

A Difference Between Greys

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A Difference Between Greys

by [Kastaka](#)

Summary

"Our people are dying," she said.

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

"Our people are dying," she said.

The others had long since retired, but Meena and I were still sitting on the corner table - literally on the table, as the stools and benches were set too low to comfortably reach our half-forgotten pints.

"People are always dying," I reminded her.

"Other people are always replacing them, too."

I took another swig of ale while I considered my reply. I didn't want to have to say it first, but it was clear what she was getting at.

"We couldn't have brought him with us," I told her. "He wasn't out of the rock; he wouldn't have survived the extraction, let alone the journey."

"It's not about him." She took another gulp from her tankard. "It's about all of us. We can't just hide out here forever - dwindling away to nothing. One day, all that will be left is a legend of short people, and a pair of doors that can never be opened."

"The whole army could not hold the under-home. How might the few of us re-take it?"

"Haven't we learned anything, up here on the surface?" she asked. "Don't you feel stronger - isn't everyone wiser now, less set in our ways?"

"Our underestimation of the foe was the major error of our ways. Going back would simply repeat the same mistake."

"Then we must establish a new home. Before there are none of us left to do it."

"None of us know how," I reminded her. "Or we'd have done it already. Karan might even now have found a new site, and have started work."

"Or been eaten by rocs, more likely," she retorted. "Even if we could find him - surely he would have a better head start if he could study the old Home. We wouldn't need to hold it, for that to happen."

I finished my drink.

"I think it's well past time for a well deserved rest," I declared, hopping off the table. "I'll see you in the morning."

Deep in the mountain, ancient mechanisms grind painfully into motion.

No-one is here to untomb the child, so the emergency automation goes to work. It is not as gentle as the ceremonial picks that should crack the shell of rock around him, but as a large

piece flakes away, he rolls out unhurt onto the cold stone floor.

Confused, he opens his eyes, and then opens them again to check that there was no mistake.

Nothing changes, whether his eyes are closed or open. But he can feel the smooth surface of worked stone beneath him, and levers himself gingerly up from where he fell, feeling around for edges, finding nothing.

The great reception hall is generously proportioned.

And he is so very small.

Wobbling on new, uncertain legs, waving hopeful, questing hands, he stumbles his way to the slightly rougher wall. He rests for a moment against it, exhausted and bewildered. He has no reference for what should be happening to him, but something in him expects... voices.

"Hello?" he attempts.

The darkness answers only with echoing silence.

For a moment he hugs the wall, considers sliding down it, fitting himself into the corner - going back to the embrace of the stone, as closely as he can recreate it in this strange new world of space and movement.

Everything is wrong. He does not know what would be right. But everything is wrong.

But there is something within him that calls for him to continue. Trailing one hand along the wall, learning his balance, something in him thrilling at the body that responds to the commands of his mind, the legs swinging in marching time.

Deep within the mountain, driven by old instinct, the dwarfling feels his way ever forward.

"There's still the fabled treasure of the sewers," our rogue, Jala, reminded us all.

We six dwarves were sitting around the remnants of a great feast - what this land deemed to be a 'full cooked breakfast', and we had consumed it to its fullest.

"I hate sewers," complained Mallac. "How am I meant to attract the ladies when everything smells? We'll spend as much as we get from it replacing all our kit. And I like this hammer. You can never get sewer rat out of a good hammer."

"My contacts at the Tower will pay well for a list of reagents that could keep us in work for another four generations," Talna suggested, producing a list from her voluminous blue robes.

"I'm with Talna. Nothing like a bit of fresh air in the hills and forests, eh?" said Sterac.

"Have they at least marked which ones are poisonous, or liable to explode, this time?" asked Meena.

I felt the weight of gold coins left in my pouch, and came to a decision.

"Or," I offered, "perhaps... perhaps we could adventure for ourselves this time."

That had got their attention. All eyes were now on me.

"It has been a long time since we abandoned the dwarf-home. We have all learned much - but none of us have learned anything that will keep us from dwindling. One day there will be no dwarves left in this land... unless we reclaim what we have lost."

"There's six of us," said Talna. "We lost six thousand in the exodus. Even my new-found powers cannot bring us the magnitude of miracle that we would require to prevail."

"Six can tread more lightly than six thousand," said Jala, from behind her dark face-cover. "We could at least liberate some of the remaining hoard. They can't possibly still be on sufficient guard."

"At least the way there will be filled with dwarf-remnants and adventure!" proclaimed Mallac. "Perhaps even some dwarf-ladies who are not yet inured to my charms..."

Something strange; something new.

All things are strange. All things are new.

But the outlines of things are emerging.

First, beneath his hands; the outlines of carven shapes, deliberate, and as he progresses he realises that many of these are made, very approximately, after his own form; a forest of legs is his first indication, but he determinedly scales one and finds torso, arms, beard, head.

Now, a greyness in a world that he had thought nothing but black.

He heads towards the greyness, not stopping to feel every graven boot along his path, as it begins to separate shapes from other shapes, but so dimly, so faintly. It feels like there should be something else, a creature of flickering shadows rather than this faint steady glow.

Then he finds it - the source of the greyness - a jumble of roughness.

It is not just grey, here. Something strange is happening to the world; there is a difference between greys which is different from just their light or shadow. And the roughness has claimed the great corridor of statues into which he was birthed.

A roughness and a straggling, upwards.

Up to the goldness - not just greyness - above.

Like him, this rock... this rock moves...

Talna raised her hands, for the last time that day, and faded from sight.

"They're not in much of a hurry," reported Sterac, cocking an ear to the approaching footsteps. "In good order, though. Maybe half a dozen?"

Jala stripped the surface off another vine and held a small vial up to catch the sap. "I wouldn't think they're expecting much resistance. Anyone else who had got caught up in this would be dead by now. If you have anything like a normal biology, this is some extremely potent contact poison."

Meena growled and sheathed another blunted knife. "Unless you've got a saw in there somewhere, it's going to do well enough if they have any decent weaponry."

"If you can all just move up, maybe I can get a good swing out," said Mallac, who was trying to isolate all of his considerable weight on one strand. "Or if you let me and Davan up there..."

"Into what space were you expecting us to move?" asked Meena.

We were suspended some way up one of the local trees, in a cunningly constructed net of poisonous vines. Talna had escaped through a spell of minor displacement, but the vines were resilient against fire and knives, and neither I nor Mallac could get a good swing with axe or hammer without injuring our own people.

Sterac was still listening intently. "They're slowing down. You can see them, look, over there. Spears three times their height. They've seen we're still moving. They're conferring about what to do."

I looked in the direction Sterac indicated, with a bit of undignified hauling around on the vines. There were six dwarves in a beautiful rectangular formation - much neater than I'd ever managed to get the party to assume, but of course we weren't all the same kind - each with the pelt of some kind of canid hung from their head, the top jaw of each dead muzzle rearing up over their forehead.

Eventually they came to some kind of decision, and marched away again.

"Maybe if Mallac and Sterac get over towards the tree, and Jala and Meena can cling onto the outward side..." I suggested.

I was still hacking fruitlessly at the net when Sterac indicated that the footsteps had returned, more of them; the six from before, and two others, not quite in rhythm.

Once they came into view, the situation became a little clearer: the lead figure had the head of a giant owl for a hat, and the dwarf beside her had a great cat's pelt over his head.

"Greetings, fellow dwarves!" I called out, as soon as they could hear me; no need to give them the initiative. "I fear there has been some kind of misunderstanding."

"Indeed," replied the owl-dwarf. "Anyone else caught in these nets would be dead. What brings our far-flung cousins to our lands?"

"A quest," I replied, "to secure the future of our kind - of all dwarf-kind."

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Mallac readying himself to make some kind of comment. Sterac 'accidentally' shifted into a position where he 'slipped' and elbowed him in the ribs, causing him to lose his balance. Instead of contributing to the conversation, he was forced to put all his effort into not sprawling behind me in an undignified fashion.

"Interesting," she said. "Well... we are not entirely without manners. The wolves will cut you down and you will join us for a great feast tonight. If you should try to head back the way you came, or send any kind of warning - or make off with anything of ours - they will not hesitate to cut you down in a more final sense."

Rocks moving...

Catching at him, dragging him down, tumbling him over and over...

He lies still for a long time in the darkness, afraid that moving will beget more moving, that the tumbling and the grinding will start again and maybe this time it will never end.

And his legs simply will not move at all.

But his curiosity will not let him stay still forever. Tiny hands reach out, explore the places within reach. The rough, jagged surfaces of rocks call back to them.

But then there is something different.

It is smooth, and it curves up to a point, and the point is sharp. It is smooth, and curves down to a different kind of smoothness, a cold song with strange edges.

He finds another smoothness, and gently tugs the helmet loose.

And starts to dig.

It was several days later that we reached the ocean.

I had always known there was an ocean in the way, but somehow I had put it to the back of my mind, caught up in the excitement of the quest - the rightness of our cause - the return of responsibility, rather than simply continuing to run away.

Perhaps I had imagined we would find a port, or a shipwright, or some kind of magical sea-transport. But the lands between this ocean and the place of fortified towns and huddling villagers that we had settled as adventurers were marshy and no good for farming.

So they were filled only by hunters and gatherers like our new acquaintances - the Owl of Wisdom, the Loyallest of Cats, and the Seal-Cloaked Stranger. I did not recognise them, although once they had dug along to my conduction, and they did not volunteer what names they might once have gone by.

The Seal-Cloaked Stranger had been cast out of a fishing tribe, a little way along the coast, but we had found nothing but empty driftwood huts, both smashed by some kind of great wave and chewed upon by some kind of great swamp-beast.

They had, however, left the makings of canoes.

Mallac began to draw enthusiastically in the damp sand, sketching out a great canoe-raft that could bear us and significant quantities of supplies across the ocean's unknown breadth.

I didn't have a better idea, so I supported him, but I worried. We had certainly come across the ocean to get to this land, but what I could remember of the journey was not at all pleasant. While a dwarf loves ale and feasting, provided we are not doing very much, we can persist for a surprisingly long time on nothing whatsoever.

Also, we had no navigational instruments or charts. While we could almost certainly get across the ocean to somewhere, finding our lost home seemed rather an unlikely outcome.

Thus, I was brooding on a nearby hillside and gazing into the endless blue sky when that which was not a cloud came to move within it.

Digging....

Digging...

Digging...

Light seeps through the cracks again. Pebbles rain down as he redoubles his pace.

Digging...

The light is golden. In a final shower of pebbles, he emerges from the ceiling - overlooking a great passageway.

It is a long way down.

There is only one way down.

He places the helmet on his head.

And he lets himself fall onto the great pathway.

They had written off Seal-Cloak's village as not likely to contain any worthwhile salvage, which caused some measure of hurt feelings when the scientist - the one with the goggles - mentioned it.

Two of them had come down for the feast. The scientist with his white coat and the admiral with his red coat and golden braid; he still missed his diamond pick, he admitted, and was eager to see its like again.

They assured me that Karan, the explorer, was with them - but he was piloting the dirigible, which apparently took some doing even when it was moored to the sturdiest-looking ruined hut.

There was a distinct lack of land-based animal life in the area, but Seal-Cloak had done some amazing things with fish. And some 'amazing' things with the fermentation of fish, as there were also a distinct lack of fruit trees and they weren't exactly planning to be in one place for long enough to do anything with the salt-marsh grasses even if they did produce the right kind of seeds.

The assembly of the feasting-table had been much more enthusiastic than the assembly of the canoes, now abandoned and partially cannibalized for furniture, as it was clear the dirigible was a much more sensible ocean-crossing choice.

"The goblins have only become bolder, since the diaspora," the Admiral told us. "There is a remnant fighting them, but there is no way to establish a dwarf-hold until we have defeated them, or they will simply find it and colonise the dark places again. That is, supposing they are not already there."

Part of me wanted to be ashamed for abandoning the other dwarves to the fight. But they did not appear to have had much success, and my few people here had at least amassed a few tricks among us.

"If that means the goblins have left to take the fight elsewhere," Talna told him, "then that means we could return behind their backs; I can set up an illusion across the Hold entrance that will keep them from finding their way back."

"We still have no idea of their numbers," the admiral cautioned her. "For all we know there is a healthy population in our dwarf-hold, as well as a force out of it."

"If we can retrieve just a few of the best gemstones, I can set up powerful defences within."

"We'll need supplies to establish ourselves, though," said Meena. "Unless we want to go much deeper and find what the goblins were living on - even assuming it would sustain us too - or risk breaking the illusion by hunting outside. I doubt the goblins had the patience to tend the mushroom-farms adequately, if even they wanted to, since they had with unrestricted access to both the outside and the deeps from which they came."

"The goblins have plenty of supplies," muttered the admiral darkly.

"Then we'll take them," declared Sterac. "Unless you want to quest for another decade to buy enough mushroom-seed and iron rations?"

The boulder was rolling down the slope, and I could only content myself with having given it the initial impetus; interfering with its path at this point would be the kind of useless fiddling that crushes the insecure king, I assured myself.

We were well underway, over the endless waves of the grey-green ocean, under the endless waves of the grey-white clouds, when I thought to ask.

"Why did you change your mind about stopping?"

"Your hair," replied the admiral. "Our scientist studied the door to the original dwarf-hold for months, but while it will open to anyone from the inside - as the goblins proved - they, as well as us, discovered that it will not open so readily."

"It needs royal blood," added the scientist. He stood over at a console of levers and buttons, staring into some kind of scope and occasionally adjusting a control based on some inscrutable purpose of his own.

I did not say, but Meena's hair is also ginger, and we did not think she had any connection to the royal family.

He survives the fall.

It is a long and winding path, and at the end is a great door.

It opens at his touch - as though it has been expecting him - as though it has been expecting someone like him.

The golden light floods into a great hall, the pillars reaching up into the ceiling. He stands there for a moment, seeing an impossibly tall figure reach forward from his position... his shadow, stretching across the ground...

And then he walks forwards, in reverence and amazement, towards bright sigils he cannot understand.

But he feels as though there is something he should understand.

There is a story here.

Figures just like him - if a little taller, maybe - are lining up before mounds of that golden light made manifest as an object.

They have some kind of tool, and they are hitting the goldenness and taking it away with them in some kind of contrivance.

But there are other things. Stranger things. They have arms and legs and heads but they are not like him.

There is a strange breeze behind him, but when he looks around there is nothing to be seen.

"I suppose we have to fight now," the war-leader said, "now that you've painted a huge target on us."

She was resplendent in her golden pauldrons and plate, and had the longest beard of any of the rag-tag band of dwarves that were gathered around in the forest camp. I would never have been able to spot them, but Karan and the scientist had guided the dirigible to their location with apparent ease.

Jala had reunited with an old friend in the camp, and had taken him off into one corner. His small smile told me they were clearly plotting something, but also that they weren't about to inform the rest of the group as yet.

"About time too," declared a fearsomely muscled dwarf with a green scarf. "Now we've got a few more, we can really take the fight to them. Even if we lose, isn't it more dwarven to face the foe than to hide in a damp hole full of trees?" She wrinkled her nose at the nearest tree in disgust, as if it had personally offended her.

"I think you'll find it's more dwarven to survive and keep going, darling," interjected another survivor. Somehow his blonde wig was still immaculate despite the conditions this remnant band had been reduced to, living in simple lean-together wooden huts in the mud.

"Don't worry," declared Jala's friend, coming out of their conference. "I don't think any of us plan to die any time soon."

The war-leader looked up at the eerie green glow that was making its way through the canopy. "They'll attack at night," she said. "They always do."

"Not," replied Jala, "if we poison their dinner first."

She had acquired a mortar and pestle from somewhere, and was grinding some leaves in it with great concentration.

"Have you found something sufficiently poisonous then?" I asked. Someone had to be the one to ask.

"Already had that," she answered, waving in the general direction of The Loyallest of Cats. "This is for faces."

"Faces?"

She dipped a half-dried sea sponge from the fishing village into the concoction she had developed, and applied it to her old friend's face. It lent his skin a convincing green hue - just like a goblin.

"Faces," she announced, triumphantly.

There are more glyphs, strewn across the wall, that look like him.

They are sitting and greatly enjoying something.

He is so hungry. He licks the pictures of the things they are enjoying.

It does not satisfy him.

Then there is someone with a helmet just like his, and a great beard like his hair, and a strange vessel; and they are dancing; and they are falling.

An odd feeling wells up inside him.

It is not an unpleasant feeling. It is a happy feeling.

He opens his mouth and it pours out - laughter - laughter...

the helmet clangs to the ground.

He is suddenly sobered by the sound. It sounds so final, even though he snatches it up immediately and returns it to his head.

There are more of the creatures that are not him.

They charge towards the creatures that are like him, and their yellow eyes are pitiless.

But then there is more dancing, and the one who looks a lot like him.

He studies that for a long moment before moving on.

There is not much more to go. In another part about how the goldenness was harvested... the fresco ends.

It did not look like it was meant to end.

There is another feeling inside him. It also wants to get out. It wants to get out of his eyes.

His legs are weak. Before he knows it, he has fallen to his knees.

His face is wobbling, and something is falling from his eyes.

He feels like he should collect it, but he hasn't the energy.

Something is terribly wrong.

"I still don't feel like this is very honourable," complained Mallac, as they strode into the goblin village.

Meena snorted. "Maybe one of them won't have been hungry, and then you can have the honourable combat your heart desires. Or, we can eat all the stew and get on with what we are supposed to be doing."

The poisoning had been extremely effective. All that remained was to gather up the supplies that we would need to survive in the dwarf-hold until the mushroom harvest could be re-established, and continue on our way.

"We can re-establish our honour when we've reclaimed our home" I said.

"You can't re-establish honour," scoffed Mallac. "Not that we had any to start with, living like outcasts in the human lands."

"In that case, did we really have anything to lose by this?" I asked.

"That's a dark path," warned Mallac. "Do you really want to walk it?"

"Oh, come on," said Karan, stuffing everything that might plausibly be useful in a big sack. "Goblins are dead, we're going to reclaim our home, they started it; what else did you want?"

"He wanted a fight," replied Jala. She was being more picky in her looting. "To show off his big boy muscles, didn't you, dear?"

"Well, there are more ladies to impress," conceded Mallac, glancing meaningfully at one of the newly-met forest dwarves.

Something like a drumbeat - feet on stone...

marching.

Marching like...

He looks up again.

Like the dwarves marching in their lines, on the mosaic.

He picks up the helmet and places it back on his head. Nothing should be out of place

The marching is getting closer, and he feels very small and very alone. He should not be alone.

The golden light pouring through the great door illuminates the vast open spaces of the room, and he feels afraid.

He looks at the dark place where he had seen movement - but that was not safe - he saw movement there.

Then he looks up at the throne.

Behind the throne.

We moored up on the ledge by the great doors, thanks to a device that Kazak thrust into the bare rock.

"We haven't too many of these left," he muttered as he placed it.

But here we were - before the great doors, supported by the great pillars, over which stood the great lintel. Jala was already severing the various ropes and climbing equipment the goblins had secured to the ledge, with an expression of great distaste.

This was it.

I could see that Meena was looking speculatively at the doors. Her hair was just as ginger as mine, although I'd never thought about it before; it was an uncommon colour, sure, but not by that much.

No. This would be my triumph - or failure. This was my expedition.

I strode forwards from the group and placed one hand, reverentially, on the outer door.

Rock began to grind. Old mechanisms shook off the dust of years and set themselves in motion.

And the doors opened.

Suddenly everyone was cheering and whooping behind me. I considered turning and joining in the celebration, but I did not want to lose momentum now - and the golden light that illuminated the winding path between the outer doors and the inner keep was as strong and welcoming as ever.

I had forgotten how strange it was, the light of the sun; how it was not yellow enough, except perhaps at sunset.

As I strode onwards, I could hear the others gradually calming down and forming up behind me.

"Hey," said Meena.

She had come up beside me; there was easily room for two abreast on the path, although any more would have been somewhat perilous.

"We're here," I said, wonderingly. "We're back."

"Told you," she said.

And I was reminded that it was her idea in the first place. And for a moment I felt ashamed, because I should have let her touch the outer doors; because I should have let her have the victory.

"We're not done yet," I reminded her, instead.

From just behind me, I heard Jala speak up.

"Inner doorway's open," she said.

Outlined in golden light, one of the two great inner doors stood open.

Meena stepped back, deliberately, as I approached the inner doors.

I considered drawing a weapon; I considered being ready for a fight. But the others behind me would be ready. I could hear Mallac hefting his hammer, Jala's knives whispering.

And in some way I did not want to be... I did not want to be like them any more. I did not want to be dishonourable. I did not want to be the lurker in shadows. I wanted to return home in triumph, not creep into my own Great Hall like a burglar in the night.

Oh, that I had a concept of night to begin with!

That was sadness enough.

So it was with empty hands and with open triumph that I cast open the other door and strode confidently back into my domain.

The hall was, essentially, empty; the throne was still there, the great unfinished mural, the strong pillars rising up into the ceiling. The other dwarves wasted no time bringing in the supplies, arraying themselves around the hall, making themselves at home.

I looked back at Meena one more time, but she had happily arrayed herself next to Jala and Talna, a huge bag of supplies over one shoulder, and she was sharing a knowing smile with the enigmatic rogue.

So I marched forward, and I seated myself on the great throne.

It was a beautiful scene: my people, new and old, arrayed before me; the golden light shining through the inner doors; everything right with the world, if just for the moment...

...but they seemed to be expecting something of me.

Maybe I should make a speech?

But no - several of them were looking off to the side.

And there was the smallest of noises, down and to my right.

I looked there immediately, fearing danger - although surely my people would have intervened if there was danger...

...to see a tiny version of my own face, complete with the cutest, tiniest beard, looking nervously up at me.

I could not help but break into a smile, although I tried to make it the most comforting, most fatherly smile I could muster after the long days of travel.

The dwarfling was understandably nervous; in fact, he seemed to have frozen into a statue of fear. That wouldn't do - not for my son - not for the Prince.

So I reached down and I swept him up off the ground, like I had seen many a mother do with their child.

I did not have much experience of children, but after the first moments of additional startlement, the young dwarf clambered up my arm and reverentially took the rather scraped and battered helmet from his head, and reached up to carefully balance it on top of my own.

This achieved, he hopped onto my knee, where he sat with evident satisfaction.

Of course. A King needs a crown.

End Notes

Beta'ing thanks to Isis from #yuletide!

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