

are not the first to come this way, though I think we shall be the last. My father travelled the Earldelving seven times, and he was an ample dwarf by our reckoning.

"Now we must make ready. Take note of what I say, for this is the last chance of speech until we come to safety, and there will be no room for error."

Under Fenodyree's instructions, Colin and Susan took off their knapsacks – a complicated manoeuvre in that space – and fastened them by the strap to one ankle. Susan's pack held Durathror's cloak, and Colin was still carrying the lemonade bottle: this he discarded. Fenodyree advised him to put away his lamp, for, he said, hands would be needed more than eyes.

He bade Durathror take off his sword.

"Keep her ever before you," he said, "and so neither Dyrnwyn nor the son of Gondemar will be lost."

And he unbuckled his own sword and pushed it into the opening.

Durathror stood alone in the silence of the underworld. He took the empty bottle that Colin had thrown down, and set it upright in the middle of the floor. A wry smile touched his lips as he looked at it. And shortly afterwards the cave was empty, save for this one monument to wild endeavour.

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Both the children had the greatest difficulty in entering the tunnel. For the first yard or so it sloped downwards, and then turned uphill, not sharply, but enough to cause acute discomfort at the bend. Sand choked the entrance, though even when that was behind them the tunnel was so heavily silted that it was almost beyond the children to move at all. They lay full length, walls, floor, and roof fitting them like a second skin. Their heads were turned to one side, for in any other position the roof pressed their mouths into the sand and they could not breathe. The only way to advance was to pull with the fingertips and to push with the toes, since it was impossible to flex their legs at all, and any bending of the elbows threatened to jam the arms helplessly under the body.

The tunnel was unlike any they had met in the Earldelving, for, although it was not straight, it did not branch. This factor, and the plugging of the tunnel by four bodies, meant that the leader was the only one to be able to breathe at all well.

They became unbearably hot. Sand lodged in every fold of skin, and worked into mouth, nose, and ears.

Colin found that he had to rest more and more frequently. He thought of the hundreds of feet of rock above and of the miles of rock below, and of himself wedged into a nine-inch gap between.



"I'm a living fossil! Suppose I stick here: that'll make archaeologists sit up!"

Ahead, Fenodyree was battling with a fresh difficulty. He had reached a spot where the tunnel bent abruptly under upon itself like a hairpin, and teasing Widowmaker's rigid blade through the angle, at arm's length, was no simple task. Strained nerves and muscles are not an aid to fine judgement. He succeeded, but it was some time before he was in any condition to follow his sword. Fenodyree was coming to the end of his last reserve of strength.

Susan felt the obstacle with dismay. It was not possible! But where was Fenodyree? He must have found a way round, so perhaps, like most hazards underground, it was easier than it looked. Anyway, lying there thinking about it would not do much good, so she tucked in her head, and jack-knifed round into the lower level. It was unpleasant, especially when her heels scraped the roof, but her weight carried her down, and it was soon over.

Colin was an inch taller than his sister, and that was disastrous. His heels jammed against the roof: he could move neither up nor down, and the rock lip dug into his shins until he cried out with pain. But he could not move.

Durathror, coming up behind, took in the situation at once.

"Can you hear?" he shouted at Colin's ankles.



"Yes."

The reply was barely audible.

"Try - to - turn - to - your - side! Then - to your belly! I - shall - guide - your - feet! Are - you - ready?"

"Yes."

Durathror's sword jutted beside Colin's feet, and although it was in its scabbard, matters would not be improved if it became entangled with Colin's wildly jerking legs.

Colin screwed himself round in the tunnel. It was really not possible, but desperation tipped the scales; and once he was on his stomach, his knees bending with the tunnel, there was just enough play for Durathror to force Colin's legs round the angle, and from then on Colin was better off than any of the others, because they were now lying on their backs, and in that position movement was even more exhausting and unpleasant.

Fenodyree jerked his way along with renewed vigour, for this bend was the last great hazard, according to his lore. Imagine, then, his horror when his sword splashed in water. He twisted his head all ways. He could not see; but his hands brought him bad news. The tunnel dipped, and was flooded to the roof. This had not been so in his father's time; so much for the elder days!

The end of the tunnel was not yet. How far did the water lie? Inches? Yards? He would have to squirm along, holding



his breath (and he was panting uncontrollably at the start!) in the hope that he would come to air. Retreat would be impossible, as it was now. And that decided him. Better a quick road to forgetfulness than a lingering one. But it called for nerves of steel to edge forward into the water, and, at the last, under.

This moment was to be endured three times more as Susan, Colin, and Durathror made the choice that was no choice. But once they grappled with the terror it did not last: for the water had collected in a shallow, U-shaped bend, not two yards long, and they all emerged on the other side before their lungs were drained of air. They cried or laughed, each according to his nature, but the sound in all cases was the same.

Not much later the floor began to drop away from the roof, and it was possible to crawl on hands and knees. The children wrestled with the sodden webbing of their packs and talked rapidly and loudly of the perils they had faced, and said how good it was to move freely again.

"Taken all in all," said Fenodyree, "the Earldelving has not used us ill: I had feared it would be more cruel. From here we shall be in little danger, provided that we respect the smaller risks."

They now pressed on with all speed, for there could be scarcely an hour of daylight left, and the prospect of having to

spend the night in wet clothes, with mud for a bed, was in no way appealing.

After a time, Susan thought she saw a faint grey blur ahead of them past Fenodyree's shoulder. She switched off the lamp.

"Here, Sue! What are you playing at?"

"Look! Daylight!"

It was: and soon they had reached it. They were at the end of the tunnel, and at the bottom of a shaft. The converging lines of its gleaming, wet sides mounted to a tiny square of blue, a whole world away.

"We've not got to climb up this shaft, have we?" said Colin.

"Nay," laughed Fenodyree, "we shall be in dire straits ere I ask *that* of you! Our way is easier by far."

He raked about with his feet behind the pile of rubbish at the bottom of the shaft.

"It is somewhere... ah, I have it!"

He dragged to one side a mass of decaying branches to reveal a hole in the floor.

"Here is the exit from the Earldelving: once through here, we cannot return."

It was a sloping continuation of the shaft, though only half its breadth, and it was cut through stiff clay that glistened without ledge or fissure.

"It is a pleasant ride," said Fenodyree, seating himself on

