

# VILLAGE, VILLAGE BURNING BRIGHT

A Never Realm Tale

The clan leader came close to exploding, but he held it in. It was an impressive bit of self-control for a goblin. “Lousy hairless apes, what do they think they are doing, burning their own homes. Who do they think they are? Goblins? By the green hair of my chins, I’ll ... I’ll ...”

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Smoke rose over the horizon, in the direction of the human village. Mordoc's brow furrowed. He didn't like it when the human villages started burning before the horde got there. It wasn't supposed to happen. Villages were supposed to burn after they got there. It wasn't right. He waved his trusty axe manslicer and directed two goblins up the hill to observe the situation. They slipped off into the woods silently. If those humans had burned their own town to deprive Skull Clan of their loot, someone was going to have a bad day. Mordoc wasn't the type to tolerate those kinds of things. Cleverness always made him angry.

Flæm shook the baby skull hanging from the end of his bone-handled totem stick. As if trying to discern the future. "Do you think Breka got there before us?" The witchdoctor inquired about their rival clan.

"Impossible, yesterday they were raiding on the other side of the Long Mountains," Mordoc smirked, adjusting the grandiose gorgon skull on his head he used as a helmet. "Goblins don't fly you know."

Anyone could tell Mordoc was the clan leader. After all, he had the chainmail and the double-sided axe of rulership. Warleader Rhino held his long spear high over his head, shaking it angrily. "Something's gone terribly wrong," he proclaimed.

"Master of the obvious, as always," Mordoc spat back.

Busz, one of the two scouts Mordoc had sent out earlier, came running down the hill. He swung his goblin issued, roughly serrated sword in a sweeping gesture. "Humans." He growled.

Mordoc gave him a wry sneer. "They're supposed to be humans there, you idiot. If it was a giant enclave, we wouldn't be attacking them."

The goblin scout waved his crude sword up the hill. "No, humans attacking the village."

The clan leader came close to exploding, but he held it in. It was an impressive bit of self-control for a goblin. "Lousy hairless apes, what do they think they are doing, burning their own homes. Who do they think they are? Goblins? By the green hair of my chins, I'll ... I'll ..."

Busz shook his head, trying to catch his breath. "No, No. Humans fight humans."

"Can you see it clearly from the hill?"

The scout nodded his oversize head. "Show us." Mordoc, Flæm, and Rhino shuffled up the hill. The going was a bit rough. Mordoc and the others huffed and puffed. Goblins aren't used to climbing hills. They are more comfortable in cold, dark caverns with their wonderful putrid smells of rotting algae and moss.

But they'd given up the caverns. Why spend a lifetime mining the pretty yellow metal, when you can let others dig it up on your behalf. And then steal it from them. Then again, outside in the forest, well the air was simply too clean for his taste. Mordoc would also have been happy to kill one or two of these stupid chirping birds as well. You know, to rub their entrails over his face, to cut down on the fresh air smell. But they were too high up.

At last, they reached the top of the hill. A large group of humans, all dressed in identical black tabards were, as reported, attempting to sack the village. The villagers were attempting to fight them off, but it wasn't going well for them.

“So, it’s true,” Mordoc exclaimed. “Cheeky swine. How can they do such a thing? What makes them think they can get away with it?”

“You mean, sack a village of their own kind,” Flæm asked.

“No,” Mordoc ground his teeth together, “raid a village in our territory. It’s our job to raid their villages, not theirs.” When Mordoc ground his teeth together it wasn’t a pleasant sound. Humans have the same reaction to a claw grounding over a pane of glass. But it always meant one thing. Mordoc was thinking.

“Rhino, send the main body across the river upstream.” Mordoc waved his axe. “When they are in position, send the Screaming Memes Squad across the bridge.”

“There is no bridge,” Rhino protested loudly. “It just a set of chains across a river. The humans took the planks off the bridge to keep the black horsemen from crossing.”

Mordoc ground his teeth harder. “What goblins can’t climb across chains? What kind of army are you running here?”

Flæm interjected. “What if they have arrows?”

Mordoc silenced his teeth. “What if they have arrows?” The clan leader squeaked in a high-pitched voice, mocking the witchdoctor. “What if I slap you across the top of the head?” He grunted. “Come to think of it ...” He hauled off and did exactly what he had proposed. His hand wacked the witchdoctor across the top of the head with gusto. “You can lead the Screaming Memes Squad. Now go. Before I decide to get bad tempted.”

Rhino seemed pleased with the witchdoctor’s assignment. “I’ve heard tell of such things.” acknowledged the goblin Warleader. “Humans attacking each other. Stupidly violent, if you ask me. Whoever heard of a race getting anywhere attacking itself? Bloody stupid.”

They gazed over the landscape and watched as the black army rode around the town, burning, and looting. It would have made the clan leader nostalgic if it hadn’t made him so angry. “A war must have broken out.” asserted Mordoc.

“You think they’d have the decency to let us know,” Rhino growled. He jabbed his spear point into the dirt in a display of insulting disappointment. “No sense of decency. Not an ounce of respect. Why we weren’t even invited,” the goblin shouted.

Mordoc growled. “What you expect from humans? An engraved invite on gold-leaf parchment?”

“But a sneak attack across the border,” Rhino protested. “It so uncivilized. Not to mention, they’re using our MO.”

“Probably going to blame it on us too.” Mordoc smiled. “I didn’t think they had it in them.” The little group bounded off down the hill to their waiting, and now impatient, army. Mordoc’s mind wandered as he gave silent signals to his troops. Orcs were common, mean and nasty. You expected his kind of behavior from an orc. No class ... and even less pride. Dwarves were greedy, plain and simple. But dwarves weren’t much for fighting. They preferred to set up businesses. Let the flies walk right into the trap, or so goes the old dwarf saying. Humans ... well ... humans were evidently stupid.

“Whoever heard of killing someone because they disagreed with you?” Mordoc sneered.

Flæm didn't answer his chief. It was wise not to respond when he was in a contemplative mood. The goblin chief continued, “Yes, you batted somebody about the head until they changed their minds, sure. But kill them? How can you make them admit they were wrong in the first place if you killed them? There's no groveling.”

Rhino joked. “Ideology. Stupid reason for combat. Stealing things, now there's a good reason for combat.”

Mordoc's goblin army wasn't classically disciplined. But what they lacked in order they more than made up for with determination. The first battalions raised their top-heavy swords over their heads in a salute as they followed Rhino towards the river. Flæm assembled the Screaming Memes Squad. They were a filthy bunch, even more so than the usual squad of goblins. They trained exclusively in the sewers. The squad was led by a goblin female named Raastezia. Goblins were not sexist. They didn't care who is carrying a sword. To a goblin swinging a wickedly serrated sword was ... well, still hacking with a sword. Who cares if you grew whiskers on your chin or not?

But even for a goblin, Raastezia was a bit odd. For one thing, her skin was more of a teal color than green. But on her head, she wore a red leather cap, which pulled over her long ears. Sewn to the top were two rabbit ears. Not a pair of stuffed rabbit ears, mind you, but real rabbit ears. Some of the rabbit's blood had even stained the cap brown where the ears had been attached. Mordoc considered her. “Do you understand your orders?”

“We're to cross the river at the bridge, climbing over the chains.” Raastezia's bunny ears wiggled disconcertingly as she spoke. “I think we should ...”

Mordoc interrupted her. “Don't think Raastezia. You're not good at it. Get it done.” She grunted a response. “And don't let Flæm hang out in the back. I want him upfront.”

Flæm answered with more bravado than sense. “No human weapon can harm the body of a goblin witchdoctor of the Skull Clan!” He shook the head strung from the top of his totem.

Mordoc snarled. “Yea, well just keep their attention while we bring the main body down on them from the south.”

“We'll make the goblin gods proud,” Raastezia muttered in a low tone which was barely audible.

Mordoc despised the gods, even those he believed in. After all, where were they when you needed them? A capricious lot, they weren't even around to help you in a fight. What good is a god who doesn't pitch in and help you get the job done, aye? No, Mordoc would rather spit in their temples and rob their priests. “Don't fall off,” Mordoc replied at last.

The goblin chief joined the marching hordes heading upriver. The shadows of the leaves moved in the breeze. For Mordoc this only seemed to perpetuate the impression of unseen creatures lurking in the undergrowth. It wasn't much of an impression; as unseen creatures *were* lurking in the depths of the forest. The local wolves, in fact, had taken to picking off the goblin stragglers and eating them. It was the one thing Mordoc missed about the dark caverns of his youth. Things didn't usually spring out from you from the walls. Not usually. His goblins were learning all sort of things about guarding their flanks.

Mordoc could hear the rushing sounds of the river before they ever saw the waters. Fortunately, the banks of this river were steep and the narrow. Goblins, being short, didn't do too well fording rivers. They had a tendency to drown. But goblins also didn't need much in the way of bridges either. Throw a couple of big trees across a waterway and his army could skidder across them like a spider on a web. Which is why Skull Clan didn't go in for worg mounts. Cavalry required regular bridges.

There was a loud crack between the sound of chopping swords as the first tree fell across the water. A squad rushed over the trunk, chopping off the branches and securing the far bank. Scouts soon reported the humans were still stacking the town. "Good," Mordoc replied, "They won't know we're coming."

Troops shuttled across the river as a few more trees toppled between the banks. Humans were lazy. They didn't leave any forces guarding their rear areas. The goblin army would soon be across undetected. The far bank had fewer chirping birds than did the last side, Mordoc decided as he finished crossing. They were probably scared off by the fighting. Fleeing made no sense to Mordoc, it meant you died panting.

Creeping up to the edge of the forest, the goblin chief could see the black army of the humans looting the town. They were closer than they were before, and he could see more details. The sigil on the tabards was a burning torch. Not only were the uniforms black, but each rider wore a black hood over his head which obscured his face. Mordoc didn't recognize the livery as any of the local kingdoms. Was this a distant foe or a group of rebels? Rebellious townspeople would be better. They could slaughter them and then claim a reward from the royal family.

High ranking humans hated to have to reward his kind. Arrogant hairless apes. It made Mordoc smile when he saw them hold their noses as the clan arrived to accept its reward.

"What do we do now, attack?" Asked Rhino anxious for the combat to begin.

"No," his chief replied sourly, "we wait for Flæm to begin his attack over the bridge chains." He turned to a runner. Which, in general, was any nearby goblin. "Cross back over the river and tell them to get started. Kick a few butts if you have to; off you go now."

Before too long, Mordoc could see the Screaming Memes climbing over the bridge chains. Flæm was not in the lead. Mordoc wasn't surprised. It didn't take long for the black-clan humans to notice the goblins hobbling over the chains. A rain of arrows pelted down on them. The Screaming Memes just turned the chains over and clung to the bottom, interposing the heavy iron between themselves and the arrows. It was better than armor. They continued crossing, advancing hand over hand. Still, the humans got a few of them. Their bodies fell screaming into the torrents below. Silenced once they hit the rocks.

"There aren't enough of them," Rhino protested. "We'll wipe the streets with their guts. It doesn't seem like a fair fight."

"Who cares," Mordoc retorted, "I hate fair fights."

When they got to the middle of a field, Mordoc waved his axe. The first goblin battalion crossed the open furrows of the farm fields screaming the Skull Clan battle cry. The second and third battalion quickly followed suit. As for the humans, they took off, unwilling to engage the fury of the goblin horde.

Mordoc stopped them at the edge of town. It was pointless to pursue men on horseback. Stubby goblin legs were length challenged.

Rhino approached the Goblin chief. "Brilliant advance," he proclaimed.

Mordoc grinned, giving everyone a nice display of his teeth. "Nice sucking up."

With no one to fight, the goblins began to drift back into the town. A few of them picked up the torches dropped by the black army. Mordoc started marching toward the town square. He stopped a group as they prepared to ravage a few of the buildings. Next to them were several bodies, men of the black army. But these goblins hadn't killed them. "Stand down," he demanded. "This is our town. It's in our territory. Nobody raids it but us. And we only raid it when I say so."

An older man stepped forward out of a darkened doorway. "Your village is it?" He asked in a deep voice.

He had a craggy face which looked like a map of a valley filled with canyons. His hair was the color of mist. The ancient armor draping his form hung like an old sock. The leather bindings were covered in salt from sweat and cracked as if they had been baked in the sun once too often. The metal plates were half rust, half iron. But the long hand-and-a-half sword, which dangled at his side was coated in blood. Dust and a rain of rust particles spattered across the street, shaken loose from the ill-fitting plates.

Mordoc grinned. "Is this your work?" He pointed at the black army bodies.

"I try to do my part," the fighter suggested. The breastplate he wore appeared to have been reforged by a talentless smith from disparate pieces none of which were intended to be used as armor.

The goblin chief glanced at him with a discerning eye. "You the village protector? May I say you're doing a crappy job."

The old man swung his sword, so the blood dripping blade rested on his shoulder. "Nice feedback. I think I'll file your opinion under don't care, not interested and don't give a rat's ass." The old man grimaced. "So, you think you can loot this village whenever you want."

Mordoc gritted his teeth. "No," he toyed with his axe, "I said this village is in our territory, nobody raids it except us and only when I say so ... and I haven't said so."

The old man pushed the gray hairs out of his face. "So, what are you doing here then?"

"I thought you could use a hand with the cleanup." He waved at the goblin group who still held their torches. "Get these bodies out of here. Drag them outside of town and burn them."

"Very civilized of you," the old man explained.

"Don't tell anyone," Mordoc mumbled in a low tone, "It'll ruin our reputation."

He held out his non-sword hand. "Rodney, village hetman," he introduced himself.

Two goblins ran forward and took his hand. "I'm Zorc and this is Snot." He indicated his friend with the torch. Mordoc slapped them both over the head. "He wasn't talking to you. Now get those bodies out of here." The two goblins slinked off, chastised. "The name's Mordoc, Chief of the Skull Clan tribe." He shook the man's hand.

“Skull Clan,” the old man muttered, “ugly buggers, aren’t you?”

“Says you,” Mordoc chuckled. He gave a grin, an expression of sheer malevolence. Displaying more sharp, pointy teeth than it was possible to count. He always resented it when the butt ugly humans started casting dispersions on another people’s appearance. He shook the knight’s hand. “Nice to make your acquaintance.”

The two took a walking tour of the town. “We could use some help with the fires,” Rodney mentioned in casual conversation. Mordoc snapped his fingers. Snot came rushing up. “Get some of the others and start putting out these fires,” the goblin chief ordered in a strict tone.

“Begging the chief’s pardon,” Snot replied, “but we goblins are expert at starting fires. We’re not so good at putting them out.”

Mordoc voice cracked, a spasm of anger racked his frame. “Find some water and some sand and pour it over the flames. Pretend you’re spilling some soup. You’re good at that.” The smaller goblin appeared confused. The tops of his ears flopped down a sure sign of lack of comprehension. Mordoc kicked him. “Right,” Snot responded, “We’ll get right on it.” Snot grabbed his friend Zorc and they headed off in search of buckets ... or perhaps a kettle or two.

“They’ll be back you know,” Rodney suggested.

“Who’ll be back?”

“The men in black, they’re bandits.”

Mordoc’s face turned to an evil sneer. “Those cheeky swine. It’s worse than a war,” he bellowed. “Imagine the gall. Thinking they can steal from a town in our territory.” The goblin chief spit on the ground. The spit burned a small hole in the street. “Just who do they think they are?”

“It would be helpful if you stuck around, you know, to ward off the next attack.”

“You bet we’ll stick around.” his brow turned dark. He pounded his axe into his hand. “We’ll do more sticking. Right in the guts of those black-clad villains.”

Parts of the village were a charred ruin, but the rest of it seemed untouched. The black army had not the time to complete their task. “Nice village,” Mordoc commented.

“I imagine a goblin village is less well built.” Rodney declared.

Mordoc’s face glowed an insulted vert. “We use less precise geometry if that’s what you mean.”

“I was thinking along the lines of dirty shacks and lean-tos.”

“Square corners give me gas,” Mordoc explained, “I like a nice dome; a round shape. So what if all the support beams aren’t cut to the same length. They poke out through the smoke hole in the center anyways. What’s the difference?”

“Each to their own.”

“Why should you care?” Mordoc demanded, grabbing the older knight by the sleeve. “We build our villages in places humans rarely even venture into, let alone dwell.”

“I don’t care,” Rodney replied, “I’m just saying.”

Mordoc seemed nullified. “Say, don’t you humans tend to surround your town with walls? What happened to this town’s walls? You don’t even seem to have a stockade.”

Rodney frowned. “We haven’t gotten around to it.”

A spasm of mocking laughter made Mordoc’s ears shake, “Here I thought Orcs were the stupid ones. We’ll have to fix your little lapse.”

Rodney’s face seemed strained. “Well, we do have a river on the one side,” he explained.

They passed a group of odorous goblins sitting around a makeshift cook-fire. Feasting upon the barely charred meat of a dead horse, remnants of the black-clad army. What goblins lacked in size they made up for in spirit and pure stench. The kind which makes humans turn up their noses in disgust. The small group laughed at mindless jokes as their teeth ripped off sections of flesh from the bones. They chewed noisily, ignoring the mess which was dripping down over their clothes. Others were cleaning their weapons with spit and moldy rags. Although, it wasn’t so much cleaning as spreading the filth around.

Mordoc turned to the Warleader. “Rhino get the heavy battalions to stand guard on the outskirts of town. Then get the work companies started on building a stockade.”

“Shall I have them dig a moat?”

“Of course, dig a moat!” Mordoc growled. “What good is a stockade without a moat?”

“Well, there was this one time ...”

“Just build the moat, Rhino.” Mordoc turned back to Rodney, “It’s hard to get good help these days. Not like in the old days where every dust cloud on the horizon was somebody out to spread some indiscriminate bloodletting.” Mordoc grabbed the knight’s arm again. “Say, you have lots of buildings, but where are all the people?”

“Most of them are in hiding,” Rodney returned a forced grin. He put two fingers in his mouth and blew a loud, ear-splitting whistle.

Hidden trap-doors opened, cleverly disguised as the sides of the buildings. Out stumbled the town people, mostly women, and children. The spaces must have been small and not kept well clean. The inhabitants were covered in dust, dirt, and grim. Mordoc smiled, it made them look almost goblinoid. The goblin chief looked them over. “Not many suited to be warriors,” Mordoc proclaimed. “I doubt if most of them can hold a sword.”

Rodney squinted. “I was thinking about spears. They tend to be good against horses.”

The goblin chief glanced at the older knight with an expression of astonishment and cocked his bulbous head. His ears tingled. “You know, it might work. It might work.”

Raastezia came running up to her chief, her bunny ears waving in the breeze. “There’s a rider on the hilltop,” she reported. Mordoc jumped into leadership mode. “Take four others and get up on the hill. Send the other scout groups to the other hills as well. Rhino ...”

“I’m on it,” Replied the big goblin. He didn’t wait for the full order, he waved, and a group of goblins joined him heading for the outskirts of town at a trot.

Mordoc looked Rodney in the eye. “Is there a tower around here?”

“The civic building in the town’s center, you can see the hills from there.”

“What are we waiting for?” Mordoc boasted. The two took off at a distance-eating jog. Reaching the desired building the two began to climb the stairs. Their feet thundered on the wooden planks and the stairwell shook from their efforts. Before they reached the top, both Mordoc and the old knight were winded. They forced themselves through the trap door at the top of the stairs to gain the final floor. It was open on all sides. Only the heavy corner posts holding up the pyramid style roof.

“There!” Mordoc shouted, as his keen eyes stopped the intruder. He squinted trying to discern the details. It was one of the men from the black army alright. He was astride an equally dark charger, giving him a clear view of the town. A single horse didn’t even give the goblin pause. After all, tall things didn’t bother him, he’d fought trolls. But then she saw movement to the man’s side. It was hard to distinguish. The creature was trying to stay out of sight. “Well, I’ll be. There’s something you don’t see every day.”

“What?” Rodney enquired.

“He’s got a troglodyte with him.” Mordoc was grinding his teeth. “Something’s not right, I don’t like it. We usually don’t see you hairless apes working with the other races.”

Rodney seemed indignant. “I’m working with you, aren’t I?”

The goblin chief grinned a teeth-displaying smile. “Yea, but you wouldn’t if you didn’t have too.”

The older knight grinned back. “It’s funny you should mention it ... no, I wouldn’t.”

The two watched closely and the rider ominously turned his mount about and set off down the far side of the hill. The troglodyte bouncing along behind him. “I don’t think we’re going to have a lot of time to prepare,” Mordoc mumbled.

“No,” Rodney agreed, “I wouldn’t think so.”



Goblin work parties sang their usual songs as they chopped the wood and dug the holes for the palisade. Goblin singing was a cross between a crow screeching in a box and din made by several hundred wildebeests slowing dying of lead poisoning. This was the kind of racket which could clear an entire forest of its inhabitants and start a hippo stampede. And believe me, you don’t want to be in one of those. Even goblins didn’t like such songs, it was simply something to do. Typically, goblins didn’t hang around long enough to work out the tonal details of their songs.

Mordoc observed as the townsfolk practiced with their spears. Many of the other goblins were surveying the humans as well and there was a fair amount of giggling going on. At a command, the humans held their spears out by point in unison. With a word, they dropped the base of the long spears to the ground. They stabbed the wooden shafts into the ground and placed their left foot behind them. What was left was a wall of spears. Charging horses would not be able to arrest their rush before their chests were impaled upon the dagger-like blade of the wall.

“They’re looking almost adequate,” Mordoc remarked. “Someone might even mistake them for orcs.”

“I assume you mean to issue a compliment?” Rodney smeared.

“Look, human,” Mordoc growled, “those spears will be good enough against riders, but trogs don’t ride, and they have twice the strength of normal men. For these ... I hesitate to say it ... soldiers, you’re going to need something besides spears, or their blood will be carpeting the streets.”

“That’s where you come in.”

“I was afraid you were going to say something along those lines.” A long blast could be heard on a hollowed-out bull’s horn. “I think we’re about to have guests.”

Rhino’s face almost turned white. “The palisade not complete.”

Mordoc slapped him upside the head. “Take the wagons from the cattle yard and turn them over on their sides in the empty spaces.” Rhino started leading a group of warriors towards the yard at once to fulfill his orders. “Leave one wagon for last to let the scouts in,” the goblin chief called after his war leader.

“We need those carts to get our goods to market,” Rodney protested.

“You need walls,” Mordoc scorned the ragged knight, “or you’ll never have to worry about fluctuating market prices again.”

There was a flurry of activity, green blurs rushing to and fro. The squeaking wheels of the wagons sounded like the cry of a wounded wyvern. Goblins pushed the carts over in the open wall spaces. Raising a cloud of dust into the air as each cart crashed on its side. It was a disjointed mess, a riot of disorganization. Mordoc was pleased. “Move the heavy battalions behind the carts.” He kicked a goblin who was not moving fast enough to suit him. In a complete break from normality, the goblin did, in fact, pick up his pace considerably. By now, Mordoc could see the lines of horse arrayed atop the hills which surrounded the town.

The final group of goblin scouts was rushing through the last opening in the wagons. Raastezia was waving them in. She concluded by crossing back into the town, the last to enter. Her scouts rushed to force the last cart into place. Pushing it over on its side with a clatter. Flæm jumped up on the wagon’s side and stood at his full height of four feet. he waved his totem over his head, the skull jingling. “Come and get it, you blind, one-eyed, minks!” Losing his balance, he fell backward, landing on his butt. The humans applauded as the goblins roared with laughter.

The air went still as everyone waited.

Goblins do not pray before battle. After all, what's the point, the gods don't listen anyway. Not only are they capricious, but if they really were upset with you, they'd do just what you want. They would answer your prayers. On the other hand, goblins do curse a lot. The silence, therefore, drew a sailor's round of swearing. Good old-fashioned, your mother wears army boots kind of stuff.

The delay was mercifully short-lived. Mordoc could hear the thunder of hooves roaring down from the hills. The humans lined up in the streets, their spear points ready. The sound was like thunder before the rain. You knew it was coming, you simply couldn't see it.

The first group of horsemen vaulted the walls. They landed on a collapsing blanket covered with dirt and fell with a thud on a forest of sharpened stakes. Rhino had prepared a moat for them alright. Only he had put it inside of the walls, not outside. Goblins rushed up to the edge of the ditch and hacked the survivors to pieces as they attempted to climb out.

Mordoc gave Rodney a teeth-displaying grin. "Size and mass aren't always an advantage."

"I can see."

After the last of the black-clad army stopped struggling in the ditch, the air was silent again. One of the wall sections shook as if it had been struck by a charging elephant. Mordoc didn't like fighting the great beasts with the massive tusks and ears, it always caused him to break out in a rash. The wall shook violently again. It was followed by an uneasy silence.

The walls never shook again. Instead, they exploded into a shower of splinters. The rain of wood was followed by a group of rushing troglodytes armed with large clubs. The exterior of these bashing tools was covered with wickedly sharp jagged flakes of stone and metal, randomly hammered into the sides of the what must have once been tree trunks. The trogs screamed a caterwauler of high-pitched tones and then attacked.

Mordoc set himself, legs apart, toying with his axe and one of them headed straight for him as if he was a rushing bull. "Come on pig, oink, oink," the goblin chief taunted him. Trogs hated pig noises. An insidious grin spread across his broad green face as he watched the lizard-like creature's legs pound the earth with his approach.

The trog raised club high over his head, preparing to squash the small green obstruction. At the very moment of impact, Mordoc sidestepped the blow. The creature's club smashed into a pole intended to tie up horses in the street. The goblin chief's body had been obscuring it. Now, the lizard creature's club was embedded too deeply into the lumber to remove it. As he struggled, Mordoc slashed him across the knee. The creature gave an abbreviated blood curtailing scream.

"Having trouble with your weapon, there?" Mordoc observed, "Would you like some assistance?" The goblin chief swung his double-headed axe with both hands to take out the other knee. The creature fell to the ground with a pained gasp. Mordoc took the opportunity, once the creature's head was reachable, to bury his axe blade in it. The goblin stared down at the bleeding corpse. "Why is there always an inverse relationship between size and brains with you lizards?"

On the goblin chief's other side. Some of the heavy battalion goblins were busy darting about from side to side, avoiding blows from the trog clubs. They were doing well, evading strikes and then jumping on

their opponents en masse. A wild set of blows flew through the air as they brought another one down. The goblins had a maxim, any four goblins could defeat an oversize creature ... provided you were prepared to loss four other goblins as decoys.

With a thunderous cry, Mordoc charged another of the scaly beasts, head down, axe extended. The trog was struggling to find a home for his club in a small goblin's skull. It barely had time to turn to meet the onrushing impact. Frantically he swung his rough club. Your average goblin's head makes a big target, easy to hit. But Mordoc was no average goblin. He slid under the creature's legs, cutting upward with his axe as he passed beneath him. The trog collapsed with a most delightful throaty scream.

Mordoc gave the lizard a mischievous smile. "Don't you listen when your sergeant tells you to wear a cod-piece?" Unfortunately, the trog couldn't hear this enchanting quip, as Mordoc had already implanted his axe in the creature's skull.

Unfortunately, he didn't reckon with the trog's associate. The goblin chef barely had time to register the creature's presence when the lizard's club came swinging at his head. The swing went wild and Mordoc was able to evade it. It only cost him the top of one of his long ears. "That's going to leave a mark," the goblin chief hissed as he moved to block the second blow with his axe.

The two weapons clanged as they struck home, but Mordoc, having the lesser mass, was thrown out of the way. He landed with an air-emptying thud on the street. Goblins are indeed small for such violent creatures, but they are even closer to the ground when laying on their backside. Mordoc shook his head to try to clear the fog. For years, Mordoc had not been challenged as chief, and he had planned on keeping it this way for many more years to come. In his addled mind, in a dream-like state, he saw a new goblin lift his famous skull helmet from his severed head and place it on his own. When the goblin turned, Mordoc saw is was Flæm.

"That will be the day!" the goblin chief pronounced, returning to consciousness. He steadied himself and peered around for a victim. Even Flæm would have done. As he's eyes shifted about, he heard a second call form the bull's horn. What few troglodytes remained fled through the gap in the wall. The last one didn't make it. he was set upon by an entire company, eager for revenge. He was soon at the bottom of a great pile-up. Mordoc could see severed arms and a leg flying, trailing innards and blood.

Rodney hobbled up to Mordoc, limping on one leg, using his sword as a crutch. "They'll be back."

"Let's hope so," Mordoc spit, "I wasn't done with them yet."



The town used the extra time to lick its wounds. The good news was there were far more black-clad army and trog bodies than human. The goblins ... well, the goblins took their lumps as they always did. Thinning the horde, they called it. Bleeding it white was more like it.

The human corpses in the ditch had already started to smell, baking in the hot sun. To the goblin's the smell was like someone had opened a spa or maybe a bakery. Human noses weren't as refined. Flæm wondered about, shaking his skull from the end of his rod. He muttered a few choice expletives and the remains crumbled into dust. Flæm kept the horses however, no reason to let good meat go to waste.

"Nice work," Rodney's voice didn't seem like he intended to issue a compliment.

Mordoc groused. "I know it sounds like you are praising me, but ..."

"Now what," Rodney demanded in a less than agreeable tone. "What do we do now? The spiked pit trap isn't going to work again," he declared.

"Agreed," Mordoc nodded his head, "even humans aren't that stupid. We might have to resort to actual fighting."

"Are you kidding." Rodney snapped. "Look around you. If we meet them in a straight fight, there won't be any of us left." The humans by his side grumbled in agreement.

"What do you expect of us?" Mordoc groused, "Do you think we can work little green miracles every day? We're two heads shorter than you ape boy. We're raiders, we're not used to standing our ground. It's in and out faster than the wind, that's us. We ..." It was as if a torch had been lit in Mordoc's head. Both his ears stood straight up. Well almost, the top of one was still missing. Mordoc would look for it later. "Raastezia? Raastezia? where are you?"

The little teal goblin made her way through the crowd, bunny ears waving in the gentle wind. "Yes, boss?"

"Get the Screaming Memes together," he grinned sinisterly, "we're going for a little trip."



The bushes were made of sword grass, cutting the skin of everyone who even came near it ... or looked at it cross-eyed. The good news was getting off the beaten track was an ordeal. Not even the trogs wouldn't be willing to do it. But sacrifice was a goblin's middle name. No really. Okay, it's kind of boring everyone having the same middle name; which is why goblins only went by their first names. Don't start getting all superior, it was a cultural thing.

Raastezia whistled a snappy goblin tone. It contained the kinds of sounds which where too high pitched for some species to hear, yet it had the same effect as a wood being ripped apart by a screaming banshee. Although to goblin ears, it was an agreeable sound.

They hustled their way up the hills, traipsing over ground covered by nothing but plants since the world was new. Mordoc almost stepped in it. More accurately, he almost stepped off it. Before him was a great chasm with a road at the bottom. Raastezia pulled him back to keep him from falling over. The road at the base was the only effective path through the hills. Any detour took you through the same knife-like plants the goblins had so recently struggled through. "This is the way they'll have to come," the goblin chief suggested.

"It's not going to help us much." Raastezia snorted. "We don't have missile weapons."

Mordoc displayed all his fangs. "Missile weapons are for cowards who don't want to see the faces of their foes." He paused. "Besides, this is where the rocks are going to come in handy."

Raastezia grinned, but it wasn't a grin of understanding. "There aren't many of us to both collect and throw a few rocks. We could use a few more troops."

"No, it's you and me, the squad and Flæm here," Mordoc remarked pointing at the clan witch doctor.

“It doesn’t sound like enough.”

“No.”

Their discussion was interrupted by the first sounds of their approach. The crunching of the rocks was distinctive. Even in the darkest cavern, Mordoc would have been able to recognize it ... Troggs. Maybe a thousand, maybe more. Behind them the tread of shod hooves. In the dark, goblins had exceptional eyesight as well as big ears. In the daylight, they were remarkably farsighted. It was Raastezia who spotted them first, her rabbit ears waving as she turned her head. “There they are.” She pointed off into the distance. Mordoc saw them too, they were headed right for the pass.

The group of goblins sank back into the foliage to keep out of sight. Troglodytes might be strong, but their eyesight wasn’t particularly good. Older than humans by eons, the gleaming towers of their cities had once dotted the landscape when men were nothing but monkeys living in trees. Back in the days when goblins and kobolds were the same sizes. Yet those who survived the great cannibalistic wars which leveled their cities were the most brutish, not the brightest. Some even said they were once men, changed by an invisible force unleashed in the great wars. But no one believed those stories. It was simply one of those campfire tales one told to scare the loincloths off the young ones.

By now the trogs were almost directly below. Mordoc put his hand upon Flæm’s shoulder, “This would be your part,” the goblin chief muttered, “get to it.”

Flæm stepped out of the shadows and stood at the edge of the precipice. He shook his totem “*Goona, goona, mektayo yasso tolla mak singe , tilla goona nata bin tolla zin!*” His accent was heavy in the old tongue of the goblins, his tone dark. Striking the ground with the bone handle of his totem, the baby skull, hanging by a leather strap, rang out. The sound echoed across the ravine. The rock walls of the canyon answered with their own ringing. The ground shook and then thundered. The side of the walls collapsed in a rain of sharp rocks and a cloud of dust.

The pass was filled with the screams of the dying and the injured. Horses snorted and their hooves beat the earth. Men shouted and there were the confused cries of the lizard-like trogs. The goblins stepped back from the edge to avoid choking on the dirt cloud. There was no reason to peer over the edge to observe the result. The cries told them everything they needed to know. Their approach would be delayed for at least a day, maybe more.

It was dark when the group arrived back in the village. Many of the scouts were so covered with bandages from the sword grass they resembled mummies. Dark green blood dipping trailed them. Rodney was the first one to greet them. “And?” He asked pointedly.

Mordoc snorted. “And what?”

“Did you stop them?”

“No.” Mordoc sounded more disappointed than Rodney looked. “But it will take them a while to get here. We bought some time.”



The night was dark and moonless with only the stars to keep the campfires company. Parties of goblins repaired and reinforced the walls. Pits were dug and they made an actual moat. The sound of shovels hitting the earth and resounding off stones sounded like the notes of a symphony. The drum beats of some primitive jungle head-hunting tribe. Mordoc found it pleasing.

It was Rodney who broke the mood. "I wish you'd done more."

"So do I."

"How many are left do you think?"

"Too many." Mordoc snorted, "Believe me, you don't want to know."

"So why are we staying?" Rodney's tone was one of resentment. The under-sound in his voice was one of defeat, hopeless rout. It was one of those voice characteristics only humans favored. Goblins had no equivalent. Yet, Mordoc knew it was not far from the truth.

When the sun broke over the horizon, it tapered over the heads of a mighty host lining the hills. "Well, doesn't this take a bowl of skunk stew?" Mordoc spat with an expanse of violence.

"You mean cake," Rodney answered.

"What?"

Rodney smiled. "You mean doesn't this take the cake?"

Mordoc growled. "You eat what you want to eat, I'll eat what I want to eat."

Rodney's shoulders sank. "They sure got here fast. Must have moved all night."

"Good," Mordoc declared, "They'll die tired." He waved his hand at the squad manning the wagon which acted as the town gate. The wheels creaked a lame lament as the goblins pushed it out of the way. Mordoc, several others, and Rodney strode forth like thieves intent on relieving a wealthy merchant of his purse. It was a proud goblin moment. Their footsteps thundered on the bridge they had built over the moat.

The wagon squeaked closed behind them, the shrill noise cutting through the thick morning air. The boards of the bridge were covered in pitch and it stuck to their feet and boots. Mordoc handed Zorc a torch. "If they get past us, burn the bridge."

The group stood as if they were a low wall on the far side of the bridge. A thick fog covered the valley. Still, in the distance, Mordoc could make out the leader of the black army. He was sitting, not atop a destrier, but a massive griffin. His shadow ran down the hill halfway to their position. "Okay," Mordoc muttered, "I may have underestimated this one."

Rodney spat. "You think?"

"It doesn't matter anyway. Not anymore."

"Agreed."

Flæm hands shook. "There is still time to run away."

“They have horses,” Mordoc responded matter-of-factly.

“I didn’t say it was a good plan,” Flæm’s voice was unsteady, “I simply meant we still have time.”

Mordoc growled. “Shut up.”

“Right, boss.”

The sound of the troglodytes charging across the open plain was like the thunder of stampeding bulls. Their cries were louder than the screaming of a hundred diving eagles. It was not only deafening but out of tune, Mordoc thought. They closed the distance fast enough though. Too fast, much too fast.

Flæm raised his bone-handled totem. “*Gulla*.” The ancient goblin still sounded like the command it always had been, but this morning it took on even more force. Even the most uneducated goblin knew the ancient goblin word for ‘kill.’ The thing Flæm called arose halfway between them and the onrushing army. The nebulous figure emerged, a form blacker than smoke, darker than pure shadow. Only the red glows were the eyes should have been cast any form of light. And this glow was as about as malevolent as one can imagine.

Mordoc slapped Flæm across the back of his head. “One!” he shouted, “You raised one! You idiot!”

Mordoc spread his feet and readied his axe. His eyes took on a gleaming quality as if they belonged in the head of some long-forgotten feral cat. His teeth dripped saliva. His muscled clenched. The trops, however, were more impressed with the smoke creature. They didn’t merely stop their rush as they appeared to run into a solid wall. They stood frozen in their tracks, the rags hanging from their bodies in strips waved lightly in the post-dawn whiffs of cool air. Everything else was still as the grave. Even the leaves on the trees seemed to bow before the dark force which had been unleashed.

The black cloud elevated as if standing on unseen hind legs. Hands rose if one could call them hands. Or in fact, relate them to anything a mortal might have a passing understanding about. With a clap of thunder, lightning emanated from the dark shape and sparked across the open distance to the trops. They spread out, one source, touching hundreds. When these lines of light struck the troglodytes, they were pulled into the air and shook as if a loose twig in a tornado. They did not so much fall to the ground as melt into a puddle of sludge upon the ground.

The air was filled with screams. Not the screams of the dead or even the dying. No, it was something far beyond such a sound. A lament deeper than a mere cry, something far more malignant. Again, the spirit let loose a flash of energy and light and an equal number of creatures fell.

By now, at least half their numbers had fallen. Or perhaps it would be more correct to say they joined with the mist, burning off in the rising sunlight. The survivors started a dash for the hills. The horsebound humans attempted to stop them, to rally their allies. But, one by one they fell, torn into strips of blood and gore by the retreating trops. Their black cloaks and armor floating to earth as if a banner broken off at the base.

More lightning cracked and the rout continued, those in the rear tearing apart those blocking their path. In a moment the hills were empty. Only a cloud of receding dust remained.

“Okay,” Mordoc pronounced, “maybe we only needed one.”

At this, the creature turned. With only those red, gleaming eyes it told its tale of pure joy. Even without a mouth, it displayed a hunger which couldn't be feed by a hundred maws. But it knew goblins and humans would feed it just as well as lizards. What might have been called hands rose again to lose its lightning upon the world. But not even this thing's power could stop the world from turning. The sun rose. And as it did, it touched the top of this dark creature's head. The first ray of sunlight split it with more fury than the lightning had blasted the troglodytes.

Only a tiny whiff of white smoke remained. With a sound barely more than a squeak, it rose and dissipated like the fog it joined. In the next moment, the valley was reverently silent. Only the intrepid goblin leaders remained ... and the old knight Rodney.

"Well, it worked out better than I expected," Rodney muttered, combing his beard with his fingers.

"You shouldn't be surprised," Mordoc declared, fully displaying his teeth, "I told you this is our town. Nobody works a village on our turf!"