

## The Shortest Path

By Adam Coyne

Orbin Dallas usually disliked travelling by foot. His stocky size (children regularly teased him, calling him stumpy) coupled with his tendency to carry more than he could, meant that whenever he was not journeying by carriage, the dwarf was reliably slow and grumpy.

He trudged along a barely visible path, ancient and broken, and covered in fresh snow, the outline of a solitary chapel fading into the distance behind him.

It was not long after dawn, and Orbin had an arduous journey ahead of him if he was to reach the city before sundown. He knew he could undertake such a task in a single day - he had needed to do so twice before now - but it meant not stopping to rest and certainly no delays. He was not looking forward to it.

With a begrudging sigh, he picked up his pace, as far as his legs would allow, and pushed forward through nearby fields. None of the holy folk were tending them today and they lay bare and uninviting. He didn't blame the farmers; no one

could tend to crops while the snows were down from the highlands.

Wheat and corn dominated Orban's surroundings, towering overhead like a forest of thin bleached saplings, swaying in the wind. The dwarf wondered aloud whether the ears would reach above a human's head, and decided that they would have done. Not for the first time he cursed the fate of the dwarves, to have been made so small, and the humans, tall. He let his hands brush gently against the stalks as he walked.

At length, as he approached the edge of the fields and, even as the sun approached its highest point, a chill wind groped its way into Orban's clothes. He braced against it.

It was at this point, just as he wrapped his scarlet cloak around him and bent forwards against the cold, that the dwarf heard it. An annoying high-pitched squeaking accompanied sounds of a scuffle to his right, through the tall golden stems.

As Orban moved through the corn he hoisted a large axe from his shoulder, gripping it deftly with both hands. The scuffling grew louder and a sharp bleating now accompanied the squeals. Using the haft of his axe to more easily slide apart the towering plants he came across a wholly unexpected sight at the base of a large oak just past the field's edge.

Flattened against the very bottom of the trunk was a child, shrinking as best as he could, cowering with sheer terror plastered across his pale face. His knuckles were white from gripping the bark at his back tightly and his trousers were ripped.

Even as Orban raised his axe and readied to render assistance he slowed and stopped, marvelling at the situation unfolding in front of him.

The terrifying creature prepared to charge once more at the helpless child, lowering its head, two small, stubby horns protruding and pointed at the child's chest.

As it ran at the boy, Orban realised several things at once about the noises he had heard. First, the bleating was nothing more than the sound of this juvenile goat announcing its attack in the most threatening way it could manage. Second, the scuffle had obviously been these two creatures locked in the battle of their lives and third, now that the child had opened its mouth, that it was the source of the

squealing. That, and it was no more a child than the dwarf was.

"Don't just stand there you overgrown potato, help me!" shouted the gnome, his high pitched voice as annoying as the situation was hilarious.

Orban stared a moment longer, a smile cracking on his face until the kid charged at the diminutive gnome, who let out a thoroughly terror-stricken and even higher-pitched scream, trying his best to disappear entirely within the tree trunk behind him, eyes screwed shut.

"Away with ye!" Orban shouted, striding forward and waving his arms. The tiny goat, now facing a more sturdy foe than the gnome, promptly halted its attack and disappeared into the foliage, a final threatening bleat thrown in the gnome's direction.

"That'll teach you, you stinking, hairy, stupid..." the gnome's insults trailed off as it shook its fist at the bushes through which the kid had fled. "Ha-ha!" he shrieked, spinning around and running toward Orban, "you did it! Let me tell you I would'a been a goner if you hadn't showed up just then!"

"I really don't think-" began the dwarf, but he was cut off before he could continue.

"Terrance Proudbottom."

Orban blinked, unsure what to say.

The gnome repeated the words with a smile. "That's me, anyway..." He seemed to be waiting for something.

"Ah, Orban Dallas," the dwarf replied.

"And what are you then," Terrance asked, quizzically inspecting the dwarf while walking circles around him. "Some kind o' giant I suppose?"

"Listen here, you mad bas-"

"I meant no offence m' lad, none at all!" Terrance laughed, "It's just you're the largest fella I've met in days, and compared to me you're certainly a big'n."

"I'm a dwarf," Orban grumbled into his beard.

The gnome clapped his hands together with glee, almost hopping on the spot. "Fantastic! Let's get going then, shall we?" He made to walk past Orban, his merry little face brushing the dwarf's elbow.

"Oh no you don't!" Orban said, grabbing the gnome and hoisting him into the air by the back of his jerkin.

"Oi! What you playin' at?!" Terrance squeaked, thrashing his arms and legs in vain.

"Hold still you little- look I'll put you down if you just *hold still*, alright?" Orban placed the gnome squarely down on the ground and folded his muscular arms, staring at him from under bushy, furled eyebrows. "Now," he said sternly, "Just what do you think you're playing at?"

"*Playing* at?" Terrance repeated. "I'm no' *playing* at anything. You saved my skin from that, that, *monster!*" the gnome waved his arms angrily at the bushes into which the baby goat had vanished. "We're bonded for life now mate! Now let's get going, eh?"

"Saved? Bonded? What are you on about?"

"It's how it works. I'm a gnome. You saved my life. Now we are bonded until one of us dies."

Orban shook his head dumbly. "No... no, no that's not what I- I don't want- Just go away will ye, ye little-"

"Can't. There's no going around it laddy. Face it. We couldn't be closer now if we were shackled up in bed together." Terrance took a tentative step to the side, assessed the reach of Orban's arms and, taking a second cautious sideways step, strode past the dwarf. "Uh, shall we? Where we headed anyway?"

Orban Dallas stared at the gnome with an open mouth for a moment, his eyes flicking from side to side. Dropping his shoulders and realising he had no suitable come back, he turned around and followed Terrance slowly. "We're headed to the city," he said grudgingly. "Ya wee snot," he added under his breath.

The two loped along casually, tall, bright trees rolling slowly by on either side as the fields disappeared over their shoulders. The ground changed gradually beneath their feet, maintained grasses and crops giving way to wilder shrubs and weeds. After some time the greenery began to recede into the cracked and dried dirt beneath their feet, to be replaced by flat, grey rocks, growing steadily in size.

"Aho, this is fun, eh Orban?" called the gnome, bounding on ahead, his eyes darting from side to side.

Orban grumbled darkly, trying not to look in the gnome's direction. He paused midstep, suddenly aware of the sharp, towering rocks surrounding him. Looking around, his gaze automatically followed Terrance's, taking in the mass of grey on all sides. The path they had been following seemed to split

ahead and disappear behind cliffs overgrown with mosses and vines.

Walking over to the junction, the dwarf inspected the area carefully, kneeling to the floor and running a hand over the ground. Finding the telltale markings he was looking for, Orban stood, stretched and took the left fork, following Terrance around the corner and entering the endless maze of rocks that wound its way to the city.

As the sun slunk behind low, dark clouds, Orban found himself asking Terrance about his life. They swapped anecdotes, slowly getting to know one another on the path, despite the dwarf's initial reluctance.

After twisting and turning back and forth between the imposing rocks, the two undersized travellers eventually came across yet another fork in their path and paused for a moment.

Orban turned to the left and took a step forward, at the precise moment that Terrance made to continue down the right fork.

"What ye doing?" the dwarf asked, looking over his shoulder.

"What?" Terrance replied, eyeing him with annoyance.

"Where the devil do you think you're going, tiny?"

"Tiny? *Tiny*? I'm going to the city, where are *you* going?" the gnome squeaked. "Bloody call me tiny," he added under his breath, keeping a silent, visible smile plastered on his face.

Orban planted his feet squarely apart, facing the gnome, and pointed behind him. "The city, is this way," he said, stabbing his finger down the left section of the path.

"Look," Terrance said, looking up at Orban, "Maybe the air is thinner up there and maybe you've forgotten, but the city is *this* way!"

"Oh no, you've lost yer wee mind, you... you goblin," Orban told him, annoyance catching in his throat. "I've been travelling to the city fer years. I'm telling you, it's this way."

Terrance eyed the path snaking behind the dwarf's back with deep suspicion, his brow furrowed heavily. "Come on, I think I know which direction to walk, I mean it's..." the gnome faltered, his mouth working wordlessly.

"Follow me," the dwarf said, rolling his eyes and turning away, not wanting to waste any more time on pointless arguing. He stamped forward, leaving the gnome standing alone.

Still unsure whether or not to trust Orban's judgement, Terrance lingered, only grudgingly following after a short time. He caught up with a brief jog, the disagreement already out of his mind and eager to push on.

As the duo took turn after turn within the neverending labyrinth, the sun began to recede behind thick clouds and soon enough they both felt the anticipation in the air: snowfall and high winds were coming.

They smelled the snow before they saw it, fresh and light, the flavour on the air tingling the back of their throats. Large, intricate snowflakes, innumerable in design floated down from high above, gradually blanketing the world around them.

Struggling forward, hot on the heels of Orban Dallas, the gnome tried not to let his anxiety take hold of him, but the fact of the matter was that with enough snow, he soon wouldn't be able to walk at all.

Orban stopped suddenly and looked up, squinting against the blinding white of the sky.

Shielding his eyes from the ever increasing snowfall, Terrance bumped into the dwarf's legs, unaware that he had stopped.

"Wha-?" he began, but Orban waved him off.

"We need to find shelter. No way we can continue through this. It's getting worse."

The gnome swallowed heavily, trying in vain to steady himself. Powerful tremors started to break across his body, finally giving in to the deep cold.

"And you ain't to be walking much longer, unless you're as light as an elf," Orban added. He reached down and hoisted Terrance off his feet by the neck of his jerkin and reaching back over his shoulder.

The gnome scrambled to grasp Orban's shoulders, digging his tiny feet into the folds of the dwarf's travelling cloak and holding on tightly as the dwarf plodded forward once more.

Struggling forward through the snowstorm, Orban silently considered their position. If the weather did not change, and soon, he knew they would be in serious trouble. Everyone knew that to be trapped without shelter in a blizzard was certain death, but his options were limited to continuing on regardless and hope to find shelter, or to turn back and hope

to reach the chapel or a lone farmhouse before his bones froze.

He decided to push onward, his powerful legs thrusting through the now waist-deep snow, with the tiny gnome shivering on his back.

Neither of them spoke. Had they been so inclined, the noise the snow made as it whipped past their ears was deafening. Even Terrance's characteristically jovial and excited outlook had been entirely extinguished by the storm, and Orban found it all too easy to slip comfortably into his usual, sullen mood.

After what seemed like an eternity of walking through the impenetrable white squall, their bodies verging on the point of seizing up from the cold, Terrance suddenly tapped Orban on the side of the head with a frozen hand. He cupped his hands over his mouth and shouted over the wind, directly into the dwarf's ear.

"Th- there's a c-cave!" he called, unable to stop his teeth from chattering. He pointed through the snow, uphill to the side of the path they were following in vain.

Orban squinted in the direction the gnome was pointing, but shook his head. "Ya seeing things, boy!" he shouted, but as he did, the wind changed and an opening in the constant sheets of sleet formed. It was there only for a second, but in that time, Orban could have sworn he had seen a dark shape above them in the rock face.

*It could be a cave*, he thought doubtfully to himself, but as he watched and the seconds passed, he couldn't make out any more. Thinking on his toes, he quickly turned aside and began the short climb slope, toward where he had seen the shape. If it really was a cave, it was their best hope to wait out the blizzard in safety.

After tripping on some hidden nook beneath the snow several times, Orban, with Terrance still clinging to his neck, breathed a ragged sigh of relief, his breath wisping up in front of his face.

"You have good eyes, Terrance," he said, as he lowered the shivering gnome to the floor and placed him on the dry, rock floor of their newly discovered cave. "Now at least we can shelter from this accursed storm."

The gnome shook himself over, reminding Orban of a diminutive bipedal dog he once saw, owned by a well-to-do lady in the City. He chuckled to himself.

"Blast it," Terrance cried, "but I'll never get the cold out of me bones."

"Can ye make a fire?" Orban asked, setting his pack down as far away from the cave's mouth as he could without venturing into the darkness.

Terrance's eyes bulged and he spluttered, "Eh, erm, well I, it's just that..."

"I'll take that as a solid no then will I? Look, is there anything ye can do? Anything useful right now I mean."

The gnome glanced around, his expression unhopeful. He looked up at Orban and shrugged.

"Bloody perfect," Orban mumbled to himself. "Stay here a moment will ye?"

Terrance started. "Where are you going?" he asked shakily.

"Need wood for the fire don't I?" Orban called as he pulled his cloak tighter and stepped back out into the snowstorm. "Don't touch anything," came his fading voice as he vanished behind a curtain of white.

Terrance glanced at the dark shadows at the back of the cave and thought resolutely that there was nothing in the world that could convince him to go anywhere right now. He sat down next to Orban's pack with his back firmly facing the darkness and rubbed his chest to warm up. Feeling a tingle on the back of his neck, he gulped heavily and closed his eyes, trying to ignore the nasty feeling he had that he was being watched.

It didn't take Orban long to return, arms laden with freshly cut branches from those trees which had limbs further down their trunks but were still unburied by the snow. He threw them down and reached for his pack.

"Pile them up will ye?" he instructed Terrance.

The gnome jumped at the chance to be able to do anything useful, and was doubly glad to be one step closer to having a glorious, shadow-banishing fire.

Once the gnome had piled the wood, Orban sprinkled a greyish powder over them from a pouch within his bag, and set to striking his flint roughly, trying to elicit a spark. It caught far sooner than he had expected, and before long the

cave was alight with dancing colours, the crackle of the splitting wood resounding deeply behind them.

"Hmm." Orban turned and stood looking toward the back of the cave. "Sounds like it goes back a ways, eh? Wanna have a look?"

Terrance shook his head violently. "No I do not," he said, folding his tiny arms across his chest.

Orban smiled as he reached into the fire and pulled out a brand. "Ye can always stay here on yer own..." he said, pulling a second branch from the fire and striding into the darkness, holding them out in front of himself.

The gnome wrestled with his fears for a moment, trying to weigh up which was the worse option, to be left alone by the light of the fire or to follow Orban into the unknown depths of the cave. In the end, his subconscious mind reminded him of his life bond with the dwarf, and hurried after him with a whimper.

Beyond the glow of Orban's twin torches, the darkness enveloped them completely. The cave quickly became a tunnel, too short for a man, but not low enough to trouble the dwarf. The ragged grey walls marched along with them, seemingly pressing in from both sides.

"How far do you think it goes?" Terrance asked, his tone cheekily inquisitive again, despite the gloom of the tunnel. He skipped just ahead of Orban's steady stride.

"I don't know," the dwarf replied, his eyes fixed on the blackness ahead of him.

As soon as he had spoken, the tunnel abruptly ended. Orban whipped his hand out and grasped the back of Terrance's jerkin, holding it firmly and preventing him from walking onward.

In front of them was a wide, low room, clearly carved out of the mountain by some unnatural means, judging by the smooth walls. It was more or less round, with no other tunnels leading either from or into it.

Along all the walls stretching about them, shelves had been affixed, with all manner of strange items lying upon them and on the far side a small table stood next to a simple cot of straw and furs. In the centre of the room, a heavy metal pot sat on a crackling fire, the flames flickering bright and hungrily. A low stone slab grew directly from the floor of the cave just beside it, with assorted ingredients strewn on top

of it, like a natural workbench. Candles littered the floor in groups, throwing a multitude of shadows in every direction.

Orban looked slowly and carefully about the room, scrutinising every object suspiciously with narrowed eyes. He let go of Terrance's back, relaxing almost imperceptibly.

The two left the tunnel behind and entered the room cautiously.

"Is this... usual?" the gnome asked, looking around nervously.

"Ah, no," Orban replied, "no, not really." He peered inside the cooking pot, but the thick steam rising from it prevented its contents from being revealed.

"What's that?" Terrance asked, pointing at the pot. "Is someone cooking?"

Orban looked from the pot to the strewn ingredients on the low stone table and around at the shelves. His eyes came to a rest on the cot.

"I think we should leave," he said, turning back to the tunnel.

A woman stood blocking the entrance. She looked ancient, at least far older than any human Orban had ever seen. When at first the dwarf had thought the woman short, he realised only now her aged back had long since folded over, and she was no longer able to stand at her full height. She looked at them with her crooked neck bent sideways, piercing, all-knowing eyes rolling around between thin, translucent eyelids.

Terrance noticed the woman and scuttled over to hide behind Orban's legs. The dwarf faced her square-on, unsure what to do.

"Get away from that!" the woman screeched suddenly, pointing a long, bony finger at the large cooking pot.

Orban and Terrance both started, though the dwarf was seasoned well enough to hide it. He sidestepped away, making sure to drag the gnome along with him. He cleared his throat and half his hands open to show he was not a threat.

"Ahem. We mean you no harm, old woman, we stumbled upon your..." he looked around briefly before quickly continuing, "lovely, home by accident. We were sheltering from the blizzard."

"What?" the woman cried, much louder than was necessary.

Orban wondered if she was deaf. He raised his voice. "We took shelter from the blizzard."

"What blizzard?" she asked, just as loudly, looking around the room quickly. She seemed startled, as if expecting snow and winds to lash about the very walls.

"Well obviously not in here ye daft-"

A swift kick silenced Terrance.

"The blizzard out there." Orban pointed past the woman's shoulder and down the tunnel. Only the tunnel wasn't there anymore. The woman stood in front of bare rock, plain and grey. Orban blinked around the room, confused.

A disconcerting grin spread over the woman's face.

"There's no storm out there," she crowed slowly, "but now that you're here why don't we have some fun, hmm?" She dashed toward them with surprising speed.

Orban took an unwilling step backward, stamping on Terrance's foot. The gnome squealed.

Before he could react, the old woman was pawing his clothes, patting him down and tugging him this way and that. She squeezed his arms, feeling his bulging biceps and nodding appreciatively.

"Yes, yes, you will do, hm?" The woman was talking to herself, still occupied with inspecting Orban. She ignored the gnome, which suited him.

Terrance was beside himself with fear and could barely move.

"Now then," called the woman, the *fun*."

Orban followed the sound of her voice to the other side of the room, belatedly realising that he had not seen her leave his side. "Enough of this," he said under his breath, and he reached for his axe.

"Now, now," said the woman, her voice oozing with glee, "I wouldn't do that if I were you. After all, how would you ever find your way out of here, hm?"

"I don't want to be stuck in here, Orban," squeaked Terrance, suddenly overcoming his fear enough to speak. In truth, the thought of being stuck in the room forever was far more terrifying to him than whatever he was now in the middle of.

Orban did not draw his axe, but did not remove his hand from its cool, metal head.

"There's a good boy," said the woman. "Nice, big, strong, boy, hm?"

"What do you want?" he demanded.

"Oh, not what I want, surely," she replied, giggling.  
"But what you want, hm?"

"I want to get out of here," Terrance wailed, quivering behind Orban's knees.

"Of course! Of course!" She clapped her hands merrily.  
"Answer me one question and you may leave, hm?" A wide grin broke across her wrinkled face.

Orban eyed her suspiciously. He knew better than to trust her, but a quick glance about the room reminded him that he had little choice. He also had the gnome to care for. Annoying as he was, Orban wasn't about to make any decisions that might jeopardise Terrance's safety. He nodded to the strange woman, signalling her to continue.

"A word of warning," she told him, "I wouldn't want to answer incorrectly." She winked hideously.

Orban tightened his grip on his axe. "Speak."

"Here I stand astride the furious winds,  
clean and green in my eyes.  
Strangers watch my back from hidden lands,  
while others curse me.  
If you seek to brave the current without felling,  
a miner, you should be."

Orban frowned. He wasn't a stranger to riddle games, but the ones he played were usually longer and rhymed. He repeated the words in his mind, visualising each and what they might represent. Standing astride a storm. Green fields in front. He didn't know what the strange, hidden lands might be. A river. A tree. The Storm River? Just as the last words revolved in his head, his mind's eye focused on the Sentinel. A mighty stone statue guarding the only bridge over the river. He had never taken the bridge, but had seen it from a distance.

He opened his mouth to reply, but Terrance beat him to it.

"A mountain," he squeaked confidently, his brow furrowed in concentration.

"What?!" blustered Orban, furious that the gnome should even have thought to answer. "How could it possibly be a mountain, ye stupid little--"

"Mining in the winds," Terrance told him proudly, as if this response cleared the matter up infinitely.

"I'll strangle you if we ever get out of here, gnome, I'll tell you that right now." The dwarf turned back to face the woman, whose hands were working themselves into strange and foreboding shapes. Her lips were moving as if she were talking constantly, yet no sounds came out.

"The answer is--"

The rest of Orban's sentence never left his mouth. A terrible clatter was the only sound now heard within the room as all of his axes, his pack and his clothes suddenly fell to the floor in a heap.

Terrance leaped back in surprise, staring with wide eyes at the space in which the dwarf had been stood a mere moment before.

He had vanished. Only his possessions remained, piled up.

"Orban?!" cried the gnome in despair. "Orban, where are you?! What have you done?!" Terrance looked up at the woman in terror, only she too had vanished, leaving the open tunnel in her place. The gnome wanted so badly to run to the tunnel and out of the cave. Even into the blizzard again, anything was better than this, he thought. Just as he made his mind up to run, movement caught his eye. He looked down at the pile of clothes and axes and saw a slight perturbation in the folds of cloth. He took a step back, unsure what new fear might take hold of him.

A small, pale green toad hopped out from a sleeve and landed on the cold stone with a slap.

Terrance looked at it, stunned. "O-Orban?" he stammered, "is that you Orban?"

The gnome bent down and picked up the toad with both hands. It was far too large to fit into his tiny pockets, so he clutched it to his chest and, without looking at anything but the tunnel, sprinted away as fast as his little legs could carry him.

He reached their now burnt-out fire and burst out into the daylight, not stopping until he was as far away from the cave as he could run.

Panting, he looked blankly about at his surroundings. There was not a single speck of snow. Neither on the ground nor in the sky. It was as if there had never been a blizzard.

He brought the toad up to his face and stared at it intently.

"Guess it's just you and me now my little friend," Terrance said gleefully. "Let's get on to the City, eh? We'll get you a nice pack to ride in."

The gnome took his bearings and strode off along the path, whistling to himself and pointing things out along the way to his new companion.

Orban the toad croaked, mournfully.