

PLUMDUFF POTATO-EYE

by

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Know your enemy was one of the necessities of winning any struggle, thought the young challenger as he peered through the underbrush at the giant. But—he chewed on a full pink lower lip—

He wished he hadn't.

Known.

The giant was so very—very—

Gigantic!

The giant lay down his axe, picked up the split logs, and walked over to add them to the neat pile under the rush covering—and the ground shook with each stride.

Seven and a half feet, maybe eight, and built broad for his height. A boulder moving. Thick and tough and—

The young man shuddered. Even in his carefully preserved quilted-leather armor, with his sword, would he be able to—

His shoulders stiffened, and that young, vulnerable lip pulled tight.

He would.

He had to.

* * *

Plumduff was aware of the intruder almost as soon as he established himself under the crisp-smelling mint bush.

Not that he heard him, the crisp *ka-chunk*, *ka-thwack* of the axe splitting dried wood would have covered louder sounds than dry leaves rustling.

Not sight, because the figure was well hidden in the dimness of the underbrush and late afternoon.

But this was Plumduff's woods, he had lived there long enough to be a part of it, his heartbeat pulsing somehow with the life around him, his senses so finely attuned that any disturbance out of the normal tugged at him.

He sighed, and lifted the axe extra high for the next stroke. Another one.

He sighed again, brought the axe down, and the log split with a reluctant *chufffff* into two neat sections.

(The watcher in the shadows saw and winced. One blow. The giant hadn't used a wedge and hammer, just the axe to split a log as thick as his own massive body.)

Plumduff carefully propped the axe against the stump he was using as a platform, and picked up the two sections, all senses alert.

Now?

Or later?

He straightened, knowing it was later. If it was now, he would have been attacked when he was most vulnerable, weaponless, bending over.

Small favors.

But was he condemned for the rest of his life to be a rite of passage, the demon each fledgling must conquer—or at least face?

What if one of them, lucky or skilled or whatever, succeeded.

With a world-weary shrug, he piled the two sections neatly in with the rest.

Enough splitting for a while. He looked over the branches he had brought in, selected the straightest one. Yes—he sniffed the spicy pine, discarded a couple of them, picked through—elm. His new chair would definitely be elm.

He held the branch up, measured it against his own brawny

forearm. Too small. He sorted through the pile of branches, chopped off, saved for kindling, patching, whatever.

That one. Yes—good size. And that one.

In a few minutes, he had four nicely straight pieces picked out, and was seated comfortably on his stump, working the bark off, carving them smooth and straight. The new legs. For his new chair.

The challenger slithered back through the underbrush. He would get his weapons, prepare himself, and—

Hit the giant at sundown, when he would be weary and slower?

But so would his opponent.

Tomorrow sunrise, when he would be sleepy and unaware?

Should he challenge first, and give up the advantage of surprise, or attack without warning, try to make the first blow the telling one.

Plumduff was wondering the same thing.

Would the lad challenge first, or attack without warning?

The young challenger was far enough away that he had risen to his feet and was about to return to his hidden gear when Plumduff spoke up, loudly, to his apparently empty clearing. "I'm getting rather tired of this, you know."

The youth in the woods froze. The giant was well away from him, but his voice was as large as the rest of him, and his conversational tones penetrated easily through the underbrush.

"What do you people think I am, anyway, a punching bag?"

The youth gasped. *The giant knew he was here!*

"Have you ever thought about it from my point of view?"

Was he going to attack?

"Here I am minding my own business, working away in my wood pile, and you're planning to rush up and attack me."

The youth in the wood debated running.

"Is that fair? What have I ever done to you, anyway?"

"You're a giant!" the interloper squeaked.

"No." Plumduff lined his four to-be chair legs up and lopped a fingerspan off one of them. "You're too short."

"I am not!" Without realizing what he was doing, the young man had drawn closer.

Plumduff took off another bit of wood. "Of course you are," he said calmly. "If we stood front to front, I doubt you'd come past my belt buckle. Obviously, you're far too short."

"I'd come well past your belt buckle, you—you giant," the young man asserted, glaring out of the bushes on the edge of Plumduff's clearing. "Giant," he repeated bitterly. "And"—getting his first good look at Plumduff's features—"you're ugly, too!"

Plumduff sighed. He'd looked at his own reflection often enough to know that, by normal human standards, he would never come in better than last in a male beauty contest.

"Yaaa." The attacker was working himself up. "Your mother was a demon, and your father a spavined horse!"

"Pffffaaa," Plumduff sputtered. "Do I really look like a horse, villager."

"Yes, you do, you—" the heckler started—and stopped. Plumduff's question had been asked in such a whimsical, mildly curious tone that it was hard to keep his own anger going.

"Look at me, do I really look like a horse," Plumduff repeated, still in that light (for such a deep voice) almost-teasing note.

The intruder looked.

"A horse?"

The youngster snickered. "No." Then, a rush of honesty: "Like a frog."

Plumduff frowned.

"Sort of. You have such a big jaw, the rest of your head looks too small, and those little black eyes, and—"

For the second time in as many minutes, Plumduff gazed at his four branches dubiously, and as he frowned in concentration, his tongue protruded to tuck into the groove between cheek and wispy-bearded chin.

"Your tongue comes out just like a frog," the young man finished triumphantly.

Plumduff, who would have sworn he had no shred of male vanity left, hastily pulled the offending organ back within the confines of his (it was rather large) mouth.

And too hastily shortened one of his to-be chair legs.

The youngster again, on a rude note: "If you're making chips for your fire, you're doing it right."

Plumduff frowned. Without his realizing it, the tongue crept out again. "It's going to be a chair," he informed. And lopped at the other three to match the too-short one.

Curious, Plumduff's would-be challenger wandered a little closer. "At the rate you're going at it," he observed, forgetting that he was talking quite amiably to the dreaded giant, "it's going to be about high enough for a two-year-old."

Plumduff's frown at that was ferocious—but somehow not frightening. The youngster smothered another snicker and said, "It's a job for two." His girlfriend was the village carpenter's daughter, and he had picked up plenty, though he himself was apprenticed to the smith. "Look, lay them flat on the ground, I'll line them up with another branch, and you can straighten them easily. And get them all the same length."

"All right." Hesitantly: "Thank you."

With both of them kneeling, staring at their work on the ground, Plumduff didn't look quite so large and menacing.

"My name's Gregoriat," the newcomer said suddenly as they were lining the pieces up.

"Plumduff," he replied automatically.

"Plum—" Gregoriat rocked back on his haunches and stared at the kneeling giant. He had a bald spot in the thicket of gray-ing black on his head, and it somehow made him look both less formidable and—and more human. "*—duff?*" He burst out laughing. "I never heard a name like that before," he managed to get out between spasms.

Plumduff sat back himself, rubbing absentmindedly at one eye, where a bit of grit or sawdust had gotten in and was irritating him. "My mother"—a smile—"who was not a demon, but a very, very wise woman, said that was the name of her favorite dessert, where she came from." He rubbed at the eye, again, squinting. "Far from here," he added.

"Must have been." Gregoriat's own eyes were watering—from laughter.

"She said that Plumduff was warm and rich and infinitely satisfying." He smiled, reminiscently. "And so was I. But she was

the one who was—" He sighed. "I miss her," he said, mouth drooping, "even now. And it's been many years."

Gregoriat's own mouth drooped. "I miss my mother, too," he admitted.

Both men were silent for a bit, grieving.

Until Gregoriat noticed Plumduff rubbing at his eye again. "Why do you keep grinding your eye?" he asked with all the directness of his youth.

"Was I?" Plumduff frowned. "Acch, there must be something in it."

"Well, don't rub at it like that, you'll just make it worse," Gregoriat scolded. "Here, turn so what's left of the light is on it—" He tugged at the man kneeling across the sticks, and Plumduff obediently rotated his large self.

"Now—" Gregoriat squinted, and his own tongue crept out from between his teeth. "Let's see—" He rolled down the lower lid of a huge but definitely human eye. "I don't see—yes I do! Wait a minute—" He tugged the tail of his not-too-clean shirt out and began gently probing.

"Hold still now—I think—yes—" He leaned back triumphantly, still holding the tail of his shirt.

"No, you don't, it still hurts. But thanks for trying."

"I did get it." He looked again, carefully. "I don't see anything else. Maybe it just scratched the lid a little and that's what hurts now. Do you have some water to clean it out with?"

"Pond's just a few steps." Plumduff rose, and Gregoriat, still kneeling, realized once again just how very, very large the giant was. "I'll be right back—or would you like a drink, too?" He reached out his large, grimy hand.

Gregoriat stared at the hand for a second, as large as the rest of the giant, and took in its unwavering offer of help, as well as its size. "Yes, I think I would—" He put his own hand in the large one—gingerly—and allowed himself to be drawn upward.

Big as he was, Plumduff wasn't clumsy. Gregoriat found himself neatly on his feet, and his hand wasn't even bruised.

"All the comforts." Plumduff laughed a few minutes later, drying his face on the tail of his own shirt. (Which had begun life as a bright red plaid blanket, on another world.)

"Fish." Gregoriat watched as a large shadow glided near the

surface and snapped up a fat dragonfly that had been trying for its own meal, and instead became one. "Water, and—" He couldn't help grinning. "Frogs?"

Plumduff grinned amiably back. "Fat ones."

"You're not fat," Gregoriat hastened to assure him.

Plumduff grinned wider. "Doubt I'd make as good eating as a frog." His face wrinkled ferociously. "But I'm sure hungry. How 'bout you?"

Gregoriat stiffened. Everybody knew about giants— "Bad time of day to catch frogs," he mumbled.

"Haven't been fishing either." Plumduff sighed. "Have to be 'taties again."

"'Taties?" Gregoriat wasn't sure what a 'taties was; he just hoped it wasn't any part of a Gregoriat!

"Um. Got plenty. Last year's, in my root cellar. Take a while to bake, though. Want to roast some pine nuts?"

Gregoriat was hungry. "Sounds good."

"To me, too. Cabin's there—" He pointed, though the small thatched-roof log building was pretty hard to miss. "Bank up the fire, I'll get the 'taties out of the cellar, get 'em started, then go out and gather some pine nuts while it's light enough to see—"

Gregoriat had been well brought up. "I'll help. Two gather faster'n one."

"Sure thing." Plumduff was already heading down some wood-planked steps. "Be right back with the 'taties."

Gregoriat leaned back against a rough wall in Plumduff's single room, comfortably overstuffed. The 'taties turned out to be lumpy, brown-skinned root vegetables that tasted mouth-watering eaten with chopped wild shallots and something Plumduff called tomatoes. The tomatoes had also gone into a wild greens salad, whose crispness had topped off the meal admirably. Along with some wild-honey mead, as smooth as anything the village could produce.

Gregoriat belched contentedly. That last round of mead had really been too much. But it had been so good. Like the 'taties. He said so.

"Taste better with a little melted cheese," Plumduff said with

a sly glint in his eye the tired youngster missed entirely. "Or butter. Now there's a feast for the gods themselves, 'taties slathered with butter and cheese, chopped onion, and maybe a little crumbled bacon—'course, can't keep a cow, m'self. But when I was younger 'n' smaller, 'n' folk didn't fear me so much, mother used to trade 'taties for cheese and butter— Never told 'em 'bout the 'tatie eyes, though—"

"'Tatie eyes," Gregoriat said on a contented yawn.

"Ummm." Plumduff had gotten out a carved pipe and filled it with dried leaves. "'Tatie's a root vegetable," he informed, carefully tamping. "Don't grow from seed, grows from pieces of the root—that is, the 'tatie itself. Eye's the part"—he chose a long slender twig, and thrust it into the glowing coals—"part of the 'tatie you need to plant to have the crop next year—" He drew in, and tossed the twig onto the coals.

"Eyes are like nuts," Gregoriat said on another yawn.

"Ah-um." Plumduff drew in contentedly. "Take a whole 'tatie, cut it in pieces, each piece grows a new plant next harvest. Lots of 'taties on each plant."

"Good crop." Gregoriat was almost asleep. But he was curious, too. There were times when the village went hungry.

"Real good crop." Plumduff was watching the half-sleeping young man through a plume of blue smoke.

"How you tell"—Gregoriat slumped a little more, his eyelids half closed—"where the eye is."

"Oh, you can see them." Plumduff's deep voice was infinitely soothing. "And if you're not sure, you just leave your 'taties in a warm humid room for a bit, 'stead of a root cellar. The eyes sprout, can't miss them then."

"Ummmm." Gregoriat snuggled down farther, his eyes closing all the way.

Plumduff gazed at him sadly. The problem was only postponed. Liking or not, come morning, the man would still feel impelled to challenge him. And he was getting older. Once he had been pretty sure of his abilities, could disable an opponent without doing too much permanent damage. But size or not, skill or not, he was getting older and his opponents younger.

Sooner or later it would be kill or be killed.

But not young Gregoriat.
Please, not young Gregoriat.

Gregoriat woke up slowly, started to stretch—
And finished waking up *very* fast.

Because he couldn't stretch. He was tied, hand and foot. He pulled, but the vines were strong ones.

He was tied! Helpless! In the giant's lair!

"Let me loose!" he yelled furiously, knowing it was futile. "You—you traitorous giant, you—you—vile betrayer, you—let me LOOSE!"

Nobody answered. Nobody came.

"Let me LOOSE!"

By the time Plumduff opened the hide door, some ten or so minutes later, Gregoriat was so hoarse, he was almost unintelligible, and his curses had degenerated to a monotonous sameness.

Plumduff waited until his captive had to stop to draw breath, and then he inserted calmly, "No. I'm sorry."

Loud enough that the hide door quivered: "*LET ME LOOSE!*"

"No." Plumduff walked over and squatted by the bound and furious Gregoriat. "I can't, son. But don't worry. You'll come out of this fine, just fine and dandy."

"Whatever that means, and whatever your word's worth," Gregoriat muttered hoarsely, his eyes shining with tears of pure fury.

Plumduff sighed. "Mam always used it, fine and dandy," he informed. "Means just what it sounds like, better than just plain good."

"Oh, sure." Gregoriat managed a creditable sneer. "Here I am, bound and helpless, and I'm going to be better than good? Oh, yes. Definitely. I do believe you."

Plumduff grinned. "What you mean is, go tell it to the Marines." Gregoriat just looked puzzled. "Never mind, lad. Those vines I tied you with stretch when they're wet. Once I'm gone, all you have to do is wriggle yourself out to the pond, it's not so far, and soak your wrists and ankles. Tied your wrists in front so you could do it without the risk of falling in and drowning. Take a while, I'll have a good head start, but you'll be free and safe enough."

"Only—" Gregoriat bit his lip.

"Only you were supposed to come here and challenge the mean, nasty old giant—" Even bound, Gregoriat snickered. "Don't you see, lad, you've succeeded. You challenged me, and I'll be gone. Never come back. You won, lad."

Gregoriat surprised Plumduff. "Why are you doing this for me?"

"Besides that I like you, lad?"

"That's not enough reason." Gregoriat sounded very grown up, all of a sudden.

"Well, son, want the truth?"

Gregoriat nodded.

"Doing it for me. You think it's fun, think it's pleasure, being the big, mean giant every would-be anything has to come and try his strength on? One challenger after another, and not taking no for an answer, neither? And sooner or later one of 'em wins and I'm dead, for what? For nothing? Because I'm tall and ugly? Because everybody who looks at me runs screaming, 'Giant'?"

"What's in it for me, I ask you? Besides staying alive, which wouldn't be no problem at all, if people would just stop treating me like some sort of monster, and leave me to it?"

He glared down at the silent Gregoriat. "How would you like to live like that?"

Gregoriat's gaze dropped.

"You wouldn't, would you?"

It was unanswerable. But Gregoriat tried. "If you explained—"

Plumduff snorted. "You think people stop and wait and listen. Unh-unh. It's get out the weapons and attack, 'fore I can open my mouth. You're the first one I've talked to in years, and you was just waiting till morn, wasn't you?" Gregoriat dropped his gaze again. "Well, wasn't you?"

Sullenly. "Yes."

"Even though I think you liked me, a little. 'Cause, young'n, I liked you."

"I have to." Gregoriat tried not to make it a whine; he didn't succeed.

"See." Plumduff spread his hands. "Case closed."

"But it isn't fair," Gregoriat burst out.

"Young'n"—Plumduff's deep voice was as close to a growl as it could get—"you're alive and you could be dead."

"I meant you."

Plumduff's jaw dropped.

"You. It's not fair. Living alone, being driven along, never having a chance for—for—" He swallowed.

"Well," Plumduff snorted, "how you gonna change it?"

Very small voice: "I can't."

Plumduff shrugged. "Neither can I. Way it is, way it gotta be." He stood up and groaned, and stretched to work the kinks out. "Ain't as young as I used to be, neither. Which is why—" He gestured to the vines, binding Gregoriat's wrists and feet. "This way, we both live. Your way, one of us gets hurt bad, maybe killed. So we do it my way. Used to be, big as I am, could take on most anybody, rough 'em up a bit, dump 'em somewhere, they'd be sore as Hades, but they'd live, be fine eventually. But I'm getting old and stiff, someday I can't be sure of winning, maybe I have to hurt someone real bad to get free. Don't want to do that. You asked what I get out of it, Easy answer. I get out with my conscience clear, didn't hurt no one bad when I could avoid it, didn't risk having someone's crippling or worse on my conscience."

Gregoriat didn't say anything, but his eyes, blue in the morning light, were clear and bleak.

"You thinking, I'm worried about losing. Yeah, that too, but not for a while, not a good long while. Less someone like you sneaks up from behind and bashes my skull in." He grinned. "Not as easy to do as you'd think." He hesitated, spread out his hands. "Son, I just don't want to have to hurt you. Don't you see?"

Gregoriat refused to meet his gaze.

"Damn all, boy, you won. You're safe. Once you get out of here, tell any tale you please. I won't be around to contradict it."

"It's not fair," Gregoriat muttered.

"You the winner," Plumduff said heavily. "Why you keep complaining."

"Because—" The blue eyes glistened with unshed tears, but their gaze was as straight as a sword. "It isn't fair, not to either of us."

"Don't worry about it." He cuffed the boy on the shoulder. "You the winner, all that counts." He turned toward the door.

"But it isn't." Gregoriat's soft young voice froze him as he was reaching for his pack. "It doesn't. I haven't won anything that counts, it's just one big fraud."

Plumduff slung on his backpack, threw over his shoulder: "Nobody'll know."

"I'll know," Gregoriat retorted.

Plumduff whirled to face him again, the light from outside turning him into a huge black silhouette of menace. "Well, what do you want, boy? A fight? The chance to be hurt or maybe killed?" Voice dropping, with, for the first time, an under-note of menace: "You think you can take me."

"Oh, no!" It was said with such a note of wistful sincerity that Plumduff snorted, and the menace was suddenly gone, though he was no smaller, and his voice still a deep bear growl.

"Then what do you want?" he asked on a sigh.

"I—I want—" Gregoriat's bound hands stretched out in a pleading gesture. "I don't know—I *need*—"

Plumduff let out his breath on a long sigh. Then: "How old are you?"

"Twenty."

"Any man in your village you can't lick?"

Gregoriat shook his head.

"No other challenges but me?"

Another head shake. Then: "There's a war, but it's far, far away. We hope it never comes here, but—"

"There's always a war somewhere, humans being humans, and sooner or later they all come 'here.' And you want to be sure that when it does, you'll be able to handle it." He shook his shaggy head. "Son, never works that way. Never can tell how you'll do in an emergency till it comes." Softer: "There must be some other way for you to prove yourself to yourself."

Gregoriat only shook his bowed head.

With finality: "Then I'm sorry, son. Ain't gonna be me."

Gregoriat knew when he had come smack up against an uncrossable crevasse. He swallowed. "Good luck, then, Plumduff. Good luck."

A grin that made his giant frog face somehow immensely likable. "You, too, youngster. Worry 'bout each day and each

problem as it comes, say I." He shrugged on his heavy pack. "Gonna be far, far from here by nightfall." He looked around his little cabin and sighed. "Snug."

"Gunnora watch over you, Plumduff," Gregoriat said softly.

"And you, lad," Plumduff replied. "I'm off."

He went out through the hide door.

He meant to use his long legs to put distance between him and Gregoriat, his village, and the homey little cabin.

He had forgotten one item.

Gregoriat's wasn't the only village around.

And even if he had had time to realize the wrongness of his little patch of woods, he would have put it down to Gregoriat's presence.

It wasn't.

The second would-be giant killer, hidden in the underbrush, had never planned to issue an honest, open challenge. The giant was a danger. The giant was a menace. The giant should be taken care of.

The hidden archer had no intention of taking any risks at all. He drew back his bow carefully—

What saved Plumduff, once again, was his size.

The archer expected a giant and aimed very high. Plumduff stepped out, humming, and the archer lowered his aim—but not enough. The bowstring cracked, the arrow sped—and buried itself, not in Plumduff's heart, but in his massive shoulder.

Inside, Gregoriat could not hear the twig *snap* of the bow launching, or even the butcher-shop cleaver-split-meat *splat* of the arrow hitting solid bone and meat. But Plumduff's howl of agony and rage would have penetrated solid stone, much less a flap of leather.

Gregoriat stopped feeling sorry for himself and rolled over to hooch himself frantically on knees and hands toward the doorway. He knew he would probably be too late—and what could he do in his helpless position—but he *tried*—

Outside, the archer had automatically put a second arrow on the string; then he made his second mistake: he looked up to find his target.

Plumduff, his rabbit-fur cape bouncing around him to make him look even bigger, his convulsed-with-pain-and-fury frog

face topped by a helmet of shaggy hair, bounding across the small clearing toward his attacker, was a sight to freeze the coolest blooded of men.

The archer gasped, and rose slightly, revealing himself, as Armageddon rumbled toward him.

"YaaaHHHHHHHHH—" Plumduff roared, all but ignoring the blood blooming on his shoulder, and the arrow sticking halfway through it.

The archer hurriedly let fly again. This time he miscalculated the other way, and the arrow went through fur and cloth and skin and muscle and—midriff. Low midriff.

He didn't have time for a third arrow.

Plumduff slammed up to him, and one clenched fist, the size and hardness of a sledgehammer, landed square to the point of his blond-bearded chin.

The archer went up with the force of the blow, his head snapped back—and in the back of its arc hit the tree behind him with a crack almost as loud as Plumduff splitting a log.

He was unconscious even before his limp body slithered down to fall in a heap at Plumduff's feet.

"YOU—" Plumduff roared again, before realizing that he didn't have an opponent anymore.

He shook his head dazedly, looked down, saw his opponent, drew back his foot for an angry kick that would probably have stove in the unfortunate archer's rib cage—and hesitated—

Wavered—

Fell slowly, with a crash louder than Jack's beanstalk giant landing.

Luckily for the archer, he landed next to him, not on him.

Gregoriat, hearing the shout, the crash, redoubled his efforts.

But it was still an agony of time later that he could push himself out the hide and look around.

To see two still, unmoving figures, lying at the edge of the clearing.

The archer regained consciousness first.

With a little help.

Shaking his head reflexively, spraying the water that had just

been tossed on it, he heard a voice ask grimly, "Do you know as much about getting arrows out as putting them in?"

"Wha wha wha—"

"I said"—Gregoriat's voice was grim—"do you know as much about getting arrows out as putting them in?"

The newcomer blinked.

He was still in the clearing, the giant was lying almost at his feet, his head *ached*, and—

Somebody had tied his hands and feet with his own bowstring. He growled, an angry lion's threat. Somebody was going to pay and pay *dear*—

Gregoriat asked for the third time, "Do you know anything about getting arrows out?"

The archer blinked and looked down. "The giant. I got him," he said with amazed triumph. "He's dead."

"Not if I can do anything about it, you worm," Gregoriat snapped. "Are you gonna help or not?"

"Help a giant? You crazy!"

"Then I'll do it myself." He had only the faintest idea of what one did. But he had memories of the midwife boiling water, so he had built the fire up inside and been looking for a container to boil water in. Plumduff had no pots, but he himself had brought a small metal shield, with enough curvature to hold some water. It was on the fire now, water in it bubbling.

"You crazy," the archer repeated.

Gregoriat looked at him. Saw a strange face. "You're not from my village," he stated the obvious.

"You're not from mine," the archer shot back.

"What did Plumduff ever do to you, huh?" Gregoriat began tugging at the bright red plaid shirt, to try to see how bad the damage was.

"Plum-what?"

"Plumduff. Him. The giant."

"Plum—" The archer thought the name as funny as Gregoriat had when he first heard it.

"What did he ever do to you?" Gregoriat had the shirt out of the waistband and began tugging it from around the lower shaft sticking out.

"What—he's a giant." As though that explained everything.

"He is not!" Gregoriat exclaimed fiercely. He was using the knife he had taken from the belt-sheath of the other man, cutting through the heavy, now stained red, plaid blanketing material, to expose the two shafts sticking out from the huge mound of black-pelted muscle that was Plumduff.

"Shorter than either of us, is he," the archer snickered.

Gregoriat glared, then turned back to his task. "He's not *that kind of giant*," he bit out.

"He's worse." The other man started pulling on his bonds, gasping in pain as the bowstring cut in.

"He's *nice*." Gregoriat chewed on his lip—hard. Both arrows were buried past the heads.

"You're crazy." A sneer. "Goldmantler. Only a crazy Golder would try to help a giant."

Gregoriat was looking from the knife to the two arrows standing up from Plumduff's hairy hide. There was only one way to get them out, and he knew it. "Only a cowardly Redmantler would ambush without warning," he sneered back. He stood up. Vague memories. The knife would need to be cleaned. In the boiling water, he guessed, and hoped he was guessing right.

"Nyaaaaa." The archer couldn't believe somebody would actually help a fearsome giant. This odd fellow was, which meant—Bet you're a giant too, you just ain't grown up yet. Nyaaaa—Bet you're—"

Gregoriat went into the cabin, put the knife in the boiling water, and, thinking about it, came back out and walked over to the archer, who was getting unimaginative in his cursing.

But he started anew when he realized what Gregoriat was doing. "That's my shirt!"

"I need bandages. You wounded him, don't see why I should shiver," Gregoriat said, finishing cutting the homespun shirt off the archer's back.

"You—" He was already shivering.

Gregoriat began cutting the shirt into strips.

Then he went back in and dropped some of the strips into the boiling water. Clean the wound with them, yeah.

The archer was still cursing, despite that his teeth were chattering.

"Shut your mouth," Gregoriat said, "and I might pull you into the sunlight. Be warmer there."

The archer thought it over, shut his mouth.

Sighing, Gregoriat dragged him down below Plumduff's huge body and into the bright sunshine.

The archer hunkered himself into a sitting position. "You really gonna try to do something?"

Gregoriat gave a tentative tug on the arrow in Plumduff's midriff. It didn't move.

He tried the one in his shoulder. It moved—a little. It was the simpler problem, buried in a massive muscle. He wriggled it again. Not the bone, he was pretty sure. Maybe— He pursed his lips. Maybe it would be easier to push it through, break off the fletching, and just draw it out.

The other one—

He chewed his lip hard.

"Ain't nothing you can do," the archer informed. "He a deader. Just going to take a while."

Gregoriat didn't bother to answer. He was feeling under the shoulder. Yes, he could almost feel the sharpness of the point. There. If he just—

He used the knife to clumsily hack off the fletching, raised the massive shoulder as high as he could with one hand, jammed down with the other.

Triumph!

The bloody point protruded. Just a finger-span.

He shoved again.

A little more point, plus oozing blood, dark and angry-looking.

He rolled Plumduff onto his side, knelt, legs on either side, supporting the hugeness with his own thighs, braced the knife under the back of the barb—and *pulled*.

The shaft emerged slowly, reluctantly, with a sucking sound. Then abruptly, he almost fell when the last length of it popped out.

"That's one," Gregoriat sighed, looking at the two bleeding holes.

"Can't do that with the other one," the archer observed.

"Shaddup, or I'll drag you into the pond," Gregoriat said in a calm voice that was somehow more threatening than a shout.

Somehow he managed to clean the wounds, with cloths soaked in the boiling water, and wrung-out-as-dry-as-he-could ones to bind it. The blood seemed to be stopping but—

The arrow in Plumduff's midsection seemed to be mocking him. He swiped at his sweating forehead, adding, though he didn't know it, blood and grime to the sweat.

How was he to get the bloody thing out?

He knew.

He just didn't want to do it.

The archer knew too. "Cut it out, only way," he offered.

Gregoriat shuddered. He went and cleaned the knife again.

"Vertical." The archer had gotten intrigued by the problem. "Shaft went in vertical. Cut along it, until you can pull it back out."

"I know." Almost a moan: "What if he dies?"

The archer didn't say what he thought was obvious. No matter what Gregoriat did, the giant was going to die.

Gregoriat wriggled the shaft again, and, before he could lose his courage altogether, cut in as hard as he could, vertically, along the shaft.

Plumduff's huge body convulsed, and he emitted a gigantic roar of sheer pain.

Gregoriat threw himself atop the massive, heaving form. "Oh, Plumduff, I'm sorry, please be still, you're hurting yourself—"

Plumduff had lost a lot of blood. His own weakness made him subside. He blinked unfocused eyes. "Wha—wha happ'n?"

"You got shot." A sneer: "A cowardly Redmantler. In the trees."

"Oh." Plumduff blinked, but he couldn't seem to really see anything.

"There's an arrow in you, Plumduff." His words almost trampled one another in his hurry. "I'm sorry. But it's gotta come out."

"Oh. Ye'." A hesitation. "Who—"

"Me. Gregoriat." A wail: "If there's a better way, tell me, Plumduff!"

Plumduff blinked again. He was lying out in his own clearing, with something—it was his pack—propping his head up. He could see down.

Yes. An arrow. Sticking out of himself. "Gre—Gregoriat?"

A child on the edge of a precipice: "It *won't* come out!"

Plumduff reached up, patted the shaking shoulders he could only see fuzzily. "'S OK, lad. Not your fault."

Muffled sobbing, only intelligible phrase: "—hurt you!"

Plumduff was weak and groggy, but one fact was clear: The arrow would have to come out, and he couldn't do it himself. Which left—

"You doin' fine 'n' dand', Gre"—a breath—"gor'at. Just gotta fin'sh job."

"I—I can't!"

Softly: "What you sayin' 'fore, 'bout provin' you'se' to"—another gasp—"you'se'f?"

Gregoriat straightened up. "It's going to hurt."

"Gotta be"—gasp—"done. Do it. Now." There were beads of sweat on his forehead, matting down the shaggy brindled hair. Lines of pain around the frog mouth. Knowledge in the brown eyes.

Gregoriat nodded. He tugged on the arrow. Plumduff stiffened, gasped, but swallowed his howl of agony.

"I'm gonna have to cut more," Gregoriat apologized.

"Yeah. Do what you must." A weary ghost of his normal broad grin. "Ain't blamin' you."

Gregoriat sent a look to the archer. *He* knew who to blame!

Plumduff knew he had only moments of consciousness left. "Gre—" he rumbled.

"Yes—" He leaned down.

"In pack. Herbs. Stop wounds—festerin'. Get 'em . . ." His voice trailed off.

"All right." Gregoriat crawled over, reached into the leather pack, began pulling out its contents, trying to leave enough to still support the massive head.

"Know—herbs?" The words were slurred, almost unintelligible. Gregoriat saw that the heavy lids were almost down.

"No. Tell me quick."

"Look for the yarrow, for healin'; seal, help the bleeding. Boil water, dump in whole packet, soak clean cloths . . ." His voice trailed off.

"Which ones are they?" Gregoriat asked desperately. There

were dozens of the small packets, little leather pouches full of crisp dried herbs—

“Red . . . sewn wi’ red . . . ones cross . . . three . . .” Again the voice was slurred.

“Liquor,” contributed the archer suddenly.

“What?” Gregoriat has almost forgotten him.

“Liquor. Help him. Lessen the pain. Lessen the—whatever it is, kills a man when you cut at him.”

Gregoriat shuddered.

“Do it now,” the archer said. He didn’t have to add, *Or else*.

“Gonna get you some honey mead,” Gregoriat told the grim gray-under-brown shut-eyed face. “Make it easier—” But he didn’t think Plumduff was conscious to hear.

But Plumduff surprised him. “Gre—” It was so weak, he leaned down to hear. “Yours—what I left. All.” A shuddering breath. “’Taties in the cellar—’member—eyes—”

“They’re not going to be any left,” Gregoriat asserted fiercely, almost leaping to his feet. “’Cause you’re going to be eating them, while you get better!” He ran into the cabin.

But when he tried to get Plumduff to drink the last skin of honey mead, it only dribbled out of his mouth to soak his scraggly dark beard.

“Why bother,” the archer asked, a shrug in his voice.

“I’m gonna,” Gregoriat asserted fiercely. “And—” A challenge to every god living and dead: “He’s gonna live!”

The archer looked around. A clearing, wind gently rustling through leaves, himself, Gregoriat—and the wounded giant, lying limp, eyes shut, each breath making the great chest shudder like an oldster dying of lung sickness.

The archer settled himself as comfortably as he could, given that his wrists and ankles were bound. All he had to worry about was that the crazy Golder—he didn’t think he was a giant, was full grown, and no taller than any normal man—wouldn’t kill him in a rage when the giant died, if not under his inexpert knife, then the aftereffects of the wound and the removal of the arrow.

Gregoriat settled Plumduff as best he could, picked up the knife—

Again Plumduff’s howl split the clearing, and tiny rustles in

the underbrush said that it scared any small creatures whose curiosity or luck had drawn them to the vicinity.

Gregoriat was as pale as his patient.

The next howl was the loudest of all.

There was no howl after that.

The archer gave his parole almost as soon as Gregoriat had finished his crude operation and sewn up the gaping wound with needles and sinew thread found in the invaluable pack.

After all, it was all over with but the claiming of glory, and he was pretty sure the other wouldn't take any of his credit.

He'd stick around to the end, but afterward—

Anyway, he was hungry, even if the crazy Golder wasn't.

Gregoriat accepted, on condition that the archer—his name was Andor, he informed—help with the chores and Plumduff.

Andor agreed. His stomach was rumbling. And his wrists and ankles had gone beyond pain to numbness.

They got Plumduff into his cabin and on the pile of furs he used as a bed, by making a primitive sled out of the hide door and two long branches from the wood pile. He was too heavy for them to carry, even after Andor's feet and hands woke up.

But once they had him settled under shelter, there was nothing to do but wait.

Andor went fishing, using what was left of his bowstring and a crooked twig, and Gregoriat fussed around the cabin, making medicine in his shield, and feeling Plumduff's forehead for fever every minute or two.

A day passed, two, and Plumduff didn't die—but he didn't recover consciousness, either.

But his size and vitality conquered wound and clumsy nursing. On the third day he opened puzzled eyes, and it was downhill from there.

Andor slowly cleaned his catch of fish, listening to Plumduff and Gregoriat arguing over the game called checkers that Plumduff had taught his young friend.

It was the same argument they had been having ever since Plumduff had regained enough strength to talk in more than short, gasped phrases.

"But I'll tell my village, and Andor'll tell his, and you'll be safe, truly, Plumduff—" Gregoriat had said some variation of this a hundred times.

Plumduff sighed. He had answered it a hundred times. "More like they'll just think I've ensorceled you somehow. You think it's better for three to run than one?"

Andor, who agreed, sighed as he neatly gutted a fish so small he had debated tossing it back to grow. But Plumduff's bulk needed a lot of food, and the local animals had gotten wary of his traps, and the root cellar was almost empty.

Andor sighed again. He had learned to appreciate Plumduff, who was a much more patient patient than his own father had been, that time he had fallen off Widow Emmiet's roof and broken his leg. Andor grinned in memory, he knew how the Widow had intended to "pay" for the fixing of her roof. Probably it was the waiting as well as the pain that had made his father so irritable.

But Plumduff, who must have been in far more pain, had an immense store of patience, and a sweet disposition that surprised Andor, who thought that hermits must invariably be of sour mien, to say nothing of Plumduff's being a fearsome giant.

"King me," said the dreaded giant smugly, and Gregoriat sighed.

"You'll get better, just takes practice," Plumduff encouraged.

"Will I get any, without you," Gregoriat asked.

Plumduff looked down at his matted chest, still swathed in bandages after ten days. He was propped up on his bed of furs, because he still hadn't the strength to sit up long on his own. "Reckon so for a bit, lad."

Gregoriat ground his teeth.

Andor, who now understood why Gregoriat liked the giant, shook his head. People were people.

"It's not fair," Gregoriat muttered for the *n*th time.

"No," said Plumduff gently, "it's not. But that's the way it *be*, lad, and I've accepted, and you must too."

Gregoriat's fists were clenched, and he was staring at the board carved into crude squares without seeing it. "There must be a way," he gritted out. "I'll find one. There must be."

Plumduff sighed, caught Andor's gaze, and shook his shaggy head wryly.

Andor found himself wishing there was a way, too. Giant or not, Plumduff was fun to be around, for his stories if nothing else.

Trouble was, *everybody* knew about giants.

Plumduff was well enough to sit quietly on the bank of the pond with a fishing line when Gregoriat flung himself down beside him, his sullen expression easier to see through than the clear waters of the pond.

"I like wandering, you know," Plumduff said gently. "I wouldn't stay in one place all the time if'n I had the choice." His gaze flicked over to the cabin, a ribbon of smoke pluming out the hole in the roof. "But 'twas nice," he said, unconsciously wistful, "to have a snug home to come back to."

"Friends are nice, too." Gregoriat had discovered that even Redders could be pleasant to have around.

"Aye." Plumduff drew in on his pipe. "Reckon so."

"It's not fair!"

Plumduff answered obliquely. "You done a good job on me. I'll be ready to move on, soon."

Gregoriat sighed.

"You lads gonna try to stop me."

"You think two of us could?"

"Well—" He grinned. "Mighty glad you cut Andor's bowstring, that first day."

"I want you to have a snug home to come back to. I want you to have friends."

Plumduff cuffed him lightly on the shoulder. "Friends ain't any less friends, for distance atween 'em."

"But I want—it's not fair."

"Mam used to say, If wishes were horses, beggars would ride."

"There's gotta—"

"Any luck." Andor, a single unwary squirrel at his belt, flopped down next to them.

"More 'taties than anything else in the stew tonight," Gregoriat informed.

Andor shrugged. "I like 'taties."

"There's gotta be a way," Gregoriat repeated. A sigh. "Have you ever seen or heard of a giant that was—was accepted," he asked, more to himself than his companions.

"Yes." Andor had pulled off one of his boots and was poking around for the bit of whatever that had been digging in.

"Of course no—*what did you say!*"

"'Course he wasn't a real giant," Andor said casually, more interested in his boot's interior than his words. "Just looked like it."

"Looked like a giant but wasn't—like Plumduff!"

"No." He had shaken out the offending bit of bark and was putting the boot back on. "Not like Plumduff. He was just a man. But he looked like a giant. At a fair. You know. He was one of the entertainers."

"At a fair," Gregoriat repeated slowly. "A fair."

"Mam took me to a fair, when I was a little tad," Plumduff said, dreamily remembering. "Even traveled with one, for a while. She told fortunes." He sighed. "Told 'em too accurate. We had to leave."

"Pity," said Gregoriat, wheels turning behind his blue eyes.

"Yeah. Friends, and travelin', and snug for the winter, usually. I liked the fair."

"People expect to see giants and demons and magic beings at a fair. But—"

"Not real ones," Andor pointed out. "And nothing you say will make Plumduff any shorter. He is a giant."

"I've only been to a fair once. But I remember it. Remember all about it," Gregoriat's words tumbled out. "Listen. I saw a man I thought was a giant, too. Only he was just a man on stilts. I remember how tall I thought he looked, I knew he was on stilts, but he still looked so tall—"

"So." Andor shrugged. "When he got down, he wasn't a giant, was he."

"No, but he looked truly tall on the stilts. Even when I could see the stilts. Now, suppose—suppose Plumduff were up on stilts. People would see him, and think, Oh, he looks like a giant, but that's just because he's on stilts—"

Plumduff shook his head. "I've never been on stilts in my

life. And if I learned, do you think I could be on them all the day and night, too."

Gregoriat was literally bouncing on the pond bank. "That's it, that's it. Suppose they thought he was on stilts, but he wasn't."

Andor snickered.

"Jesters!" Gregoriat went on. "They do all sorts of things to make themselves look odd. Pad their clothes, stand on stilts, wear funny costumes, paint their faces—"

"A jester—"

"And you could make a great big club out of cloth, and go around with it on your shoulder, saying, Ho ho ho, I'm a giant, and whack people with it—"

Andor was leaning back on the bank and laughing, but Plumduff was watching Gregoriat with a hopeful expression.

"And wear funny clothes, and hike your belt high so you look like you're on stilts and paint your nose red and make big floppy ears out of cloth and tell your tales and travel wherever you pleased and come back here in the winter—"

"Here?" It was a hopeful question.

"Sure. Andor and I will tell our folk that you aren't a real giant at all—"

Andor sat up. "I don't tell lies."

"Is he a *real* giant?" Slyly: "Everybody knows what real giants are like?"

"No." Andor didn't have to think about it. "He's not a real giant. He—he's only big."

"But you are a jester. And you got hurt, so we stuck around to help until you got better—"

"But I'm not a jester."

Even more slyly: "A jester with friends in the village could trade for butter and cheese to put on his 'taties." Suddenly solemn: "Are 'taties as good a crop as you said."

"Better. Maybe too good. My mam warned me about never depending on them. They are liable to bugs, and wilt. And if the crop goes, it all goes, lucky to salvage enough for seed. Happen now and again. But mostly—good crop. Easy." He sighed. "But I'm not a jester."

Andor spoke thoughtfully. "You tell mighty good tales,

Plumduff. Tales I've never heard. Plenty of jesters pay their way with tales."

"You could travel and make friends, and have friends to come back to, too," Gregoriat added.

"Trade 'taties, too," Andor added. "Good crop. I like 'taties."

"Friends . . ." Plumduff murmured.

Thus began the saga of Plumduff Potato-Eye, the traveling tale-teller, he of the enormous height and padded club, the flapping breeches and bright red nose—and the marvelous tales and potatoes he traded, so that potatoes became a new crop, a new staple—

In later years, after he had made his rounds many times, it became an open secret that Plumduff really was quite tall, but of course, all those in his enthralled audiences, from the smallest sweet-sucking child to the oldest grand dame, knew that he was not a giant.

Everybody knew about giants.

And Plumduff.