you said the second warrior didn't engage you in battle. I don't think it is common practice among your people to run from a fight."

"No," Gabe agreed, suddenly more than serious. "I thought about it on my way back. The only explanation is that he wanted to tell Vetora that one of Karungal's line has survived."

"And that means?" Caeryl asked, noting the concern of her husband.

He stayed silent, pressed her hand tightly.

Toriel sighed. "It means that Vetora will start looking for the survivor. The blood feud is on again. It is only finished when all the members of one line are eradicated. Correct, Gabe?"

The huge man took a deep breath. "Vetora doesn't care whom he kills as long as he finds me. I remember enough of my people to know that much. If he finds me here, the tribe will raze our home and kill all who are here."

"Then we'll have to fight!" Caeryl said. "You two are good with the bow, Cyarest is coming along fine. Teach me how to shoot the arrows, and we'll have four defenders here!"

Gabe smiled and stroked her cheek. "Spoken like a true warrior!" he praised her. "But the tribe numbers at least a hundred warriors. We do not stand a chance against them."

"What would you have us do then?" she cried. "Let ourselves be cut down like wheat?"

Yelarnyi made a moaning sound and leaned onto the window sill, never turning her head around. "He's leaving us, girl."

Caeryl stared at her husband, felt the tight pressure of his grip – and knew that her mother was right. "No... Gabe, not now. Not now..."

"It is the only way to protect my family," Gabe said flatly.

Toriel grunted heavily. "It goes against my grain to say so, but you're right. That Vetora won't stop until he's dead."

“There has to be another way!” Caeryl cried.

“Perhaps,” Gabe wagged his head slightly, “I can find enough honor and glory in the world to buy myself free of the blood feud. If Vetora sees a mighty warrior ready to join his tribe, maybe he will reconsider.”

Fire lit in Caeryl’s eyes. “If that is possible,” she said fervently, “you can do it. You are Gabe, you are *my* Gabe! Honor and glory, that’s what you are! By all the gods, Gabe! You *will* do it. And we will be back together... again...” Suddenly the fire vanished from her eyes, drowned in tears that welled up despite her best efforts. Her fingers clawed into his chest, and she whispered helplessly, “Gabe, my Gabe...”

The human sat straight, his eyes focused on Toriel. The elder elf nodded calmly, understanding fully.

The next morning Gabe had packed a sack of belongings and fastened it to the saddle of Taresh’s horse. The Ryelneyd warrior’s sword was on his belt, his own elven bow in a saddle bag of the horse. In the other, Yelarnyi had stowed plenty of food for the boy’s journey.

Caeryl was at the window of her house, tears glistening on her face. She had said her good-byes to her husband the night before, in all the ways she could have thought of, and now there was no way she would prolong the suffering.

Only Toriel was with Gabe, holding the horse for the human. “You don’t believe in what you told my daughter, do you?” the elf asked calmly.

“No,” Gabe shook his head. “If it is true what the warriors said, there is no honor or glory in the world that can buy me free of the blood feud. Nothing short of Vetora’s death.”

“And his son will carry on the feud.”

“Right.” Gabe looked towards his house, smiled at Caeryl, then turned his gaze back to Toriel. “As you said, the only way to stop the feud is when all the members of one line are dead.”

The elf frowned. “There must be dozens of relatives of Vetora in that tribe. You can’t seriously...”

Gabe shook his head. “Not alone. Master Toriel, I promised Caeryl that I would find honor and glory in the world outside. That is what I will do, but with that I will not buy myself free of the feud. I will buy an army to carry my vengeance to Vetora and his kind.”

Toriel considered the thought for a while. His tapered ears were quivering. Eventually he said, “That will take time, Gabe. You are human, you do not have our lifetime.”

The boy smiled openly. “You taught me much, Master Toriel. I may not have the time, but I have elven patience. And a reason to come back.”

They looked at each other, seeming more like father and son than ever before – regardless that one was a blue-skinned elf of less than six feet, and the other a muscular giant of a human towering more than an entire foot above the other. “Then go,” Toriel said, “and do what you have to do, Gabe, son of Karungal.”

“No.”

The elf raised an eyebrow, frowned at the single flat word.

“I am Gabe, son of Karungal – and Toriel. Remember that, father of mine.”

A smile spread on the elf's face, slowly, sneakingly. By the time that Gabe had mounted his horse and ridden away from the farm, it encompassed all of Toriel's face. “Be sure that I will remember it,” he whispered, “beloved son of mine.”

THE BEGINNING