

A photograph of a forest path. The path is covered in moss and fallen pine needles. Tall, thin trees line the path, and the ground is covered in a thick layer of green moss. The title "The Sheriff" is written in large, white, serif font across the middle of the image.

# The Sheriff

By J Drew Brumbaugh



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Dedicated to AD&D role-playing adventurers everywhere who love a mystery mixed with some serious combat.

Starky concentrated on the dark silhouettes of his two companions as they cantered through the forest gloom. Gil rode in the lead, his broad back unmistakable. Between Starky and Gil was the dark elf Larnathin. Night was coming and with it came trolls, werewolves, or worse. Somewhere behind them the Duke's men would be coming.

The shadowy trees on either side of the road slapped at Starky, their limbs stinging through his thin leather tunic. His arms bled from dozens of scratches. He fought his fear of being caught and focused on the rhythmic cadence of the horses' hooves. The clink of Gil and Larnathin's silvery chain mail reminded Starky that he wished he had such protection though little good it would do if the Duke's men caught them.

How far behind were they, Starky wondered. Not far enough and he cursed Gil for talking him into robbing the gem merchant. Gil had made it sound so simple; break in, grab a fortune in jewels and escape before anyone was the wiser. Something had gone wrong. The Duke's men had appeared from nowhere and Starky had run out the back with only two small emeralds. Hardly worth getting hung. He had been better off cleaning stables.

His eyes strayed to Larnathin's back. He was a dark elf and even from behind his wiry silhouette made Starky's skin crawl. Why had Gil invited a cold-blooded killer? The elf was definitely not a thief. Starky could still see the sense of joy in the elf's red eyes as he slit the gem merchant's throat. Thanks to the elf it was no longer about a few gems. No, murder would get them all

killed. Starky promised himself that he'd leave these two as soon as he could. He'd get away on his own, get an honest job somewhere they didn't know he was a thief. Just not in the middle of the Grisly Forest.

Turning in the saddle, Starky peered back through the thickening twilight. A tuft of sandy hair flicked out from beneath his battered cap and tickled his eyes. He brushed the strands away and rubbed his pudgy nose. It was too dark to see much. He imagined he could hear the Duke's soldiers coming and gulped thinking about the arrow that would get him in the back. Even so, he dared not pass either of the others and he was not straying into the woods.

The threesome crested a hill and started down the other side, the horses picking up speed. At the bottom of the hill the road took a sharp turn and around the curve they came out of the forest. Starky saw rolling hills stretching away from the forest's edge to the horizon. Gil reined his horse to a stop. Larnathin halted next to their leader. Starky pulled up behind them. The horses pawed and shifted, breathing heavily.

"Gil, do you think the Duke's men are still following us?" asked Starky gripping his battered sword hilt as he strained to hear hoof beats in the darkness.

Gil's face hardened. "Starky, you worry too much. They didn't follow us into Grisly Forest."

"Are you sure?"

"Shut up," snarled Larnathin, his eyes glaring red.



Before Starky could respond Gil urged his mount forward. Starky and the elf followed. For a long time and they rode in silence. The night passed and by morning they found that the endless sea of grass had turned into orderly fields, row-on-row of some unrecognizable crop. A pungent aroma permeated the air making Starky's nose itch. He rubbed it but the itch persisted. Larnathin sneezed.

"What is that smell?" asked Gil.

Starky wondered the same thing.

Near mid-day they topped a rise and saw a small town nestled in a hollow below. Sturdy wooden buildings lined one long narrow street that intersected a pair of cross streets to make a grid. Between the party and the town proper were endless long, low racks of thatching that held thin, red pods drying in the hot summer sun. A small gurgling stream twisted through town and ran off to their left.

"I thought you said we were going to Anslett," said Starky, now worried that they were lost.

Gil pulled off his helm and scratched his perspiration soaked black hair. "We were. We must have come out of the forest on the wrong road. Right now I'm hungry. Let's find an inn or tavern where we can get something to eat."

They trotted single file into town. The street was hard packed dirt. What caught Starky's attention was that there was no debris. At home the street would have been littered with trash. Here, nothing. The few scattered townsfolk who were out nodded as the trio rode by. Their clothes simple and clean without patches.

As they neared the center of town, Gil said, “Larnathin, did you see any soldiers or guards?”

“Nope.” The elf had his hood pulled up over his head to shield his eyes from the glaring sun. His hollow voice seemed to come from a cave.

Not only no soldiers, thought Starky, but no fortifications either. What kind of town was this? What kept them from being overrun by bandits? His stomach growled and he forgot his concerns in favor of finding food.

Gil rode ahead, sitting up straight, proud, his chin held high. Starky chuckled to himself. What made Gil think he was so smart when they were obviously lost?

“Looks like as good a place as any,” said Gil stopping his horse in front of a whitewashed stone two story building with a sign that said it was “Clawmark Inn” and advertised food and drink.

Larnathin slid off his horse and dashed up the steps to the inn. Starky climbed down and waited for Gil. They went in together.

A dozen round tables with wooden stools around them filled the main room. Light streamed in through wide windows. Starky spotted Larnathin already seated at a table in the far corner. A polished bar ran along the back wall. Behind it stood a wiry, dark haired man in a leather apron. A fire crackled in the stone fireplace that filled the right-hand wall. A haunch of meat sizzled in the fire. Several customers sat at the bar while others clustered around tables. Gil pushed his way toward Larnathin as Starky hustled to keep up.

A young woman in a modest blue dress scurried up to the table to greet them.

“May I help you?” she asked with a smile.

Starky imagined that her smile was just for him.

“You sure can,” snickered Gil, throwing himself on a stool. “Here, sit on my lap.”

“I’m sorry, no.” Her smile stiffened. “I’d be happy to bring you food or drink.”

“Good idea,” said Starky, smiling, trying his best to make up for Gil. “I’ll take a mug of ale and a hunk of that roast.”

“Make it three of each,” said Gil.

“Certainly, sir,” she responded and walked away, Starky following the pleasant sway of her dress.

Larnathin glared after her, muttering under his breath.

Starky watched the serving girl until she went behind the bar and then he surveyed the other patrons. There were several men in heavy, blue work clothes, an older merchant in expensive clothes and a short bald man in robes from some church. He did not see a single weapon.

From across the room Starky heard angry voices. Chair legs scrapped on the floor. A burly man lurched from his seat towering unsteadily over the others at the table. The big man leaned across the table swinging with both fists.

Before anyone else moved, the bartender dashed out from behind the bar and planted himself squarely in front of the bigger man.



“John,” said the bartender, putting one hand into a pocket on his leather apron, “you’ve had too much to drink. Go home and get some sleep.”

The big man staggered but held his ground.

“John, don’t make me get the sheriff,” and the bartender pulled out a thin silver whistle.

John’s face whitened. His eyes rolled back in his head and he fell backward with a thud.

“No need for the sheriff,” said the bartender. He leaned over and patted the fallen man on the shoulder. When there was no response he waved to a couple of other patrons, “A couple of you drag him home so he can sleep it off.”

“Too bad,” said Larnathin. “I was hoping to see a good bar fight.”

You would, thought Starky, and back home there would have been one.

The serving girl returned with their food and drink. “Three silvers,” she said.

Gil fished around in his purse for a moment, and then growled at Starky, “Pay her.”

Starky started to complain, but didn’t, realizing it would only make things worse. “The sheriff is highly respected here, isn’t he?” asked Starky as he slipped four coins to the girl.

The server looked at the four coins, “Thank you, sir. And yes, he is.”

“How many deputies?” asked Larnathin.

“He doesn’t need them,” she said and turned toward another table.

“Strange people,” hissed Larnathin.

“I’m getting an idea,” chuckled Gil.

Not another idea, thought Starky. “I hope it’s a better idea than robbing the gem merchant.”

“Yeah, yeah,” spit Gil. “Just eat your food. We’ve got things to do.”

They finished off the meat and their first ale and ordered a second round of drinks. Once they were settled with their second ale, Gil motioned for the bartender to come to their table.

The bartender picked up his mug and ambled over to their table where he sat down on an empty stool.

“Welcome,” he said. “I’m Rutherford. I own this place.”

“You have good food,” said Starky, saluting the innkeeper with his mug.

Rutherford returned the salute in silence.

“Tell us about your sheriff,” said Gil keeping his tone friendly.

“Ever since Zach came, about thirty years ago, Southard’s been a wonderful place to live. Everybody loves him, especially the kids. He gives them rides at our summer picnic. It didn’t used to be that way. No, this used to be a real hell hole, full of riffraff, scoundrels and hoodlums.”

Gil leaned across the table and lowered his voice. “I have some money I need to keep safe. Can you lock it up for me over night?”

“Your money’s safe enough even if you left it right here on the table. The last robbery was, oh, about five years ago. The sheriff caught the thief a mile or so down the road. We tied him to a stake and the sheriff roasted him real slow. It took three days for him to die, screaming all the time. It’s the kind of lesson that only needs taught once.”

“I see what you mean,” said Starky, lines furrowing his forehead. No matter what Gil had in mind he wasn’t going to be part of it. Let Gil and the elf roast. But how was Starky going to get away from them without having his throat slit? Starky needed a plan. If Southard was as nice as Rutherford made it sound, maybe he could stay behind when the other two rode off.

Rutherford stood up. “If you need anything else just let me know.” And with that he went back behind the bar.

Gil got up. “Let’s have a look around. I want to know more about this town.”

They stepped out into the brilliant sunshine. Starky blinked. The three of them trooped down the dirt street. The air hung heavy with that pungent smell blowing in from the fields.

“Stinks,” noted Larnathin.

Gil shrugged and continued walking south.

They sauntered along, looking in shop windows, checking for the sheriff. He was nowhere around. Starky was amazed by the contentment he saw on every face. It contrasted sharply with the guarded fear that had been his companion at home.

At the edge of town, a small stream flowed into a shallow pool. At the head of the pool two millstones creaked in protest as the gurgling water turned the wheels. The mill on the right was smaller and smelled of flour, wheat, barley and rye.

“Why would a town this size need two mills?” asked Gil. “Let’s have a look inside the big one.”



As the approached the larger mill, the wind changed direction and blew a burning stench through the open window. Fighting the sting they reached the window. Three men worked bent over the millstone. Linen strips covered them from head to foot. Even their faces were wrapped in damp cloth, their hands gloved. A fine brownish powder covered everything.

Gil coughed, Starky sneezed, and Larnathin fought to hold back tears. "You there," shouted Gil through the window. One of the mummy-like figures glanced up. "Come out here."

As soon as the miller was outside, he pulled off his mask. "What are you trying to do?" he shouted. "This stuff burns the hide off a troll. You can't stay downwind."

"What are you people doing?" sputtered Gil. "What do you make from that flour?"

The miller laughed. "Flour is it?" He chuckled again. "It is for the sheriff. He buys a dozen sacks every day. It keeps him happy. And he pays well."

"What the hell is it?" asked Starky.

"We call it Sheriff Zach's potion."

Gil stared at the miller. "Seems pointless. Why do it at all? Couldn't you find something better to grow?"

The miller cocked his head. "I guess we just love our sheriff." With that he yanked up his facemask and reentered the mill.

"I've got it," said Gil. "There isn't any sheriff. It's a cover. This powder is a weapon."

Starky scratched the stubble on his chin. "If it burns as bad as the miller says, maybe you throw it in someone's face."

Larnathin pulled his sword halfway from its scabbard and slammed it back with a metallic thunk. "If there is a sheriff, he's too old to stop us," he spat in disgust. "Let's steal everything we can carry and if the sheriff shows up, I'll kill him."

Gil grinned. "My idea exactly. Let's start at the inn."

"Not me," said Starky. "I. . ."

Larnathin had his sword out, the killing look in his eyes. "You're going with us."

Starky stepped back. It was no use. He had to go with them.

They hurried back to the Clawmark. Starky's mind racing, trying to devise an escape plan. Gil and Larnathin pushed Starky ahead of them, their swords at his back. The few startled patrons stared in disbelief as the threesome stormed into the inn.

"Gentlemen," said the innkeeper, backing away from the bar. "Please put your swords away and sit down."

Gil snickered. "Hand over all the money you've got. If it's enough we'll let you live."

Starky panicked. He wasn't going to be a thief again but how was he going to get out of it? Larnathin inched toward the innkeeper, a berserk fire in his eyes.

“There isn’t enough money to die for, but if you don’t put your swords away I’ll summon the sheriff,” said Rutherford calmly. He pulled a tiny silver whistle from his apron. “I’d hate to have to blow this. Once I do, it’s too late.”

“Go ahead, blow it,” growled Gil.

Larnathin inched closer, his sword menacing Rutherford.

“I feel sorry for you. I don’t like executions,” said the innkeeper. He put the whistle to his lips and blew.

Starky was surprised by the long moment of penetrating silence. The whistle hadn’t made a sound.

“It doesn’t do anything,” laughed Gil.

“Kill the liar,” shouted Larnathin and lunged over the bar.

From somewhere outside Starky felt a deep rumbling. He couldn’t actually hear it but the vibrations came up through the soles of his boots plainly enough. The elf felt it too and stopped, craning his head toward the door. Starky saw his chance. He leaped for the elf, grabbing his sword arm, clawing open the hand. The elf whipped his arm around sending Starky sprawling. And then Larnathin leaped on the bar, sword drawn back, poised to spring on the innkeeper.

From outside, Starky heard the whoosh of leathery wings and an ear-splitting reptilian hiss. A huge shadow passed over the front of the inn, blocking the sun. Something metallic settled heavily to the ground.

“By the gods, what is that?” asked Gil, a quiver in his voice.

Even the elf looked frightened.

The front door shattered open and a huge reptilian head eased in. Hard black pupils glared at those in the inn. Tall pointed ears stood erect and little puffs of gray smoke curled from twin nostrils. A flicker of flame danced around the forked tongue. The dragon's long neck slithered in between the scattered tables and chairs. Red scales glittered in the sun slanting through the windows, a silver star flashed on the dragon's chest where it had been hammer welded to the scales.

Starky rolled under the table where he'd fallen. He curled into a fetal position shielding his head with his arms. It was too late to escape. They were all going to die. "I give up," he said meekly.

"You hurt Rutherford and I promise you'll bake for a week before you die." The dragon's voice was deep and raspy. Smoke puffed in short angry bursts from both nostrils.

Gil's eyes bulged out of his head. Starky saw the burly man's lips move but nothing came out. Gil's hands shook so hard that he dropped his sword. It clattered to a stop near Rutherford's feet. Gil pushed aside the nearest table and dashed for the window. As he leaped for freedom, the dragon's head snapped sideways and deftly caught Gil with his teeth. The big man screamed as the dragon bit down hard. Starky heard the bones snap right through the chain mail armor. The dragon chewed for an instant and then swallowed. A thin rivulet of blood ran down the side of his jaw.

The sheriff licked his lips and turned to the elf crouching on the bar. The sheriff slowly lowered his head until he was eye-to-eye with Larnathin. The dragon snorted. Blue flames licked around his gleaming fangs. The elf's jaw

trembled and Starky heard him stuttering in elfish. The dragon drew back its head and there was a rush of air into its lungs. A rope of brilliant orange fire burst from the dragon's mouth striking the elf in the chest. Not a flicker touched anything else in the inn.

Larnathin screamed an elfish curse as his clothing burst into flames. He leaped off the bar, charging the dragon, his sword slashing back and forth as he went for the throat.

Before Larnathin reached the sheriff, Starky stuck out a leg from his hiding place under the table and tripped the elf. Larnathin slid across the floor like a leaf-stuffed scarecrow and bumped into another table. He turned, glared at Starky, the hate and killing lust evident, even as the flames consumed the elf's clothes, burning his flesh. Slowly, unsteadily, Larnathin got up on one knee, eyeing Starky. The elf grimaced, fighting the pain as his clothes charred away. For an instant Starky thought Larnathin was going to attack. But before the elf could move, the sheriff's massive head shot out, jaws open, and snatched up the flaming elf. Starky heard the crunch of bones snapping like dry brush.

In an instant it was over except for Starky.

"So," said the sheriff, a mischievous grin exposing the sharp teeth along his lower jaw, "is everybody all right?"

Rutherford peered over the bar where he'd ducked for cover. "I'm fine now," he said glancing at Starky. "I hated to call but they left me no choice."

"So, I see." The sheriff looked around focusing on Starky. "Who is this? Is he one of them?"

“Not exactly. He tried to stop the elf from slicing me up.”

“Okay then. If that’s done, I’m off to enjoy my evening ration of powder. I hear the latest batch of peppers is even hotter than the last. Oh, and by the way, I’ll pay to fix your front door. I do like making an entrance.”

Starky scrambled to his feet and backed away from the dragon as the beast slipped backwards out the door.

“What’s he talking about, his evening ration of powder?”

“It’s the ground pepper flour from the big mill. The sheriff claims it helps keep his fires lit,” said Rutherford, clapping Starky on the back. “You look like you’ve had it. How about a mug of something wet?”

“Sure,” said Starky glancing at the door to be sure that the dragon was gone. “Aren’t you afraid to have a dragon around?”

“Scared,” said Rutherford chuckling. “Heck no. It’s his fortune that pays for most everything here and he never bothers anyone unless someone blows the whistle.”

“What about sacrifices and all that?”

“Foolish wives tales made up to scare kids. Here,” and Rutherford handed Starky a frothy mug.

Starky took the mug, found a seat and took a long draught. The ale was cool, wet, soothing on his throat.

Rutherford sat down next to Starky. “Are you planning to stay around?”

Starky nodded yes, his mind reeling.

“I’ve been thinking of putting in shorter hours. I could offer you steady work here at the inn. Do you know anything about tending bar?”

Starky took another long drink. Stay here? Work at the inn? Well he was rid of Gil and the elf and he still had the two emeralds. Maybe he didn't need chain mail. And he'd be working with the serving girl.

"I can learn," he said. "But where exactly am I?"

"Cayenne County, of course."