

The Burning Village

-'Hey, panlicker, get outta here!'

The young woman jumped up in surprise. The farmer, old Harrow, waved his pitchfork and swung it at her, slinging a row of curses simultaneously. She immediately ran off to the village, escaping the man's curses and the many people on the road's laughter as well. This was an almost everyday routine, as the elf made her way from the small copse of trees to the village of Thrownstone. The men in the village had made a habit of laughing at her - or worse.

And so, Darynna made her way back to her parent's home. The woman made a wide swath around the village road, where the Followneck brutes used to hang about, and jumped over grandma Jane's garden fence into the small backyard. Before her was the low-slung thatch roofed house of her parents, the Jacksons. She ducked under the thick layer of thatch and through the cobblestones into the room that constituted the entirety of her home. She was greeted by a whiff of grilled badeep, seasoned with sweet herbs from grandma Jane. Dad stirred the soup in his trademark method of reversed eights, while mam sat by the table, knitting wool in her usual unending way. Darynna had never seen where all these knitted goods went, the wool seemed to appear out of nowhere and go into nowhere, an eternal flow flushing through her old hands.

-'Hey, the small one is back!', remarked dad.

He stubbornly insisted on calling the elf small, even though he had long since shrunk and she had grown to a head taller. She smirked as she sat down next to mam.

-'The woods were very talkative today?'

Her mother had no idea what Darynna did out there in the woods, but the elf had been able to explain to her human adoptive mother that she'd go commune with nature. Of course, she had been reaching out to the essence of Ilrune Illifane, an experience that brought her much greater pleasure than any other activity. Except eating, she told herself as dad placed the dish of steaming badeep on the table.

The lovely dinner went on in great harmony, and the group discussed the need to go west, towards the castle of Orksed. Dad had been growing his herd of a hundred badeep for two years, and they were slowly running out of candle-wax and clothes, as well as tools. A few farmers had given them enough food to last the winter in exchange for the past year's steady supply of judeep, so that was off their minds.

-'That nasty winter will soon enough come, we'll need our good clothes early', argued dad against mam's idea of going next spring. 'And a couple'll die off in the winter, they won't find enough trees to suck on. Would lessen the money we'd get out of them.'

-'But daddy, you know how dangerous the bloody monsters in the north are right now! Can't we wait for the winter to freeze *their* pukey badeep, and go in spring once the soldiers got the road covered again?'

-'Pah!'

Mam turned a pleading look upon Darynna, hoping she'd argue for her cause. The elf, who didn't really care, started thinking on how to get stubborn dad to stay at home, when he spoke up again.

-'And them's pukey soldiers ain't be no good anyway. Get more killed by *urukchaj* than they kill the pukey things!'

-'Ah, but ye can't be saying that of the poor men', said Darynna. 'Since the new guy down in Londerhome, they've freshened up a bit, you know. They're getting better.'

-'Pukey no! Sure, they ain't raided out own villages since then, but they aren't doing much better against *urukchaj* than before. Imperials ain't no good!'

And so the conversation winded on, invariably falling to the likes of dad. He insisted strongly enough, until mam finally gave in and let him have his way. They'd set off next day's morning, trekking along the main road with eighty cattle. Dad hoped to be able to sell in Castle Orksed, an army place halfway to Longhorn Bay. Darynna doubted he'd be able to do so, however, since dad's stock was middle-aged and good. No

soldiers would pay the high price for producer cattle, preferring cheaper old ones good only for butchering. They'd have to go all the way to the great city for coin, she was sure of that much.

The small family spent another couple hours before the hearth, discussing Jane's new cauliflowers from up south and how the Snakewoods were being cleared heavily, chasing poor wild animals all over the place, including Joe's flax fields.

When it was dark outside, and the wood in the fireplace falling into embers, she decided they should go and rest for the next day's beginning march. Mam went off to fix the cushioned shutters on the small openings that served as windows, as well as placing similar cushions around the doors, to keep the cold winds of the night outside and not on their bare toes. Dad stoked the fire, so a couple flames could give them enough light to set up for the night. Darynna, exhausted from her day's meditation, headed straight for her cot. She started pulling off the thick green robes she'd been wearing, which she had etched with mystical runes she'd discovered herself. After the robes went her wraps of layered clothes she always wore as a measure of protection, and her well-cut yellow and green linen clothes. Once she'd finally stripped, she slid into bed, looking at her two lovely parents making their way to the bed on the other side of the hut.

She smiled as she saw their dim shadows shuffling into bed, painfully aware of how old they had gotten. She'd been with them only four decades, and was still a young child, whilst they were old and growing weak. Again, as almost every night, this unquenchable sadness swelled up in her, encasing first her heart in a block of ice, and slowly spreading over all of her body. How was she supposed to, how *could* she, deal with the dwindling away of her parents? What would she do when, when... when the day came? She couldn't even dare thinking along that line, and turned around, burying her face in the cushion and trying to drench out those fears, squeezing them out of her consciousness, forcing her to ignore the very greatest fear that dominated her.



Night had saved him, he was sure. Fate had not been good on him, as the thick dent on his helmet and battered brigandine proved. Staggering, he made his way away from the fiery lights, the barking, the shouts. He had left Orksed behind an hour ago, and he wasn't sure whom he was fleeing: the orcs or his friends. Both had gladly gone for his neck, and now, he had no idea where to go.

He cursed as he stumbled over a boulder, his hand leaving a streak of dark red blood on the ground. Coughing, feeling his life force flowing out of his side, he thought back upon the better days, when he'd been garrisoned in Quirthrealm, far to the south.

Like a dark shadow, the man stood up, hunched over in pain. Slowly, he held on to a large rock, pulling himself over, slowly slumping over. Above, the stars shone bright, their unending fight with darkness seeming like an epic joke, laughing down upon the miserable human over which darkness had just been pouring.



The birds chirped, and a deliciously warm air permeated the house as rays of light sought their way through some joints, casting a multitude of shadows and reflections on odd dust particles. Mam chuckled as she donned her thick outdoor robes, looking over at Darynna's deserted cot.

The young elf laid in a mass of blankets on the floor, cuddling with a thick pillow as she snored lightly. Dad didn't dare wake her up, and instead proceeded to unfastening the shutter closest to his adoptive daughter. As a beam of light fell upon her beautiful brown hair, she moaned a highly inelegant moan, which caused mam to break out in laughter.

The day started nicely in this manner, the old human pair walked out their door, using sticks to assist themselves as they walked down the small village road. Dad carried a large pack on his back, whilst mam pulled a wheelbarrow filled with saddlebags, which in turn were mainly filled with provisions.

Darynna watched their slowly retreating backs, her face starting to beam as dad helped mom hold the heavy wheelbarrow. How lovely the two were as they shuffled off, helping each other! Then she saw the ugly face of lady Thickskull, a neighbour, who was looking at her bare body and pointed ears highly disapprovingly. Darynna smirked and quickly disappeared from the doorstep, walking to her bed. She pulled on her neat green traveling clothes and put on the layered cloth protection over her belly, arms, and legs. Above that, she pulled on a thick sleeveless leather vest, fastening it with a rope on her hip. She fastened a few hip pouches, and some leg pouches, on her body, filling them with sweet bread, judeep flasks, and some dried fruit for good measure. On her way out, she grabbed the bow and quiver she'd made with dad a few years ago. Of course, she didn't really know how to use the bow, but she managed to hit more or less accurately every five shots, and the things looked very good on her. Humming softly, she placed the door protection in position, the local sign saying "not here, come back later".

Skidding, she went down the road after her parents. This early, most humans were either eating breakfast or occupied with morning tasks, meaning they couldn't be on the road to bother her. She loved the mornings for this, and for sunrises. But she also liked sleeping in...

But that was hardly a problem for her! The weather was beautiful, they'd have over two tendays to get to the city and back before the frost settled in. So many days on the road... she couldn't wait. Being on the road was almost like pure freedom to her, away from all the grumpy humans and their prejudice, free to do however she pleased, living off the land and dependent on no one.

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Akhak watched from the shrubbery on a small hill, ten minutes' walk to the north of Throwstone. A foul stench permeated the area around him, his fetid yellow bloodshot eyes hardly moving as he stared straight ahead, towards the low huts clustered in a small depression.

To his right, two old humans and an elf were riding on badeep and driving a herd off, moving towards the road.

-'Food today!', Akhak shouted as he went back down the other side of the hill, towards the large group of foul creatures. They started a chorus of hideous laughter.

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The four dwarves marched south, as quickly as their short feet could carry them. Two wore plate armor, the other two only light layered armor. All four wore visible wounds, and all four were very tired. The recent battles had not done well on them.

-'Aye, ye think we could rest?', called out one of the plate-wearers. He had black skin, and a thick nose as only Alebrothers had.

-'Ye know we can't, Arrik', replied one of the cloth armor wearers. He was white and wore a thick black beard.

The four came from the dwarven enclaves of the north, from the Troll mountains. A month ago, they all still lived in their mighty caves, dwarven strongholds so great that no army, be it human, giant or goblinoid, had ever chased them off in many centuries. All of the four had lived the entirety of their three hundred year long lives in the Trollmount enclaves, and never had any witnessed the fall of a dwarven hold.

Until now, and the huge hosts that had come from everywhere, washing over the dwarves like waves over pebbles.

-'Ey, ye bickerers! I'm seeing some houses up front!'

They made their way closer to the small settlement.

-'That ain't good', commented Arrik Alebrother.

They were marching up a small hill that was strewn with small shrubs. All around them were marks from heavy feet that had carelessly stomped over anything in their way. The dwarves knew exactly what they were, for they had seen similar traces all over their own mountains.

Afraid of what they would see, the foursome reached the top of the hill, staring down at a small human village. Screams filled the air, and people were running everywhere, as black forms howled and ran after them.

-'Seems like we've got some skulls to cleave!', shouted one of the cotton-clad dwarves. His companion pulled out his two battleaxes and smiled back, as the two ran off towards the village.

The Alebrothers sighed and looked at each other. 'That be Warbummers right there for ye', said Brekka, Arrik's cousin. Upon these words, she pulled out her sword and strapped on her iron shield.

-'How I wished the brudders were here, to help us in this fight', moaned Arrik. 'Bah, they're only a dozen or so!', said Brekka as she ran off after the Warbummers. As he looked at Brekka's back, and the perfectly made armor she wore, Arrik was proud of his kin. Grabbing his warhammer and shield, he sprinted off after the others.

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-'There be food here!', cried Hrugkad.

Akhak looked up from the body of the human he had been slaughtering. Blood had splattered everywhere, and hardly any aspect of the bloodied mess at his feet could be recognized as human. Grinning, he stomped off towards Hrugkad, an odd squishing sound coming from beneath him as he walked right over the corpse.

Hrugkad was in one of the houses and had ripped open a crate, revealing many broken jars out of which oozed a thick yellow paste.

-'Ugh, no judeep! It be squeezing outta my ears already!', moaned Akhak, who had been eating almost exclusively judeep over the past year.

As a reply, the grinning Hrugkad pushed the broken crate to the side to reveal another one, full of bread, dried fruits, and salted vegetables. Among these vegetables was dried game and mutton.

-'Tonight, we feast!'

The two orc's moment of triumph was short, for a new kind of howls could be heard outside. To the two monster's surprise, these were cries of pain - from their kin.

A hideous leer on their face, Akhak stuck his head outside the ravaged house, scimitar ready to cut off the head of whichever puny human was trying to hurt his brothers.

His thick yellow eyes almost sprang out of their sockets as he saw two dwarves, clad in brown armor, jumping around between three of his kin, smashing axes in their shins. As he watched, one of them jumped atop the shoulders of another, burying one of his axes deep into the skull of an orc.

Howling in rage, Akhak and Hrugkad stormed out of the hut, running through some garden to their three, now two, brothers. Hrugkad readied his spear, about to skewer one of the puny creatures, the one that had killed the orc.

A heavy mass suddenly beat against his right side, sending him sprawling across Akhak's path. The other orc ignored him, stomping on his prostrate form as he stormed upon the two dwarves. As Hrugkad struggled to his feet, he saw a small form jump upon his chest. It was clad in silver armor, its head black like that of his kin. A friend? But a sword appeared in the thing's hand, slashing down upon his face.

Brekka Alebrother jumped off the corpse of the dead orc, almost being hit by the swoop of an orc's club.

Getting back her footing, she pressed into her shield as the orc slammed the club into it with all his might.

Brekka tried replicating by slashing at his legs, but she just didn't have the reach, and another club swing from the orc almost sent her sword flying. The next hit on her shield almost tumbled her over, and her wrist hurt badly. The monster stood over her, ready to smash down the club and give her a nice pummeling.

A warhammer spun past, smashing into the monster's face. It fell over backwards, and Brekka reacted quickly, by sticking her sword in the strap on her shield designed for this and jumping atop the falling orc, pulling the warhammer off its face as she did.

Spinning around, she saw three dead orcs on the ground, with two more, fighting the cornered Warbummers. Her cousin Arrik was rushing up beside them, having pulled out a hefty blade. A large orc in chain mail was towering over one of the pair.

Barnouth Warbummer was in a tight situation. A huge orc had joined the fray, and his dainaxe offered hardly any protection against the monster's wild scimitar strikes. Desperately, the dwarf parried the orc's overhead strike, trying to follow up with a stab against the orc's knee as his sword hand flew away.

Although it produced a sharp crack, another swing followed, and this one hit his left hand's fingers, reducing them to a bloody mess. Howling in pain, Barnouth grabbed the two-handed axe with his undamaged right hand, swinging desperately at the orc's hip, scoring a weak hit through the monster's poor mail armor. That didn't stop the thing from swinging his scimitar at Barnouth's chest, tearing through part of his layered cloth armor and cutting heavily into the dwarf. He staggered back, trying to hold up the axe as a measure of protection.

Akhak raised his scimitar for the finishing blow on the weak dwarf, bloodthirst making him grin wickedly. He heard a wet thud as he was about to swing down, and suddenly he couldn't breathe anymore. Confused, he brought his free hand to his neck, feeling a hilt that didn't budge. As a veil of darkness crept over him, he staggered forward, crashing down over poor Barnouth.

-'Aye, good shot, Brekka!', commented Barnouth's brother.

The black dwarf woman turned around, pulling her sword out of her shield's strap. She was confident her cousin could take down the other wounded orc now that the big one was dead. They had seen about a dozen attacking the village, and only five were dead. The poor dwarves were still outnumbered, as Barnouth was down.

But no more came on. She spotted four running off towards the east, and the rest of the village was perfectly calm. She had forgotten how easily these monsters were routed... Grinning, she turned around towards the three others. Her grin remained.

The last orc that had remained was lying on the ground, a sword sticking out of its chest, while Arrik and the Warbummer were standing next to Barnouth, who was standing. A steady flow of blood was coming from his chest, but that could be patched up, she was sure. The four of them had fought off a dozen orcs! She herself had brought down two of them, she proudly thought.

Barnouth seemed less happy, however. He wasn't bothered by the wound, his stubbornness couldn't be overcome by such weak damage, but he knew the orcs would come back. He had been a good scout captain, and he couldn't let such a victory cloud his thoughts.

-'Ye know they'll come back. Ye saw the hordes in the north, our enclaves couldn't stand against them. There's scores of them. More'll come.'

The dwarven faces turned grim, for they knew it was true. Their minds saw through the illusion of their victory, even though they had achieved something they would have thought impossible. A dozen orcs!

-'Aye, well, let's set up these hummies. Show them some dwarven craft!'



Darynna and her parents were riding along the main road. It was more of a dirt trail, a pathway the imperials had built along the northern border of the empire so as to allow for troops to move quickly where they were needed. Nowadays, there weren't many troops to move, and the road was quite bad and hardly recognizable as such. It was used mainly by peoples from the villages to move from one spot to the other, reckless in the face of dangers such as the orcs.

In this manner, the Jackson's herd proceeded along the dirt road. Four score badeep were an impressive sight, lumbering along the path and leaving behind a trail of mud. Dad rode up front, leading the herd from the back of a strong beast. Mam brought up the rear on a smaller one, one which she didn't have to break too greatly as it was very docile. Darynna followed the right flank, happily riding a crazy and enthusiastic younger beast.

So they had proceeded for a day, leaving behind the thick Snakewoods. Towering mountains rose to their left, their distant snow-capped ridges appearing like clouds to them. Their humongous size, their pure mass of stone, always caused the elf to gape and almost fall off her mount as she followed the slopes upwards in their unending rise for the heavens. They were aptly named, she reasoned, for Cloud Peaks described them perfectly.

The man hid behind a boulder. He was exhausted, and his leg had bled out so much of his life he felt as if he would fall over. He still managed to look down at the trail, to observe the group of soldiers marching along it. There were five of them, all wearing the new armors issued by the emperor. They had to be favoured men, probably henchmen, to be granted such good equipment. And they were after him! Unmoving, he stared at their retreating backs.

- 'Pah, what should we do?', Darynna asked as she rode up to her father. He had slowed down and was leading the herd off the road into the plains. Imperial soldiers were coming towards them, their helmets shining.

- 'You keep your bow at your side!', he muttered as he discreetly unsheathed an old bronze shortsword, which was almost turning green with age. 'Them's imperials be as likely to kill you as to protect you. I've heard they've looted Jaybridge Dale, in the south... take care, and hide your ears!'

A ball of fear panged in Darynna as she remembered her ears were plainly showing through her auburn hair. Quickly, she turned away from the fast approaching men, pulling her black travelling cloak from under her and slinging it over her shoulders. Without bothering to fasten it correctly, she pulled the hood deep over her face, so that she was almost blinded.

The five men looked suspiciously at the badeep herders. Even though the humans seemed like everyday peasants, the men's leader signaled his three pikemen to hold their spears at the ready. He put his left hand on his sword's pommel and stared hard at the approaching old man atop a statuesque badeep.

- 'Halt!', he shouted. Remembering the words as best he could, he yelled out: 'In the name of the emperor, state your name and, uhm, your goal!' He knew he'd gotten it wrong, but the peasants wouldn't realize, and if they did, they wouldn't comment on it.

The old man looked pale, but his eyes, although the soldiers didn't notice, had a hardness to them, one on which any frail bodies would hit and shatter. 'We, noble soldiers, are on the way to the west, to sell our cattle to get through the winter.'

The leader's aide stepped forward, and demanded that the peasant's companion approached. He ignored the old woman in the back.

- 'Yo, that one's a goodie', commented one of the soldiers behind the leader. He nodded.

- 'You, dismount. State your name.'

Darynna didn't budge. She knew that if she got off that badeep, they'd see who she truly was, and she wouldn't see the next sunset. Villagers tolerated her, but soldiers - that was a different thing.

- 'Hey, you heard him?', said one of the spear-wielders. He approached the elf, swinging the spear tip in her direction. Time was running out for the Jacksons.

Darynna was ready to try her luck and shoot an arrow at the man. Maybe she would hit, and they would run away. Maybe.

Whispering for Ilrune, she slid out an arrow from the quiver on the other side of the soldiers, out of their view.

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- 'Aye, them pukey orks be everywhere!', commented Brekka Alebrother. She was on the small hill to the north of Throwstone, standing next to Derrick, the other Warbummer. The two were looking over a berry bush to the northwest, where a host of dark creatures was moving southwards. Faint howls could be heard from this distance, which was an hour of marching away, at least.

-'They been marching south all day, I'm sure', commented Derrick. 'From the fall of the Troll mountains, they've probably been marching south in hosts. They're so massed together, no wild herds o'anything coulda feed them. They'll all be washing down here. And the actual army ain't gonna be far behind!' Brekka flinched at these words. Her proud army, the unbeatable Alebrother squads, had been crushed by the very orcish army Derrick was referring to. Some general had crept out of a dark hole in the north, rallying a goblinoid realm to his cause, and was coming south - into this human realm.

-'Ye sure we shouldn't run further? Through this human empire, to their greater cities?', she asked Derrick, quite worried by the orcish onslaught. She wasn't sure why the four dwarves had stopped here, why they weren't continuing their flight from the darkness that had engulfed their home.

-'Nah. We've beaten these monsters once, we'll be holdin' the next group's attack. If we prepare here, positioning us to our liking, we can fight off a score, maybe more. And the next ones to come, ye be sure, will be no greater in numbers than the previous foe!'

-'Because small wild tribes will come first, a know.'

-'Aye.'

Upon these words, the two fell silent. They had noticed another dark splotch in the green expanse of the plains, one much closer than the distant host. It was coming pretty straight at them, they'd probably spotted the brubber trees off to Throwstone's east side. These trees were the main food source for badeep, which in turn were a basic orcish food source.

-'They'll be here in an hour. Let's tell the brudders.'

A still distant, but much closer, howl underlined his statement.



The wounded soldier was lying on a flat rock, holding his side as he looked up into the bright blue sky. Darkness had shifted to light, but again, it seemed as if the sky was laughing at him, for he was feeling the darkness slowly creeping over his consciousness, occasionally blurring his view as he tried looking out upon the world of the living, where he so insistently belonged.

He cursed. From his position on high, he'd spotted a rider wearing imperial livery, an important official, surely. The soldier had gotten to see the likes of imperial officials, and he didn't think too highly of them. However, the men following him weren't exactly typical soldiers. They looked quite different, he reflected. All furry and brown, with long black hair and shining red eyes. Their mounts had to be of a new stock, they were low and grey, furry, too, with thick mouths filled with teeth.

Gruik pressed his wolf on. The two other goblins followed him closely. They'd been on their way to help their tall masters, the hobgoblins, in their assault on a large group of humans. The hummies had been armed with thick shields and lances, and sticks spitting smoke and piercing stones. Many dead of their kin had littered the now-red fields before the human army, and the masters had said Gruik's family would attack next.

But a human had separated from the large group, followed by two others. Gruik and his friends had jumped off, going right after hummies. No evil hobs had called them back, allowing them to ride on, almost free.

Two men had gone down quickly, but that last one was tough, and they'd been after him for a while. The goblin's wolves were tiring. They might turn on the poor humanoids soon!

But to their luck, the chase ended then. In front of the fleeing human was a large herd of badeep, before which stood five more human soldiers. They turned around in surprise at the sight of the wolf riders, fear gripping them. Their leader and two others started running off after the rider, while one of the soldiers tried making a stand on the road.

Darynna sighed both in surprise and relief, for one of the goblin's wolves jumped upon the man that had been pointing his spear at her. Despite herself, she felt quite happy as the beast tore at the human, ripping his face off in a bloody mess.

Its rider turned his damp red eyes upon her, and she gulped in fear.



Old grandma Jane had been working furiously, simultaneously shaking in fear. That had not stopped her from making a huge pot of delicious soup, which she had served to some of the shaken villagers. They were a half dozen, had taugth white faces, and a blank look in their eyes. That very morning, their parents, children, friends had been murdered before their very faces. They didn't talk, they hardly even looked around, just staring straight ahead at a point in space, lost to the the world. They were as distant from the world as dead.

Grandma Jane couldn't be scared to death by an orc raid. She'd seen worse.

After sending a cursory glance to the blank rescapees, she poured some soup over the flat bread she usually used as plates, soaking it well before ducking and exiting her cottage. After clenching her nose, she walked through the corpses sprinkled here and there, to the spot where two of the dwarves were hiding on the roof of a firewood shed.

-'Ye have some food!', she cried as she tossed two of the soaked breads up.

-'And thanks to ye, me lady!', cried Arrik.

-'What're you thinking, dwarfs? When's the pukey horde comin' on?'

-'In the next pebbles', theorized Brekka.

-'Ah, so soon? I better get 'ma swurd ready!'

-'Ye can almost smell them from here!'

Of course, Arrik thought the old lady was joking. Not so long ago, a couple villagers had set off southwards, fleeing through the treacherous Snakewoods.

Jane knew that was a stupid idea, as did most of the others that had stayed along with her. For beyond the Snakewoods was the Snake's Plain, a treacherous expanse of ground that sometimes turned to swamps, sometimes to frozen tundras, and sometimes to the hunting ground of fearsome predators.

A good dozen people had stayed, therefore, locked in their houses with the shutters on and door protections nailed to their frames. Only Jane had kept her door and windows open. She said that that way, her "patients" could see the light of day, and that beam of light might guide their erring soul back to the frail life. Or it might not, she'd add with a shrug.

The dwarves didn't share her optimism, however. Barnouth was hurting all over from his wound, and all four had caught a glimpse of the approaching foes. They were not only more numerous than the previous foe, but judging from their piecemeal armor and fearsome polearms, those were much more seasoned foes.

A howl permeated the town as the orcs crossed the hill, spotting the settlement.

Yapping in joy, they started forward, yellow eyes searching for pray.



Laughing in glee, the small furry goblin sprang from the wolf's back, easily crossing the distance between itself and Darynna in a single leap.

She shrieked as the monster landed on her lap, its mouth full of sharp teeth a finger from her face. She tried bringing up her bow from her side, smacking it towards the creature's face. The tough wood slapped as it hit the goblin's forearm. It easily fended off the hit, pressing hard against Darynna's chest as a counterattack. Off balance, she swung her arms widely.

The small humanoid pulled out a shortsword from behind its back, trying to swing it in the small space between his hand and the elf's stomach. She grabbed both the goblin's hands, still off balance, and he tried to push forward, to drive the sword in. The elf fell from her mount as the goblin pushed.

She smashed hard on the ground, her breath knocked out of her. The monster landed on her breast, his shortsword skipping off into the tall grass to the side. In a desperate attempt, Darynna swung up with her right fist, hitting the goblin's jaw squarely. He hardly budged, grabbing her throat with both his clawed hands.

The elf brought her legs up behind the small creature that was squatting on her, managing to grab the dagger strapped to her ankle with her left hand as she did so.

The thing's small hands were exerting a lot of pressure on her windpipe, and she started gasping, hardly having the strength to bring up the dagger behind it. Pulling herself together, ignoring the great stress her imminent death was placing on her, she swung up and hit the goblin's arm, driving the dagger a finger deep into the creature's flesh.

It yelped and stood up, its clawed feet raking through Darynna's padded armor and scratching off her skin. Ignoring the pain, she pushed her body upwards, the small goblin falling to the side.

She leaped atop it, both her hands pushing the dagger downwards upon its throat. In a last wall effort, the creature pushed back at her arms, but it hardly had the strength. Mercilessly, the elf shoved her dagger down into the goblin's throat, producing a squirt of warm blood which hit her face.

Exhausted and shook, she rolled to the side, leaving the dagger in the shivering body of the monster as she collected her wits back around herself. Panting, she sat up, brushing the blood of her face and feeling her wounded chest. She pushed herself up, trying not to fall back down, looking around and trying to understand what had just happened. At her feet, the small creature gurgled and stopped moving.

He was a veteran. He'd been a soldier since he was twelve, and had fought with the Quirthrealm Legion for two decades now. He didn't really know the other four, but when the spikeleader had asked for him to go along in their flight, he hadn't denied. Orksed had been on the verge of falling, elite orcish troops having smashed an army shortly before.

But he hadn't been aware of how *bad* these people were. Not only did the spikeleader have no authority, but he couldn't even enforce orders on *peasants*! And when those three wolf riders had come, he'd been stunned at their reaction. The leader and two others had actually run away before three wimpy goblins. And the other had been so frozen in fear, he'd let a wolf eat his face!

Sighing, he stood in the middle of the road. One of the wolf riders came straight at him, and he could show how a *real* ochebanian soldier fought. As the wolf jumped forward, he ducked down and stuck his poleaxe in the ground. The stupid wolf had engaged its entire weight into the polearm's razor-sharp tip, cutting a gaping wound through its chest before impaling its belly on the weapon.

In a fluid motion, the man pushed his poleaxe to the side, letting the twitching body fall off as he disengaged the tip and spun around, moving backwards at the same time. Smashing down from above, the axe head cleaved through the stunned goblin's head, never letting it find out how it had been thrown off its wolf.

Pulling his polearm out and turning around, the soldier just had time to hold the shaft before his face as a burly goblin rider swung a long blade at him. It rebounded off, making a dent in the tough wood a hand from his fingers. The goblin's wolf reared around whilst lashing out with its hind legs, hitting the man's side.

As he was pushed to the side, his brigandine luckily warding off most of the damage, he just had time to see the burly goblin jump off its mount, about to stab down upon the confused human.

The two warriors hit each other simultaneously. The goblin grinned as its sword slashed next to the human's chain pauldron, burrowing through the thick leather and drawing blood. It didn't feel the pain as it impaled itself on the poleaxe's tip, its chest perforated by the same jump that had given it the power to swing its sword.

Regaining his senses thanks to the burning pain in his shoulder, he threw the goblinoid corpse before its earlier mount, which seemed ready to jump at him. Instead, it gleefully accepted the ready meal.

Another wolf, this time without mount, was occupied attacking the old man on a badeep.

-'Hey!', cried the powerful warrior.

The wolf, thinking its kin was already attacking the soldier and not eating a goblin, let go of the old human's stirrups and leaped forward, in a jump so great that no one could have anticipated.

Its face met with the swing of a bloody poleaxe, connecting and driving deep into its skull.

The other wolf let go of its meal, ready to run off before this dangerous human. Now was the soldier's turn to surprise, and he came forward in such a speed that the wolf couldn't even blink. The axe cleaved through its neck, separating head from body.

Standing triumphant in a pool of blood, the mighty warrior looked around. The two old humans were getting carried off by the scared badeep, and a single thing stirred in this scene of death.

Darynna stood on shaky legs, looking at the powerful man and the bodies littered around him. She was shocked and weak, but her stunning beauty was in no way mindered, as her cloak had fallen off in the encounter.

The man grinned as he put the polearm on his back, approaching the defenseless elf. 'Well, seems like I just got myself a prize.'



The horde stormed the outskirts of the village, clearly expecting no resistance. Derrick, crouching behind a chimney, observed the scene. The score was running in exactly on the spot where he and Brekka had thought they would run through. Fifty dwarf steps away from Derrick was another house, on whose roof Barnouth crouched, dainaxe across his lap. He seemed very relaxed despite the ravenous monsters beneath him, with a wide grin on his face. Derrick had to smile, looking at this true Warbummer readying for battle.

A shrill whistle tore him from his thoughts. That was the signal, given by Brekka because Arrik couldn't whistle. The two Alebrothers, clad in their heavy armor, stood up on the firewood shed's roof, throwing their two warhammers into the massing throng. One hit, resounding like a wet thud as it bore through an orc's helmet and into its head. The other hit an orc's chest with its hilt, causing the monster to fall back but hardly dealing damage. The two dwarves then pulled out their cleaving swords, jumping into the fray and cutting through orcish legs.

As soon as the many orcs were massed near the two fighters, the Warbummers jumped from their rooftops, crying for Morigan as they flew down upon the outermost monsters.

Both of Derrick's battleaxes bore into an exposed orcish skull before the dim-witted creature could even understand what had befallen it. Gleefully, the dwarf pulled his axes out and jumped from the falling creature's shoulders towards the next in line.

It was clad in loose chainmail worn over skin and was slowly turning around to see what all the commotion was about. A hit from Derrick's left hand bore through the armor but couldn't really scratch the monster, and before he could hit with his right hand, a heavy orcish bracer met his face as he was smashed to the ground.

The leering monster stood above him, pulling its scimitar back extremely far to kill the poor dwarf. Praying to Lugmathor, the dwarf threw his right-handed axe. It spun once, then dug into the orc's exposed face in a wet crunching sound.

'By all the gods, this is fun!', yelled the diminutive warrior as he jumped back to his feet, changing his remaining battleaxe from left to right hand and pulling out a dagger.

A howl of pain from a distinctly dwarven voice shook him, bringing his spirits back down from the high clouds they'd been in. After a quick battle-wisened look, he spotted Brekka with an arrow sticking out of her shoulder pauldron. Another quick look following the arrow's flight back, he spotted an extremely burly orc wielding a warbow of incredible proportions.

'Lookie here, you fat pukey dimwit!', cried the sturdy dwarf without hesitation. One of his kinfolk had been endangered by the brute.

The archer had already cocked its arrow, and pointed the missile at Derrick instead of poor Brekka. Rolling forward, the dwarf managed to escape the high-powered arrow which thunked into the cobblestone hut wall behind him instead.

Placing an armored orc between himself and the archer, the dwarf made sure the burly one would not have a clear line of fire at him whilst keeping out of reach of the other monster's scary warscythe. Derrick even dared jumping out to the right and shoving a finger to his nose at the archer, taunting it in this way before jumping back behind the polearm-wielder.

The dwarf's plan worked out, as an orcish gasp outside his line of sight told him a dainaxe had found its mark on the orcish archer.

But he now had a more pressing problem before him: a bloodthirsty orc wielding a long weapon that forced him to stay out of reach with his short melee weapons.

After a failed distraction attempt, Derrick tried throwing his dagger at the monster's face. He missed, sending the flat of the weapon against the monster's chest, which did absolutely no damage. Cursing, he spun around and ran as fast as his small legs could carry him, running around the house on which he had sat to get a new angle on his foes.

The orc hadn't run after him, instead turning on Barnouth who was just coming out of another bloody encounter with an orc. Seeing that his kill count was still low, Derrick caught some bravery again and sprinted forward, jumping on high and holding his battleaxe in both hands.

It thudded through the monster's leather cap easily, burrowing itself to the hilt in its skull. Unable to pull the weapon out, the dwarf jumped down from the slowly falling orc, to face two new opponents. Interposing himself between the creatures and Derrick, Barnouth fended off a heavy greatsword strike, saving the defenseless dwarf's life.

Derrick pulled out a dagger, his last weapon, and looked at the battlefield. It was littered with orcish bodies, but a dozen or so remained standing, and they weren't ready to leave. The Alebrothers were cornered, Brekka heavily wounded and depending fully on Arrik. Barnouth was desperately fending off two tough guys and didn't seem to be able to keep it up for long.

The situation was desperate, Derrick realized, as he threw his last dagger at the orc's face that had previously leered because it had drawn blood from Barnouth's shoulder. That orc fell over backwards, but another remained, and Derrick had no idea how he could save Derrick, let alone the others.

- 'Comin' in!', yelled a croaky voice from behind the surrounded Alebrothers.

With stunned eyes, the Warbummers observed as grandma Jane stormed in, swinging a greatsword as tall as herself.



The strong man towered over her. The stench of sweat and blood permeated the air as he grabbed her arms in an unbreakable grasp. Darynna fell away from the world, thinking back to the last sunrise.

Shimmers of dawn again burst through the darkness, sending the sky through all shades of colours in a firework of beauty.

She remembered the terror those red eyes had caused, those red holes of hate and bloodthirst. She tried escaping the pure evil she'd seen, trying to run from that image that permeated her head. Good and evil is balance, she knew, but she couldn't think of that evil. She tried tearing her thoughts from the red void, tried pulling away from that expanse of pain, but the more she pushed it back, the more it engulfed her.

All was red. She was surrounded by red, engulfed by red, absorbed by red. She couldn't push it away, it was all over her. The red was warm and sticky and caked her face. It shook her arm.

Slowly, she left the realm of pain, came back to the real world, to find a blurry red view. She realized her face was caked in blood, and tried wiping it off, realizing her beautiful hair was sullied in the liquid. She was about to vomit.

The soldier stood before her. He was suddenly much thinner, and he was bleeding. But he was also on the ground, a sword hilt emerging from his neck.

- 'Come. More monsters will follow.' The soldier held out a hand. It was red from his own life's nectar escaping him.

Finally, she understood, coming back from the real world and facing the terrors that had chased her away. She had killed the goblin. She had actually separated a soul from its mortal coil, forcing it to eternal suffering. She was also covered in blood, and most of it wasn't her own.

The new soldier had come out of nowhere, she noticed. He had a pale face, a very thin one, as if he were exhausted, or hungry.

-'I am exhausted and hungry, o elf', he said. 'Please let us be on our way.'

Darynna looked away from the human, searching for her parents. Where were they? There was nothing around, except a mess of bloodied corpses.

Far away, in the north, she could see faint movement. That was probably the panicked badeep herd, which her parents were trying to bring back in control.

-'I must go west. My parents will go there', said Darynna.

-'West? Mylady, west is an orc army! Greater than ever seen before! West, you will find death!'

-'But west is where my parents will go.'

-'They wouldn't! There are orcish hordes everywhere!'

-'But..'

-'Mylady, there must be some brain behind those pointed ears! Realize, the west is lost! And if we do not go east *now*, we will be gone too!'

-'But...'

The elf stood clueless, absently stroking her wounds, trying to reach a decision. The man took her shoulder and started pulling her eastwards, but folded down upon himself.

Realizing the man's situation, Darynna quickly caught the man and put his arm over her shoulder, supporting him as she started walking eastwards.

-'Thank... you', he muttered.

She didn't answer and tried not to cry, pulling him along the main road, away from the carnage.



The orc swung wildly, smashing his huge axe down upon a stunned Barnouth.

Derrick cried out, ramming into his kin and pushing him aside. The heavy blade smashed into the dirt ground next to the two prone dwarves.

The monster grunted, dislodged his axe, and prepared to swing down at the two again. Derrick jumped up so quickly that no eye followed him, running under the orc's raised axe and jumping up, putting his arms around the orc in a friendly embrace.

The monster howled and swung his upper body, causing the dwarf to fly up and swing around, landing on the creature's back and still holding fast to its neck.

-'Run, Barnouth! Ye get te safety!', cried the dwarf as he struggled to stay on the struggling creature's neck. Barnouth, of course, didn't even consider running away, striking with his broken dainaxe at the shuffling creature's legs instead. A sideways kick sent him flying, and he sprawled on the ground, coughing blood. Derrick still held fast, tightening his grip on the ever-more frantic orc.

Sounds of battle and orcish cries of pain halled all around behind the dwarf's back, which gave him a sliver of hope that not everything was lost. His staunch dwarven arms tightened.

The monster tripped and fell - backwards. Derrick was buried beneath the struggling body, but still he tightened, still he tried killing that terrible beast. He ignored his own pain, fell back into pure hatred, pushing himself to forget all other than his anger towards this brutish creature's race that had murdered so many of his kin. He squeezed.

Battle unfolded around the dwarf. He ignored it all, concentrating solely upon that one orc whom he hated. He didn't see his Alebrother kinfriends smashing orc bones upon orc bones, or Barnouth getting away safely from the fray.

He didn't see the fierce Jane, which had fallen into a primal rage, tearing through orc ranks and ignoring whatever scratches the puny creatures could put on her. He didn't see as the few remaining bedraggled orcs turning around and fleeing, or the cheers from his kin. He only saw the shivering orc and his unending squeeze.

He didn't see the monster as it stood above him, grinning wickedly and shoving a spear through its brother and the dwarf beneath it.

+

'He was made by clay and now returns to clay, at the table of our father Moradin and his sons Dunatis, Goibhniú and Morrigan. He has fought for the gods and has joined the gods. May Lugmathor welcome him with open arms.

'Mud became clay and clay becomes mud.'

Barnouth finished his prayer and stood back from the simple stone he'd been kneeling before.

In utter silence, first Brekka, then Arrik and Barnouth kneeled before the grave, carving a single rune into the stone.

As final goodbye, Barnouth smashed a clay pot upon the rock, its muddy insides flowing out. The sharp bang of the shattering clay was like a final sound, terminating Derrick's presence in the mortal world.

Barnouth had to think back upon the days together in Mountainside Bastion, a small mining fortification that had stood to the south of Clan Warbummer's main enclave. Both him and Derrick had grown up there, mining their first iron, gold, and mithril in the stone beneath that fort. He remembered Derrick's wide smile as they found their first, although small, ore of shimmer.

He remembered the look of terror on Derrick's face as the black hordes had swept through the vales, washing over anything and everything in their way.

He remembered that night without stars, when the two made their escape, leaving the masses of darkness a beard's length behind.

He remembered that joyful fellow, that dwarf who had always looked upon the world with eyes wet of joy, of happiness from being alive.

And that dwarf had now gone.

Forever.

+

'Rider cummin', commented Brekka, hefting a warhammer.

'Aye, I'm not thinkin' that's an orc', responded Arrik, similarly placing his hand over his sword pommel.

'Bah! Imperials be as bad as orcs', said Jane from behind the two armored dwarves. 'Sometimes.'

'Well, let's wait and see.'

The bedraggled man came closer, giving the three standing in the middle of the path in the western entrance to Throwstone a good view of himself before he drew too close.

'Well, he been exhausting that mount of his.'

'Be about to drop, in my mind', said Jane.

The man came to a halt in front of the three suspicious humanoids. As if grandma Jane's words came true, the man's mount whinnied in a last burst of energy, throwing the human off its back and trotting away.

He brushed his arms as if they were dusty and looked down at the trio.

'How do you do, persons?'

'We been doin' just fine afore some orcs came and got our kinfriend', answered a slightly irritated Brekka.

'How terrible', said the official with a visible sneer. 'I shall let my mount recuperate and be right on my way.'

All three looked at the man with visible disgust.

'Shouldn't you be protecting the peoples?', asked Jane.

'Imperial affairs, none of your business. Get out of my way, I'm hungry.'

'Aye, we been sufferin' from orc attacks here. Ain't got no food for useless peeps like yerself. Get on yer way', said Arrik.

The man looked down at the grumpy dwarf as if it had just spit on his nice uniform.

-*Excuse me.*' He started grabbing for his blade.

-*Excuse us*', replied Arrik as he grabbed for his own sword.

At a loss, the man thought very hard. He was not used to people ignoring his orders. Where were his soldiers? These ugly dwarves would probably end up cutting his throat in his sleep! Never trust non-humans! Reaching a decision, he shrugged and moved to the side, walking around the group and towards one of the houses abandoned by fleeing people.

-*Scavenger*', muttered Jane as she walked off towards her hut, where six people had to be tended to.

The two dwarves looked at the haughty human clad in billowing red and black robes, at Jane's retreating back, and at the mount grazing not far away. After a look at each other, they shrugged and walked back towards the grieving Barnouth, a few skids to the southwest of Throwstone.

-*'Ye know, next horde comin', we ain't standing a chance.'*

Brekka's comment was unneeded. Arrik knew that truth very well, and the dwarves would either stand and fall or run. And Barnouth was not likely to run.



They stumbled onwards, never stopping.

Night slowly fell, the sky turning red. No shades of beautiful pink or orange, just deep red. Even the sun had turned a carmine shade in its last moments, before disappearing and abandoning the sky to turn black. The sky had no chance against the onslaught of darkness with its greatest ally gone. No moon shone, no stars could pierce the infinite blanket of pitch black that had taken the place of light.

Still, Darynna didn't lose hope. Her chest burned as if a volcano had birthed there, the torn fabric of her clothes allowing for an icy wind to permeate her already frozen body. Winter seemed to have risen, two tendays before its supposed arrival.

The man at her side was silent. He hung from her shoulders, barely managing to place a foot in front of another. The last fight had exhausted him completely. Only the drive of survival kept him going, a step in front of another, his stubbornness greater than that of even a dwarf.

In a few hours, Darynna knew, they would reach Throwstone. The pair was not very speedy, but hardly slower than half the speed of a marching human, for fear was driving them on. Fear of having wolf riders come up their rear, or of having an orc horde marching in their way and skewering them into a bloody mess. They knew everything was about to fall apart, if it hadn't already. The two words the man had managed to say after their march had started, "orcs" and "everywhere", perfectly reflected their fears.

The grass told Darynna of pain, the birds, of suffering. She knew the orcs had risen, and somehow all goblinkin, too. Ilrune was helping her, for she would join her deity in the Feywild very soon, she knew. Nature had told her darkness was fast coming, and truly, she felt that she'd known that already.

They walked on.



-*'A village, Radj Kurduk!*' The orc messenger kneeled on the ground, prostrated before his leader.

Radj Kurduk was the proud chieftain of a large clan, the Skullsmashers. They'd joined the Bonebreakers recently and were happy to go do some raiding on the hummies down south.

The Radj was very tall for an orc, and had odd blue eyes that shone in the darkness as if he were a frost giant. He wore well-made mithral armor and carried a heavy maul on his back.

-*'When will we reach it?'*, asked the eager leader of a horde of eager warriors.

-*'By morning if we rush, o radj.'*

-*'Warriors!'*, shouted the burly orc. They all looked up, their fetid yellow eyes shining from bloodthirstiness. *'We attack before dawn!'*

A howl of joy went through the closest ranks, spreading through the entire horde and filling the air, hailing as if they were thousands. So great was their howl it froze the hearts of peoples more than a day's march away.

They finished as one, and Kurduk started running. Taking up his lead, the horde of three hundred warriors rushed around him, howling anew in joy. Their heavy feet stomped the tall grass, crushing it to mud as they ran forward, bloodlust driving them on faster than a raging bull.

The Skullsmashers had many connections with their gods, the Gruum'Uruk. A large amount of acolytes strengthened the clan. Kurduk had two powerful lieutenants, Blades of Urg'Neval in their own right. He also commanded a small group of Red Fangs of Darag'Aas that rode huge bats, forming a small striking force. Even mighty spellcasting clerics of Frugga and the almighty Grak'Uruk had joined the powerful Skullsmasher clan. Nothing could stand in their way!

Around the main force ran smaller squads of longblades. They were called so because they were the best warriors, and accordingly, had gotten the best weapons - heavy armor and polearms. These longblades formed groups of four that ran the front and flanks of the main host, protecting it and keeping a lookout for possible loot. A warrior left one such group to run for his leader.

'Mighty Radj, there are creatures to the east', said the powerful warrior as he ran alongside his leader.

'How far?', replied the orc chieftain.

'A few stonethrows away.' Both monsters were grinning, knowing some fun was about to begin.

'Take two groups, bring them to us.' All orcs around started laughing gutturally.

Smiling as if it had been visited by Grak'Uruk himself, the longblade ran back out of the main host towards his expectant companions.

'Prepare the poles!', he greeted them. Howling in glee, the five waved above their heads. A hand of Red Fangs were silently flying above and happily joined the longblades in their hunt.

The ten monsters veered off from the horde, running due east. Their dark eyes being well attuned to the darkness they thrived in, they could see the small group of humanoids before them with ease.

That group consisted of four humanoids. Three dwarves, two males and a female from clan Alebrother, had escaped from their falling Volfar Enclave. All were wounded, and only one wore armor. The other two were an elven couple that had been travelling the Troll mountains before being surprised by orcish hordes.

The five had become a tight-knit group and had gained quite some affection for each other. Together, they'd fought and sneaked through the southern foothills and into the plains, rushing from the masses of darkness. All of them yearned only for one thing, to find safe sanctuary - and they were very near a powerful human realm, which was surely safe enough.

'Aye, ye been hearing those howls?'

'They did seem quite near', replied the male elf. 'Have they been approaching us? I cannot see a thing, dwarven brother!'

'Well, ye see, that group to the west hasn't seen us. Them's filthy eyes be looking south, not east!'

'Aye', replied the dwarf in armor.

Above them, silent as the night, flew five huge bats. On their backs sat bloodthirsty monsters, ones filled with hate for those humanoids beneath - both of their races had caused great pain to their kin.

Using the Red Fang sign language, their leader signaled for their targets - the dwarf in mail and the elven male, whose shortbow seemed in much too close reach. All five pulled back their heavy bows, readying to shoot an arrow with such force it could punch through steel.

As one, they let fly. Two shots bore through the poor elf's head, his body smashing to the ground immediately. Three others twanged into the dwarf's light helmet. Although they didn't penetrate nearly as deep, the dwarf stumbled and crashed to the ground.

'Tommer!' 'Lilofanain!' Shouting in fear and the names of the fallen, the three remaining companions came to an abrupt halt, unsheathing their weapons and looking around.

'Above!', cried a dwarf as she spotted the dark forms. 'All around us!', cried the other as he saw the leering faces of the longblades that had surrounded them, hefting their heavy polearms.

The fight was short, the group having no chance. The two dwarves fell quickly, since their opponent's hefty hammerhead had a much greater reach, knocking them out easily.

The elf set up much more of a fight. Swinging to the side, she brought up one of her two shortswords, striking at an orc's chest. It banged off its heavy armor. A thrust to her other side slid off another monster's pauldron and scarred its neck. Bringing her sword down as she spun, the elf drove the blade through the orc's neck and out the other side, killing it brutally. She could do no more, as three pairs of strong arms grabbed her and pushed her down.

- 'They're back!', cried one of the longblade squads that was running the Skullsmasher's flank.

The entire horde stopped and veered, forming a half-circle around the returning four orcs. They carried between them two long poles, on which the five humanoids were bound. The poles were set down at the feet of the radj.

Pulling out a dagger in such a fluid motion none of his followers could see where it came from, the tall orc observed the loot. Ignoring the three immobile dwarves, he stalked over to the pole on which both elves had been carried. The woman was squirming, trying to break the heavy bonds the longblades had placed upon her.

He bent down towards her, his face only inches from hers. Ice seemed to grab her heart as those blue holes looked down and into her, so deep that one would fall forever through its icy depths.

A horrible sting hit the left side of her head, and she didn't understand what had happened. Her right side similarly started hurting, and she realized she couldn't hear anything anymore. The orc towered above her again, holding two bloody pointed ears in his hands.

- 'Feast, my orcs! Take their things, and nourish your souls!'

In a united howl, the horde jumped atop the five bodies, as well as the one of the dead longblade. They were stripped of their armor, their weapons, their pointy ears and bearded heads, and then devoured.

- 'Put it in the war wagon', said the Radj to one of his Blades as he led four orcs, their arms filled with bloody loot.

Shortly after, their bloody meal was finished, and the horde ran on.



- 'Yer people don't seem to be doing much better', commented Arrik.

- 'They've seen death for the first time. Zorl does not leave complete souls', replied Jane.

- 'Ain't no Alebrothers be sittin' around when orcs came their way!' The dwarf was unsure as to how someone could ignore orc skulls to break. 'And who be Zorl, anyway?'

- 'Ah, I forgot. He's like Lugmathor in the dwarven pantheon.'

- 'But Lugmathor ain't out stealin' souls! He's a son of Moradin, he welcomes them to Thom Faldur's Halls!'

- 'Well, then he isn't Zorl. Zorl is a human god, and we don't really like him... he takes our souls when we die, and destroys them - or turns them into his servants.'

- 'Aye, that ain't a good god for yerself! Just ye get rid of him!'

- 'We cannot.'

In typical dwarven manner, Arrik was about to continue the argument and insist she should be rid of such a bad god. Why would one's own deity try stealing your soul? Why would you have an evil god? Hummies were a weird thing.

He was interrupted by one of the humans in Jane's house shrieking. She nodded and briskly walked back to her hut, so as to calm another tortured soul.

Furrowing his brow, the dwarf walked off from Jane's home. He didn't understand what had happened to these humans, and why Jane even kept them vegetating there. His discussion with her had led him to the conclusion that they would never regain their lost bits of soul. Wasn't that equal to staying in their vegetating state? Why bother with them, then?

Only then did the dwarf realize how macabre his thoughts had been. Shaking his head, he tried forgetting that line of thought, happy that the old human woman was there to treat them.

Only then did he realize he had left the western end of Throwstone and had walked out a bit along the single road. He also saw two silhouettes approaching from the west.

In a flash, he pulled his warhammer off his back and readied to throw, not daring to shout out. Darkness was everywhere, and even his dark-attuned eyes couldn't see well. If these were orc archers, he was as good as dead.

But they just shuffled forward, one of them almost falling over. Unsure, Arrik didn't throw. As the two approached more, he saw their slender forms. No orcs were so thin. And as he looked at the stumbling humanoids, he saw the one on the right walking with great grace, and made out pointy ears.

'-Durned elves', he muttered.



The pair stumbled on. The man was as good as dead, he wasn't even aware of his surroundings anymore. He just walked onward, unaware of his burning legs, his lacerated side, or that he was even moving. His consciousness was in a dark bliss, gone already from the world. His corpse just walked on, as if it thought his soul was still there.

The elf was not doing much better. The air was biting cold, her torn clothing pushing waves of such cold into her that she felt like a moving block of ice. She had to concentrate so much on her legs to keep going and not fall over, she hadn't even seen the small but warm fires of the town before her.

Suddenly, she heard shouts. Coarse voices calling to one another, in a guttural language she didn't recognize.

She pulled out her small ivory knife, the one she'd use in lunches outside to spread butter, and tried standing straight. As she did, the soldier hanging from her soldier slid off her and onto the ground, completely limp.

Two small creatures slipped out of the darkness on either side. Trying to cry out, Darynna swung her knife at one of the two. Her shout came out only as a hoarse gasp, and her swing sent her sprawling to the ground, the knife falling out of her hand.

She gave up, allowing the ice cold to overwhelm her. She drifted off into nothing, about to join her beloved Ilrune.



'-Ain't lookin' good, I'm saying', commented Brekka.

'-Aye', retorted Arrik, looking down at the two unconscious forms.

Shrugging, he stepped forward and turned a body around. It was the one that had fallen second.

'-She's ice cold!'

'-And this one ain't even elfen. Looks like a hummy.'

'-Bah, let's get them to Jane.'

Arrik lifted the unconscious elf with his strong dwarven arms, easily hefting her up and over his shoulder. Brekka did similarly, and the two walked down the road back to Jane's.

'-We got ye some more guys!', greeted Brekka as the two entered grandma Jane's hut.

Looking at the two unconscious forms, the human woman motioned them to place the two on a bench against a wall, just next to the brightly burning fire pit. As the two placed the bodies down, Jane gasped. She'd recognized the elf's face, despite her blue lips and drooping ears.

'-That's the Jackson girl!', she cried.

'-Huh?', retorted Arrik.

'-She was the daughters of two villagers here... Where'd she come from?'

'-Ye got elfies in this village?'

-'No, no, the Jacksons were human...' She didn't see the perplexed look on the dwarf's face as she looked at the two's wounds, continuing her monologue. 'The Jacksons went off this morning... they were going for Orksed... must've crossed some bandits... maybe her parents are dead?... poor thing.'

Under the attention of the two dwarves, which were heavily furrowing their brows, she started treating Darynna.

The dwarves turned to leave when Jane called to them, still looking at the elf. 'One o' ye give me a hot towel, she's very cold... the other, give me the medicine kit, and see what ye can do on the man.'

As Brekka went to drop a towel in the boiling water above the fire pit, she was interrupted by a guttural screech. She turned around, ready to slap whichever torn human was losing his lungs again.

She was surprised to see the human in a standing position, holding a heavy kettle and rushing towards the prostrate elf. The human was yelling, 'the elf, the elf's back from Zorl, it's a devil!'

The dwarven woman had seen enough mad people in her life. A demon had once burst through dwarven walls and spread its madness throughout the fortress, turning its inhabitants into crazed monsters.

Jane whirled around, pushing the man back.

-'She's no devil, come to your senses! It's the harmless Jacksons girl...' A blow hit her outstretched arms, the kettle banging off the shook woman who was standing between the human and the elf.

-'It's the Jacksons girl!', shrieked the man. 'The monster!'

Struggling, the old human woman kicked the attacking man in the shin. He went back a bit and swung again, bringing the improvised weapon to bear on her head.

A stubby dwarf jumped in the way, taking the hit without flinching. A strong punch in the crazed man's belly sent him flying back. Lying on the ground, he shuffled away, stumbling to his feet and moving towards the exit.

-'Demons!', he shrieked and ran out.

Grabbing her warhammer, Brekka threw her hot towel at the shaken Jane before rushing out after the man. He was running northwards, away from Throwstone and into the plain.

-'Stop right there, ye madman!', shouted Brekka, readying to throw her weapon.

Of course, the man didn't stop, rushing on. Hefting the warhammer, she considered sending it after him. His legs were much longer than her own, she would never catch him. But again, why would she kill him? His madness wasn't exactly his fault. Shrugging, she turned around, knowing orcs would do the job for her anyway.

Someone shrieked in pain. Had that stupid dude started howling again? She turned around again, looking at the flank of the hill the man had been running up just before.

He was nowhere to be seen. Her darkness-adapted eyes couldn't make out much, nothing was moving. No, in the air above, two dark forms were flying northwards. Worried, she called for her cousin. The two hefted their warhammers and walked northwards.

They found his corpse easily enough. Two black arrows were sticking through his chest.



-'We feast, brothers!', shrieked Kurduk.

His brothers howled and rushed faster. Above and before them, the five Red Fangs rode. Two of them had come back from a quick investigation, informing the radj that only a dozen or so humans lived in the village, and that a large part of it was abandoned. This meant they were expecting no resistance but also not too much loot, meaning they would torch the place and rush on southwards.

What the radj's scouts hadn't seen was the large pile of orcish bodies behind a firewood shed.

Before the horde reached the village, however, Kurduk called his warriors together. Quickly, the over three hundred running monsters stopped and grouped around their impressive leader, whose blue eyes stared through the night at the quite close hills behind which he knew was a human village.

-'Warriors!', he called. 'Listen carefully, and remember what I say.'

Those on the outside of the large circle dared to curse silently, unhappy that their leader again had to hold such a talk about strategy, whatever that was. Those closer to him, however, as well as the longblades and Blades of Urg'Neval, listened attentively, for their leader's wisdom was what had led the Skullcrushers to such great strength.

'-We will need to practice formations!', the powerful radj went on. 'Later, we will be in the territory of humans. They have strong armies with sharp spears, and we cannot allow ourselves to be stupid and impale ourselves on their weapons!'

All orcs muttered assent. The thing they hated more than living creatures was dying themselves.

'-And that is why we have to practice being good at fighting! We will fight in a way like the humans, and smash them as we do!'

The orcs agreed, although, Kurduk knew, they would never be able to think well and not throw themselves at human spears. That is why he depended on his lieutenants, the acolytes of Urg'Neval.

'-And that means, warriors, that you will obey! You will do what your leaders tell you, be it Brukku or Lagnab'Dal, or your own Radj!' Brukku and Lagnab'Dal were the two Blades of Urg'Neval, his lieutenants. The horde cheered assent, and did manage to split into the three groups Kurduk had been training them to form since they'd left their home far away in the north.

The mighty radj quickly discussed with his two lieutenants to make sure they understood well, then placed himself at the tip of his main force. On either side, the Blades moved off with their smaller groups of some good warriors and the horde's archers.

Kurduk's main force consisted of the least experienced fighters. Just behind the first ranks of orcs were the spellcasters of the Skullsmashers. On either flank of the main force, the longblades made sure no one could hurt the horde in another way than frontal assault and also that no orc broke ranks for whatever reason.

The radj had even managed convincing his five Red Fang followers of Darag'Aas to act as messengers and scouts, when they weren't needed to murder some enemy leader.

From the southeast, then the southwest came a single burst of warhorn. The Blades were in position, and Kurduk knew he could storm the settlement with no danger of any trap. With this strategy, the orcish host would be able to take over towns of many hundred humans.

Starting a loud uniting howl, he stormed forward, his warriors everywhere behind him, washing over the small hill within moments and storming within sight of the defenseless human village.



She gasped and choked, shaking all over. Her eyes were a black curtain, flashing open to show horrible scenes of burning light. She felt a sliver of herself returning, trying to calm her, but still she shook, still the horrible light blinded her.

Something pressed her down, and more of herself returned. The curtain closed less often now, the burning white slightly separating from a light shade of pink. As she looked, she shook less, but sweat poured out of every pore in her body. She felt a terribly sticky mouth, fingers that could hardly move, and a searing, burning pain in her chest. She forced herself to come back, and stopped shaking altogether. Once she had got her body in control, she blocked out the pain that was permeating the entirety of her soul.

She forced the searing light into an image. As she did, she realized she was staring into the faces of two people, humans both. Her short-lived hope that these were her parents disappeared in an instant, instead recognizing the battered soldier that had saved her and an old woman that she'd seen before.

The woman was a villager of Throwstone, she knew. And oddly, no bad memories were tied to that face. Images of her jumping through a small garden and over a fence. She recalled the old woman who had never slurred at her, never turned an ugly eye upon her pointed ears in the way so many others did.

'-Grandma Jane!', she gasped happily. Her voice sounded like a stone rasping against bone.

'-Darynna!', replied the woman. The two embraced tightly, happy for the sliver of an instant. They had lost everyone they held dear, but at least they had each other.

The man stood to the side, awkwardly observing the two embrace. He'd come back to consciousness quite rapidly, as two black dwarves had removed his heavy armor and bandaged his wound.

But Darynna had been in a much worse state. Although the wounds on her chest were superficial, she'd caught some sort of disease, because she had been completely undercooled. Jane had clad the elf in her own badeep fur jacket which she'd held over the fire before, and had also placed her next to the fire. Color had been returning to the pale woman's lips, but she had remained cold to the touch and unreactive to any stimulation.

Until now. In moments, she was standing again, feeling her stiff fingers and wounded lips.

'How are you feeling?', asked the old woman.

The young one took a while replying.

'I saw the Feywild.'

Jane was silent.

'I walked its grasses, and I saw Ilrune Illifane in all her beauty. She talked to me... she welcomed me to the realm of everlasting beauty, she showed me the portal to Silma Fael and the realm of Moon Everlasting... But she sent me back. She said I must fight!'

After a considerable silence, the unknown soldier spoke.

'I thought she wanted to put you into the realm of whatever Fael?'

'Yes, she did...' Darynna took a little while to gather her thoughts. 'Ilrune changed her mind. She must have realized something, Nature must have told her of something... she said I must go back.'

The man shrugged and walked towards his damaged brigandine, slipping it on.

As the elf looked at that human who had saved her, she realized she didn't even know his name. They had survived only thanks to each other, on the way back, and they didn't even know each other!

But a halling horn cut her short. It sounded like one of the postman's horns, but it was much, much louder, and a lot more... guttural.

A second horn echoed through the night.

Jane, who had been looking utterly confused, suddenly started shouting. 'Orcs! Grab yer weapons and get out there with the dwarfs!'

A shock went through the elf as she remembered the goblin rider, his terrible red eyes...

The man seemed much less bothered. He looked around and found the rest of his equipment. He put on his helmet, a *rojer*, and put his arm through the straps of his large kite shield. Unsheathing his sword, he ran outside to join the fight.

The dwarves had been expecting it. After a quick discussion, Derrick had gone off to get atop the shed on which the Alebrothers had sat in the last battle. The two dark-skinned dwarves, equipped with their full plate and heavy helmets, sat atop grandma Jane's hut. It was centrally located and contained nine humans - by far the greatest number to protect, if there was anything else left one might deem worthy of protection. A couple others were in their own huts, but nothing more could be done for them.

Brekka observed the human as he ran out of Jane's hut, a thick frown placed on his face. He ran out along the road towards the hill, behind which such a mass of howls could be heard it felt as if the entire north was emptying upon Throwstone.

Derrick sat on his shed, trying to see where the score of orcs would come out. To his great surprise, rows of orange lights lit up on either side of the village from behind, in the forest. As he tried finding the light's source, they arced up high and started flying back down, forming a rain of fire that was falling upon Throwstone.

The dwarf had his wits about him, though. He knew very well that flaming arrows were an impossibility, that they were useless and couldn't possibly be lit up so uniformly. His people, great engineers all, had spent a century trying to make them work before realizing it was a stupid idea.

This meant he knew those arrows were not burning. Most likely, some sorcerer had cast some spell on them. And as he thought this, the fires shimmered out, looking like phantoms of themselves as they rained down. Derrick had recognized them as an illusion, which had broken the spell on him. Grinning, he turned back northward.

And stopped grinning immediately. Over the hill were many, many monsters. So many, there had to be more than a hundred. And they kept coming.

Grimly, the dwarf grabbed his battleaxes and prepared to jump. To the west, beyond the looming rock walls of the mighty Cloud Peaks, the sky was turning red.

+

Lagnab'Dal was as happy as if he'd just slaughtered a dozen elves. A Red Fang had just come, and gone again with Lagnab'Dal's message that all was well. Continuing to grin like an idiot, he waved at the ranks of orcs standing in the shadows around him.

He blew into the horn, once. It halled through the night, as great as the howl of the greatest orc. A second blow came from the other side of the human village.

-'Get your stuff done!', he shouted at the two spellmakers. Quickly, they obeyed, performing their strange rituals on the arrows of his mighty archers. As soon as all fires were lit, they shot, and sparkling lights flew through the sky. Their shine was indiscernible from real fire, thanks to the great power of Grak'Uruk.

Finally, the host's howls started resounding. The time had come! Opening their toothy mouths wide, every single orc in Lagnab'Dal's group started at the ridge of the hills, awaiting the moment to charge.

A pair of icy blue eyes appeared, and they rushed ahead.

+

-'He can't be doing that!', muttered Arrik as he saw Derrick standing up on the shed.

-'Makes ye wonder how them Warbummer's haven't all been killed yet', commented Brekka.

-'They have.'

The two were silent as they saw the horde wash onwards, the Warbummer standing bravely, facing the wave. Arrik dearly hoped that there were no archers in that host, so his friend might send at least some monsters out of this world.

-'Been happy knowin'ye, cusin', said dour Brekka.

-'Yep, me too.'

Up front, the wave had reached and passed the shed, some orcs grabbing or stabbing up at the standing dwarf. Suddenly, he jumped, his two axes raised high above him, then smashing them down upon two bare orcish heads.

Their skulls went in and cracked as if they were nuts. As soon as they had fallen to the ground, Derrick pulled his weapons out and started slashing at the legs of another monster, ripping through leather and skin alike. He ignored the stinging pain in his side, turning halfway and sending a battleaxe spinning into the annoying orc's face.

Turning around, he jumped to the side as the monster with wounded legs swiped down with its scimitar. Pushing with his foot on the two black hands that were holding the blade's hilt, he brought the fetid orcish cranium within reach so a single swing mashed its forehead to pulp.

A heavy blow hit his back, and he sprawled forward, almost losing his battleaxe. An orc in chain mail stood before him, and the dwarf prepared to jump aside as it readied to strike.

It was the orc that jumped aside, however, as it was pushed away by a giant. It was an impressive monster, wearing shining silvery armor of a make greater than any the dwarf had seen. Its blue eyes like they could freeze anyone in their infinite cold depth.

The powerful orc grinned and raised a maul whose end was stylized as the head of a white dragon.

Derrick jumped to the side to escape a wide overswing that smashed into the ground, immediately informing the quick-witted dwarf that he had a slow enemy before him. This meant that the orc could easily be outplayed and killed through its exposed face.

Its weapon came back so fast the dwarf didn't even see it, since he was pulling his arm back to send his axe into that leering face. The silver weapon came down quick and hard, driving the poor dwarf's head into his shoulders.

Radj Kurduk howled and walked over the dwarf's corpse as he stalked onward into the small village, his bloodthirst in no way quenched.

+

-'That man is doomed', commented Jane.

She was observing the brave human soldier who was standing a few steps in front of the cottage's entrance. He had raised his shield and kept his sword to his side, ready to engage the first orc to come his way.

They came quickly enough. Three spears thudded into his wooden shield, quickly followed by a flurry of slashes as axes and scimitars smashed down upon him, pushing him steadily back as he was overwhelmed.

Two forms appeared out of the heavens, crushing the man's assailants and wildly swinging their warhammers around. Together, the three stood before grandma Jane's hut, stemming the flow of the hundreds of orcs.

Darynna was scared witless. Monsters were everywhere. Pointy black ears, disgusting yellowish tusks, fetid yellow eyes looked back wherever she looked. Soon, they would come in, through the doors, the windows, even the chimney, and slaughter them. All of them.

-'Can I get a hand?', asked Jane.

Turning around, Darynna saw that the old woman had opened a trapdoor that she'd never seen before.

Jane was pushing the lost humans through, but she was struggling.

Surprised by this new turn of events, the elf rushed to her side, helping the humans to enter the squeezed cellar below. A woman, the mother of the Followneck brutes that had treated her so badly over the entirety of her life, whispered in a huskish voice.

-'Thank you.'

Not sure what to say, Darynna pushed her on in.

The door banged shut. The elf whirled around, looking at the bright red faces of two previously dark-skinned dwarves. The human seemed in no way exhausted, but so much orcish blood had splattered over his face that he was now as black as any Alebrother.

-'They'll ram through the windows and the door soon enough', commented Brekka.

Following her words, there was a heavy thud, and the top of a poleaxe appeared in the door. Only the dwarves, the soldier, Darynna and Jane were left.

-'Well, if we're not the last trench of Throwstone, I'll be damned', commented Jane.

-'Could've died much better in a good Alebrother mine', commented Brekka.

-'But now, ye've lived longer, and no one's be saying you wont be living further, too', Arrick tried saving his cousin's mood.

-'That panlicker face is, though.'

The door had gone to shatters, and the leering face of an orc in armor stood in the frame.

+

By pushing many comrades aside, Lagnab'Dal had managed to reach the house with humans before both the Radj and the other Blade of Urg'Neval. This meant he was going to get them, and that he was going to get most of the loot. Maybe he'd even get some spoils from the war wagon.

-'What is here?', asked an ice-cold voice from behind him.

Lagnab'Dal started in surprise. Of course, he had no real idea what was going on here: he just knew that there were humans in there, and that the orcs were trying to get in.

-'I know exactly, o radj', he affirmed. 'I have cornered some humans, and we are going to get them!'

-Leave some blood for me!

The two laughed gutturally, although Lagnab'Dal's laugh wasn't all that sincere. He was feeling quite dour, for he'd get no recognition from Kurduk if Kurduk did most of the killing, which he'd invariably do.

The Blade's saving angel came in the form of a giant bat, swooping down next to Kurduk and sending a couple orcs skittering off the landing zone.

-Radj Kurduk!

The powerful orc in gleaming armor turned around, the blue shine of his eyes illuminating the face usually hidden by the Red Fang's hood.

-I have seen many lights. The north is awash with ours, and all tribes are coming down.'

Kurduk grunted unhappily, for rivals were on their way.

-Our women are coming swiftly, and will be here before midday. They must have heard the war horns.'

Again, Kurduk grunted. He couldn't allow his warriors to weaken and spend time with their wives; the time was for war, not pleasure.

-And I have seen humans, to the south. Soldiers, it would seem, but they almost looked like the orcs from the north, so messy were they.'

This time, the radj grinned. The battle was coming to him.

-We march!', he cried.

This stunned every orc within earshot, and even the struggle around the entrance of the human house quieted. None could believe those words.

-Humans are coming to fight us, tough humans with spears that will be stuck into us. We must fight them, and teach them one does not march against us!

None of his warriors understood the reasoning, but they cheered as they understood that more battle was coming their way. Most had realized by now that Throwstone was meager loot.

-Some warriors, stay with Lagnab'Dal! All longblades and others, with me!

This generated instant chaos, as every orc moved in a random direction, hoping it was the correct one and that Kurduk wouldn't shout at them.

The sky had turned bright as the larger part of the main host marched off to the southeast, through the thick woods. Only Lagnab'Dal and a dozen orcs remained, standing around the beleaguered house they had left abandoned until now.

-Come out, and surrender!', called the Blade of Urg'Neval.

Nothing could be heard from inside, until the orc realized that those creatures inside probably didn't speak his guttural language. Cursing, he sat down next to the other twelve sitting orcs.

-Why don't we just go in?', asked one of them.

Lagnab'Dal was silent for a while, contemplating this proposition.

-No', he finally said, 'because the humans are in a defensive position. Kurduk told you not to run into defensive positions.'

He fell silent again.

-And, some captured humans would be nice, cause the women said they needed some slaves for the work.'

-Grumpf, my wife said that too.'

The others nodded, and they all sat, looking at the silent house.

A while later, another warrior asked:

-So, how do we capture them?'

-I suppose we just run in and grab them.'

-But what if they hit us?'

-Then we hit them back.'

-Then they'll be dead.'

Again, they all went silent. A third was about to open his mouth, when a chorus of lighter howls sprung up from behind them.

-The women!'

-'Grakkka!'

-'Mumbal'Yack!'

-'Kurkkun!'

So the cries went, as the second host of Kurduk entered Throwstone. It consisted of all the women, children, and goods of the horde, and they were going to build their camp here - to show the other hordes that this territory was taken, and to fight them back.