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The Tragedy of Krudhog the Cruel:
A Horrid Tale Best Never Told at All

Composed by Othur Lokbrok

Translation by Eric Ramos

Preface

What have I to tell you, unlucky one, of this vision brought before me? Hear it here that I, Othur Lokbrok, do not speak with a voice of my own, but rather echo the Sisters Weird, come to me one night in a passion and fury beyond all earthly resemblance. Thereupon that cursed night was I, awake and trembling, for out of a dream my spirit raised itself vigilant, as hushed voices seemed to seep and slither eerily through my window. Then in the dark at the foot of my bed a dampened candle glowed red hot as three faces, horrible, wicked, appeared before me. ‘Awaken, young Othur, son of Lokbrok, son of Gap,’ spoke the middle one to me. ‘Heed our song, of heavy heart and shaking shudders, that we loathe to lay before you. For though you may clasp your ears, or cover your eyes, or seek shelter beneath your covers, it is you that must hear and see and embrace our awful lament. It is you that must carry such burden and tell it thus, tell it to all those that sleep without an open eye for the Evil of your day. We hope some still live with an ear, or two, or three, willing to hear how Evil once thrived, and how Evil may be felled again, as beneath a Heel or Rock.’ In this way the Sisters Weird began their terrible tale, and so it is that I, Othur, as best can be remembered from that tenuous and wicked hour, relate in pity and woe to you the Tragedy of Krudhog the Cruel—he who once ate and drank and bathed in Evil, like our neighbors and kinsmen do today, who found a smidgeon of Grace much too late, and earned the fatal mercy worthy of a Scourge in the final breaths of his miserable, wretched life.

Concerning Orcs

The origin of where such a title as ‘Orc’ came from is long forgotten, though linguists today believe it must lie in that Black Speech of old, wrought hatefully from the words of ancient, loving Elves. *Urku*, *uruk*, *urco*, and *orco*¹ may be fitting vocabulary roots for such a title, since, while their meanings and uses differ in the subtlety of Elves, that lesser Dark Lord and creator of the Black Speech, who sought the twisting of language to harm mortal ears, found the simple and useful connection between these stems and adjectives to be in the description of something *horrible*. Thereby *uruk*, later *orc*, having been appropriated from the Elvish tongue, remains one of few words in the Black Speech unchanged from Elvish design. The lesser Dark Lord saw nothing more fitting than the chant of *uruk-hai*, or *horrible folk*, to frighten the enemies of his vast and horrible army. It must be said, however, that Orcs were never truly “horrors,” nor were they ever truly “monsters,” in the fantastical sense, as we are wont to think they are today.

One might conceive an image of “Orc” and imagine something akin to the pig-faced sneer of a green, apish, and fat-snouted bully. Such a thought is not too far off the mark, yet Orcs were never “piggish,” in the sense that they possessed snouts or tails of swine, nor were they ever “green,” as fairy-tale goblins are dreamt of being. In actuality, quite similar to the

¹ Meanings uncertain, though most scholars agree upon *horrible*, *terrible*, and even *demon*. See Celtio (1628), *Elvish Roots, Twigs, and Other Cognates*, for more on the lost linguistics of Elves.

development of Black Speech, Orcs first came from the Elves, and later from Men, retaining the general physicality of any person you'd meet, say, on a street or in a tavern. They were cursed, however, in their marring torture by the Lord of Dark Lords,² the old and self-fancied ruler of the earth and all matter. Forever after, Orcs became distinguished by a seeming sickliness—for their skin was often sullied in color, or jaundiced, or even reddened head to toe as a man crimsoned with shame. So, too, were they distinguished by daunting distortions—for their ears were pointed down sharply to the earth, opposite of Elvish ears that pointed high to the heavens, while their faces were scrunched and squinted, as if blinded by the sun or a temper incurable, and their bodies were mechanically fixed to befit only the exertion of power, never care or precision. Thus, descendants of uninterrupted Orc lineages found themselves naturally inclined to thick legs, wide backs and necks, and an unmatched mighty stoutness (seen preserved in the likes of Orc-blooded Neanderthals³ discovered in our day).

Greedy, grubby, grinning jerks Orcs were, for as Fallen of the Fallen they well received and met the expectations of the Lord of Dark Lord's corruption. Namely, their twisted bodies and redirected hearts bore unceasing pain and pricking upon their every thought, so naught but hate could flow from their every motion. Thus, Orcs saw the world through blood-colored lenses, since they were broken in their earliest days to think only of blood and its shedding, never spirit and its sharing, as the prime mover or substance of the world. Considering the Lord of Dark Lords grew frighteningly accomplished in rooting all matter to his will,⁴ one can assume that the nature and history of Orcs are almost fully forgotten and dismissed today not just because no Orcs walk still among us, but rather because Orcs are no longer needed to spread the will of Evil. All things that live in our matter-made world will naturally turn to "Orcishness," as the Dark Lord desired, if they fail to heed the Good beyond the world itself (as much of us do).

Despite the stories of old being preserved and passed down by the hands of self-concerned Elves or Men, Orcs did once exist alongside the ancestors of modern people. Their deeds were awful, their achievements regrettable, though they still served a purpose, no matter how small, in the grand and beautiful plan of the One. Stories of this glorious purpose fulfilled in Evil fell forgotten, thought better to be left unspoken or utterly destroyed, for little Good could be found on their surface, and their blackened words could taint one's senses—or, more commonly, they could painfully bring to mind the Evil flourishing today. Yet some of these "horrible" stories are preserved and passed on, to the dismay of many, as this one is before you. Some say they are told so the weak of heart may continue having idols to idolize, while others attest these stories belong to the strong, so the strong may have scourges and sinners to forgive.

² Also known as *Dark Enemy*, *Black Foe*, and, once, *He Who Arises in Might* in the Elvish tongue. See *Flitterbitter* (1312), chapter 1.

³ Still widely contested; most scholars will only acknowledge Elvish relations in specimens of Cro Magnon, rarely Orc or Dwarf in other specimens of human ancestry.

⁴ That is, before his divine imprisonment outside of Existence. See *Brog* (802).

I only hope that you, brave one, may forgive my recounting of this terrible tale, and find somewhere within it a greater thing, no matter how small, that shows how shadow may never truly triumph, and there within the deepest darkness the brightest light may shine.

—Othur Lokbrok, 1844

The Tragedy of Krudhog the Cruel:

A Horrid Tale Best Never Told at All

The life of Krudhog Carrionfood, the Cruel, warrior Orc-Man, began and ended in the bleakest of sorrow, the sorriest of despair. Centuries ago, amidst the Quiet Times of the Third Age, Men warred with Orcs and Men alike for the territories left behind in the absence of the lesser Dark Lord.

Walking in the early morning along the fringes of a battlefield, bedecked with bodies and sown wet with the blood of Men and Orcs, a band of errant Men, nomadic and treasure hunting, came across the corpse of an Orc-woman, clad in the bulky armor of her people as Orc-women were wont to do. Against a tree her body sat upright, while her head fell corpse-like to the side. From where she sat her legs were splayed about a pool of blood, and from there the flesh of a babe, newborn in war, wailed in its blindness at the wind that threatened to chill it to silence.

Before the Man-company could pass it by, a woman of their own kin stepped forth from their horses and spears and gathered up the babe in her arms. The soldiers, shocked and revulsed, cried out in objection, though the woman, proud and defiant, spoke unfettered before her peers: ‘Enough of bloodshed, enough of death,’ she declared. ‘Today under darkened skies and over soaked grounds, I see the coming of the day and the blossoming of flowers. Behold! A babe, brought to life in this place of death, as a sign of new beginnings. Be it Nature’s fruit and hope for a time that will shake the need of sword and steel.’ Thus, she held the babe aloft, and it wailed, and the soldiers before her raged in protest at her blasphemous praise of Orc flesh, babe or not. This bold woman held the title of Lady to their chief, who possessed a love for her greater than the love he felt for all his soldiers, so to their dismay he bade them be still and silent. By the chief’s order they were to allow the Lady to carry the babe, for it was his belief that it would not last long anyway, eventually perishing from the elements and, in its death, quelling his Lady’s unnatural mercy.

Though most of the soldiers obeyed and withheld their grievances, an elder from within the Man-company burst forth with fiery tongue: ‘Dare not bring that thing with us,’ he warned the chief and Lady, ‘for it will spell your Doom, and ours as well. Though but a child now, it will

grow fast some day and invite darkness upon us all. Better to cast it upon a rock and rid us of a cursed fate, before the forces above cast it upon us instead forever!’ The chief, however, was unmoved by the elder’s words, bidding him stay his wrath lest he should be stripped of rank and raiment, righteous or not. The Man-party could then only look on, with tight-knit brows and defiant thoughts, as the Lady hoisted herself upon the chief’s steed in stern victory. In her arms the babe slept wrapped in her regal cloak, while the hearts of the Men in tow grew wrapped in concern and mistrust for their lord and lordess. Together in secret, those soldiers felt it may perhaps be true that Doom would yet rise upon that bloody day’s horizon.

As their march continued, the sun shone through the grey smokiness of the sky and cast an auburn glow upon the Man-party, waking the babe and setting his first sights upon the Lady above. Her head was crowned by the light she blocked from the babe’s fresh eyes, which then and forever after never witnessed a more beautiful, loving, and perfect smile. Such softness and purity were fleeting, however, as the clanking of metal, and the sun’s growing glare, and the stomping of horses, and the grumbling of Men itched something deep and painful within the babe. He began to whine and wail, as birds of prey circled hungrily from the scent of death below.

The Men in tow, witnessing those vultures eye their unrightful guest, laughed in bitter contempt and deemed the babe but an ugly piglet for the mud, naught but a food source for creeping things, born to die in waste. “Carrionfood” they called him thus in secret, though in time he gathered their whispers and insults to be meant for him, not their enemies as they feigned. Later, the war-born babe would take up the mocking as his own bastard’s title, come first from others’ hate of him, then reclaimed by the hate thereafter that festered in his maturing, haunted mind.

Mature he did, to the grimace of others, for whether by his Orcish constitution or the mothering of the Lady, he grew to the state of a healthy child, never leaving the side of the Lady under her watchful, protective eye. From afar, the chief’s soldiers gawked at what, to them, was mere insanity, playing with and coddling such a pallid, deformed creature. Though the Orc-child was a sorry sight to see—at least, when compared to the tall and cleanly children of the roaming Man-company—most that were brave enough to go near him were filled with the worst of uncanniness and let him be. They would later speak chillingly in private to their peers of how the Orc’s eyes, darker and more dimmed than their own, were yet still utterly human, and could flash bright with life, especially when trained upon the image and laughter of the Lady.

She protected the Orc-child in every waking moment, meanwhile teaching him in secret the words and ways of her ancestors, never before revealed to the inhuman ears of his foul kin. Jealousy and resentment stewed among the soldiers of the band, fearing what such a thing may do if allowed to reach adulthood. Even the chief, recognizing his erroneous judgment of the Lady and her thriving orphan, plotted alone many dark and vicious things to end the shame brought upon him. None had long to wait for their retribution, or their Doom, to arrive.

One morning, when the band of Men woke lazily in their camp, nestled betwixt a young, green forest and a river-bordered prairie to the west, the Lady brought the young Carrionfood to a grove near the river for firewood and fairy-tales. Approaching the camp in secret along the water's edge, a party of Marauding Men from the south, scouting the woods in advance of a raid, stumbled upon the woman and Orc-child. In ambush they surprised and bound them in wrappings, then carried them away to their distant settlement. Not long after, the Lady's chief sent one of his soldiers to recover the dawdling pair from out of the woods, before the Man-party made its way farther west. When the soldier returned empty-handed and concerned, the chief bore a terrible thought in his head, finding his opportunity had come to pretend a great weeping and sighing for his losses. He ordered the soldier, as his only witness, to claim that the Lady, in her madness, drowned herself and the creature. Then, when all were aware that their Lady had perished, the chief continued the band's march across the prairie in the shallowest of mourning. The soldier-witness, burdened with secrets and a strained love for the Lady, soon fell into madness himself and slew the chief in vengeful frenzy. The remainder of the Man-company, lost without a leader and slowed in their travels, dissembled into folly, or soon fell to the lurking marauders nearby.

The Lady, more desirable a captive to the Marauding Men than the child, took the worst of their abuse (too unspeakable and vile for me to record, no matter the Weird Sisters' commands). The Orc-child, forced to witness all that befell the Lady, turned cold and stonelike in his demeanor, never breaking before the torture they would bring upon him. As a curiosity and a plaything, the Marauder Men kept the odd boy alive for sport, while the Lady, come to the end of their likings, was skewed and piked at the gate of their camp in morbid warning to Men and beasts alike.

When a group of drunken, teasing Marauders brought the Orc-child in jest before his murdered Lady, he burned hot as a flame and, as if a great shadow or spirit had possessed his body, snatched a blade from one of the Men crouched nearby. Lopping off many a leg and arm and head, his strength proved unnatural and shocking to the Men around him. Others, though, coming from within the camp, found it humorous and entertaining, leaving Carrionfood another moment longer to exercise his instincts. An archer then, once they had had their fun, shot the Orc-child in the arm, forcing him to drop his still too heavy Man-weapon, while a trio subdued and bound him for their chieftain. Amused by his fury, he let the boy live, as his Mannish speech and warrior prowess proved at least equal to the sons of the Men around him. Yet Carrionfood would remain their slave, spending his spared life as the first-in-line for raids to come.

So, for the better part of his adolescence, the Orc-boy, known to Men still as Carrionfood, for he saw himself by no other name, would meet first in all raids the clash of swords, and was last to depart from flesh-covered grounds. Though a slave, the Men allowed him to enjoy the riches of whatever he could scour and hold when marauding: armor, weapons, women, gold, and the like. His growing thirst and rage could never be satiated, and he came to love the use of his hands in the throttling of escapees. Many of his fellow combatants found a twisted game in this,

sometimes loosing prisoner's bindings in secret so they may send Carrionfood, like a dog, to retrieve their heads with his bloody maw.

By this path the young Orc-man, enslaved, held onto his forsaken life longer than most, brought down to a show and a pet for those with foulness in their hearts. Considering the presence of Orcs had come to a lacking in this quiet age, a hunger seemed to grow in the bellies of Men for flesh, though they may hesitate to admit it. Having another to fulfill it for them became pleasurable in the worst of ways, then a fetish of the lukewarm and anxious in that yawning and yearning of Men for something more, something visceral.

Carrionfood, in his fury and consumption of Man-meat, soon forged a mighty body, mature and strong, seen frightening to Men and beasts alike—or, really, frightening to any breathing thing with a sense to flee from danger and death, which he, as an Orc-man, embodied in full. There were, however, still some among his terrible Marauder lords without fear of such things, and so he long remained a slave in title, branding, and name. His treatment changed only to equal his murderous brotherhood of Men, which donned him in the armor and garb of a Mannish warrior—perhaps for some confused display of respect in fear, or rather a morbid idolatry of power misunderstood.

Whispers of such a warrior eventually reached the downturned ears of lingering, southeastern Orcs. Not unlike the superstitious wild-Men of the south—who took heed of all legends and grasped the warnings of rumor and report—these Orcs, too, turned vigilant and curious to hear of a figure that walked and spoke like a man, yet moved and devoured with the hate and strength of their own kind. Traversing to the north in a night, the Orc party grumbled across prairies and grasslands in search of this warrior. Most of them itched for exercise in the dullness of their exile, while others, if fate would have it, determined to recruit a new bane against Men in their unceasing, militant march. Coming at last to the minor hill known as Mucktop, the Orcs climbed to settle camp before dawn and, after, seek signs from up high of these supposed Marauding Men, co-commanded by an Orc-man both ruthless and beautiful in his art.

The hill, however, did not yield the vacant viewing space they expected, for instead a lone figure, wide and broad shouldered in a cloak of dark fur, sat close and still to a dim fire, within the confines of a shabby, single-man bivouac. The figure, alerted by the unsubtle and cumbersome marching of Orcs, turned in a flash at their approach and threw sharp rods of iron toward their heads. Two Orcs in the front fell to the attack and an uproar arose in cantankerous, Orc-speak reply. The wide and cloaked figure stood upon a stone and grasped at the hilt on his side. He aimed to ready his blade in defense but stood firm in his place, for chains held his ankles fast to a tree nearby. The speech and appearance of these intruders, the odd figure noted, seemed not like Men at all, instead feeling both new and familiar, horrible and dear. The raucous Orcs, seeking revenge, were stayed by a taller, metal-clad Orc who stood beside the two that had just fallen.

Neither party advanced, so Carrionfood, drawing back the hood of his cloak, observed silently other flesh of his own for the very first time. The tall Orc, pallid and scarred, grunted something crude and harsh to Carrionfood, though the Orc-man could only squint and turn his head in confused reply. When realizing that this chained figure, Orcish in appearance yet clad in the ways of Men, must only speak in the ways of his masters, the Orc party chortled and sneered and dropped the tightness of their readied shoulders. The tall Orc chuckled himself and called out to the figure in appropriate language: ‘Stranger! You speak in Man-tongue?’

Bewildered, though understanding, Carrionfood nodded his head and held his hand steady by his belt. ‘We are seeking a warrior in these parts,’ the tall Orc continued, ‘rumored to be of both Man and Orc bloodlines, capable of great Orcish deeds while skilled in the talents—and folly—of Men. May you have seen such a warrior, comrade?’ Carrionfood stared back in silence. The tall Orc, stepping closer, spoke again: ‘It is our intent to dismiss this rumor, for the sake of our reputation, or uphold such a warrior as our own, for the greatness entailed by a joining of such forces would be more terrible than anything recently seen in these lands. At least, since the loss of that supposed Dark Lord, long ago. Come, you brutish, loathsome creature, sit with us and talk, so we may, at worst, discuss our iron notches and belts of head-skins. That, or we shall allow you to scamper back unchained, whipped with your tail between your legs, way back to the Men you clearly lick and hump for treats!’ At this Carrionfood grew hot in the face and scowled, but, with a watchful eye and in submission to reason, eased back to his stump-seat and pardoned, in a nod, the Orc-party’s entreating upon his slavish camp.

Saying very little and listening cautiously, the Orc-man heard out the case of the pure Orcs. They retold their whole plight, following the Fall of their people and loss of their Lord, scattering them hidden across the land. (I am no expert on the ways and times of Elves, so I may not duly speak on their behalf, only recall the version the Sisters brought to me.) The effect of the Orcs’ story proved awful, hardening the already shriveled, stony heart of Carrionfood, as tale after tale of misery, woe, pain, and abandonment befell the Orcs in their oral histories. Forced in shame and desperation to seek the might of Dark Lords—as they claimed—Orc-kind first sought and fell rejected by the Elves, who resembled them greatly, yet cruelly withheld any inclination to teach or aid, let alone speak, with those they deemed ugly, foul, and undeserving. A sort of razing, rather, began against the ‘savage’-deemed Orcs—rulers of their own independent, withdrawn wild-lands to the east—despite some Elvish kinsmen beginning equally wild and primal, too, before their enjoining within the greater Elvish culture.

The Shadowy One—as the Orcs called him—came upon those abused and frightened rejects to offer vengeance for their slain, and a hopeful future under his leathery wing. With this glorious promise for their people, Orc-kind forever bowed to Shadow and waged war against the world that found their existence unbearable, that saw their lives as monstrous as the creeping, crawling things that had plagued the world long ago. ‘To be an Orc,’ explained the tall and metal-clad one, ‘is to fight, to be strong over the villains and tyrants of creation. These tyrants, surely, were sent by the sadistic False One to enslave and abuse the wronged Shadowy One, who

found himself forced against all odds to teach his children, we precious few, the cruel and vicious ways of strength, of power, of survival.'

The tall Orc stood mighty before the flames of the camp, made terrible and taller in the fire, which, by his words, he seemed to stoke along with the hearts of the Orcs surrounding him. 'I am Shobo, the Foul,' the tall Orc shouted, 'son of Evil, and father to Carnage, and here I stake once more my oath against the world! Let the ground quake beneath me, let the sky weep above me, but never will I stop until we claim and command all that falsely moves and grows and breathes in freedom, all that lives without our permission and oversight, we righteous chosen! Let the world be Orc! Let the world know Doom as we have!'

Mesmerized, Carrionfood sat with his mouth curling into a smile, and a flicker of wickedness in his eyes. With the fury of his heart rising to so great a crowning, he leapt to the side of Shobo and took his arm in fellowship, shouting: 'Let them know Doom! Let them know Doom!'

The time left before the morning arrived grew thinner, though not even the power of daylight could dismay this Orc-party from their dark madness. So, aided in the undoing of his chains, Carrionfood led them all to where the Marauder camp lay tucked hidden below.

Blood, so much blood, spilled across the land before the morning's meridian could paint the horizon with its own crimson pain. Once the sun had risen and began to warm the land, a stench unimaginable wafted from the campsite. The Orc-party, by then reclining in shade and basking in victory, picked their teeth with bones or rummaged through the loot of Men. Shobo proudly made his way across the red-soaked grass to the unwinding Carrionfood, seated on a log and catching his breath in the aftermath of—even for him—such an extreme and excessive slaughter. Shobo helped him stand up with a hand and, holding Carrionfood's arm up high, made an announcement to the camp: 'Now you rascals all see the certain power before you! This stranger, this Carrionfood, must be him of rumor we sought, and never have I seen an Orc so gruesomely enjoy the mortal task appointed for him by his deformed curse. Let it be known that from this day forth he shall forever be deemed Krudhog, or the Cruel as it's known in his filthy Man-speech. With such an ally, we will usher in an age of wrath to cleanse these puny lands. Hail and kill, my brothers! Hail and kill!'

The title 'Krudhog' did not mean 'Cruel' as Shobo proclaimed, but instead translated into nothing but Orcish nonsense from their tampered tongue. Perhaps it meant something once in another context to the Elves of another time. In any case, it sounded cruel enough to the Orcs that day and would continue to instill fear in other beings of Middle Earth for days to come, as the Orcs were clever and knew that Men and Elves feared most what they couldn't understand.

The proceeding years were awful. Hints of a returning Evil spread from river to river, mountain to mountain, yet Shobo and Krudhog's ravaging company proved only a small

contribution to the darkness, which began to creep and wind through many woods, and hills, and roads of fading liveliness. Wolves discovered the courage to hunt in great numbers again, while Trolls felt free to come down from the north, and even goblins were compelled to seek more space outside their mountains. Something inconceivable had aroused the Evil of the land into action once more, stirring a wrathful confidence into the hearts of many a creature once afraid of the daylight. Some powerful enemies of the old Evil took notice as well, however, and scouted the far reaches of Middle Earth, searching for a reason, or a happening, or some hidden thing that had inflamed the children of shadows.

One night, in the charred ruins of a meagre village previously populated with country Men, Shobo and Krudhog caroused together with the conscious part of their company. Belching, guffawing, stomping, and smashing, the Orcs were awake and gleeful well into the witching hours of the night. Krudhog, needing to relieve himself, snuck away from the merriment to the cusp of the woods nearby. There, during his putrid tree-watering, he thought he had spied a living body, peering crookedly at him from deeper within the forest. Squinting his Orcish night-eyes, Krudhog tried to make out whether it could be a surviving snack from the ransacking, or a beast foolish enough to approach one still hungry for more. Adjusting to the dark, he spotted what resembled an old man, cloaked in grey with a hat pouring over his eyes, down to the whiskers of his beard. The Orc-man blinked, and the thing that seemed like an old man disappeared.

For weeks onward this strange pattern continued: the Orc party would have its way with the wild or lesser Men of the near-east, the Orcs would barge farther into the west's territory, and Krudhog in his privacy would perceive some lone figure trailing nearby, be him a 'spy' or 'hermit' or other person cloaked by the Orc-man's beer-goggles. Many nights later, finally convinced of its reality, Krudhog confronted Shobo alone in the officer's tent, official yet shabbily made for their temporary settlement. Shobo, however, was unmoved and thought little of it at first, until a memory pricked at the back of his bony, bald head.

'Ah, the grey one perhaps,' he pondered. 'Whatever could he want with such measly things as we? I never knew him as one to travel this far, though I admit we are closer than ever to that meddlesome Man-kingdom, as those grubby meat-bags would blaspheme it. Well, my friend, it should be no issue. Someone like him, a wolf at a distance but a gadfly at his worst, could never hope to confront us. Even if he should threaten to turn us into something unnatural, what harm could that do? Take the blemishes from our skin, the tremor from our step? Force us into tea-time with the Elvish brats? A feeble thing of the past such as he would never make it past our defenses, though we were drunk, blind, and tied to each other's asses!'

In the mischievous moments of laughter that followed Shobo's words a stillness fell over the camp at large, unknown to the heckling heavy weights. Before long, a stillness fell over the two as well, and everyone awake at that time could feel a sky-born hush fall upon their dwellings. Krudhog, aware of this change before Shobo, moved toward the entrance of the tent to

investigate. However, blocking the Orc's path and swiftly stepping past, an unusually tall and decrepit old man stood before the pair and frowned.

A shawl of grey covered his shoulders, and his grey hat scraped the ceiling of the tent, though he wore a cloak of white poorly hidden underneath and white hair flowed down to his shoulders. Stunned initially, Krudhog and Shobo raised arms against the man, but he said, 'Don't be rash,' and quickly cooled the flaming Orcs. 'Take a seat,' he commanded, 'we have much to discuss, and I have so little time to tell you. No one shall bother us.' The two obeyed and felt unusually complacent, as if an enchantment, unknowingly, fell upon their heads.

'I'm seeking some worthwhile companions,' the man continued, 'to aid me in a job. You're willing to work for another, yes, if the price is right and ripe to your liking? I need a select few, strong and capable, though cunning and stealthy, to retrieve some items for me. Easy, yes? I'm but an old man, and my hands, as you see, are tired and withered, my legs following suit. I need someone like you, Krudhog, and you, Shobo, to assist a helpless old man as myself, yes. There's been great word about the hills and underground regarding you two, and I've traveled quite a distance just to find your audience. I will give you time to think it over, but not too much time, for time is running out, and I should need your aid sooner rather than later. If you should accept, you will find me farther west in the Black Tower. Your way will be protected if the pair of you come, but only alone, without your company. I promise you both, the reward will be greater than either of you may imagine, for I am a man of great age, wisdom, and treasure, and what I need aid in retrieving is of greater age, wisdom, and value than what lays in my ancient halls. You have three moons to consider. Goodbye! And tarry not long, Orcs.'

So, swiftly he left as swiftly as he entered. The hazy stupor lifted from the Orcs' heads, and, in its clearing, a rage overcame them instead. However, that rage, misguided, soon became supplanted by something else. In Shobo, a stirring for treasure and pride for desirability pulled his mouth into a wicked grin, sharp and toothy. In Krudhog, though, a desire to retaliate against the old man's invasion grew, as well as a tactical need to scope out this 'Black Tower' for when his fellow Orcs may one day find it to their liking. After grumbly deciding to accept this offer, the two prepared for a short journey, relaying to their company in the morning the nature of this sudden and lonesome quest. The specific contents were carefully changed in clever fibbing, so that the task appeared to be in the aid of an agent of the returned Dark Lord, lest there be mutiny among the ranks for conspiracy.

One Orc, Ragmast, spoke out on behalf of the excluded captains in their party, of which he was one. Several other Orcs, too, greedily agreed and perked up with questions, and proposed answers, regarding their inclusion in this quest. To disarm the situation, Shobo, approaching Ragmast and placing a hand on the antagonist's shoulder, threw forward his head upon the Orc's nose and, as he crumpled, assaulted him on the ground. Stomping his hands and limbs and torso into the dirt, Shobo spat upon Ragmast's body, while to his delight no others had a mind to intervene. Some were afraid and grew silent, while others laughed heartily along with the

invigorated Shobo. The sight of Ragmast's entrails and head pieces would've emptied the stomachs of any compassionate sons of Men, yet the Orcs were animated by the power and knowledge of violence. Such was their art—a horrible thing that, when taken to extremes, reveals all of one's guts, and then the world for them is made sane for a moment.

I must intrude here to clarify that Krudhog and Shobo knew the Dark Lord had not really returned from the depths, let alone sent an agent their way. They couldn't have known a fact like that—and wouldn't have believed it anyway. The mystical one who enlisted their aid, as perceived by both his allies and enemies, still belonged to himself and the forces of Good; though later his heart, hidden and hardened, would appear twisted toward Doom after all. This future betrayer, the mysterious old man, was not of the flesh during his offer, but instead spoke as the projection, or spectral extension, of the powerful Man of Cunning, that notorious White Wizard our children still condemn in old fables. I would not have known either, had the Sisters Weird not revealed this truth to me, displaying in horrible lucidity an image of the Wizard's Black Tower sending forth his ghostly apparition. It sought aid from the Orcs of all parts of Middle Earth, promising some ambiguous though great reward for the errand of retrieving an old, and very rich, man's valuables. However—as the Orcs and I were to discover—the White One's eye gazed out not to some cave or royal tomb, but far off to a place long forbidden, for he lusted after the distant Hill of Dark Sorcery to the north, and its Evil contents within.

The Hill, I learned, stood once as home to that most infamous Necromancer of the Third Age, who plagued the northern land of Mirkwood—which, I admit, still chills me to think about, considering this 'Necromancer' was no true wizard or warlock as you or I had been taught in our fairy tales. Not even close, for in truth, that comical villain of shadow and death was merely a ruse and disguise of the fearsome Dark Lord—that one thought slain on the Battle Plain by Middle Earth's armies in the Second Age—attempting to secretly rebuild his shattered self in the bowels of his abandoned palace. The White Wizard and his council of elders, much earlier than my own horrid tale I tell, discovered the same disgusting truth and together ousted the 'Necromancer' from the Hill, preventing the Dark Lord's proper return for a meagre time longer. Yet the White Wizard had ambitions of his own, driven to secrecy and shadow unknown to his council. He, as well as the Dark Lord, pursued a common item—the legendary and awful Ring of Power, which once cast so much woe and misery upon Men and Elves alike, and had been considered lost to the annals of time.

In his race to find it first, the White Wizard stalled his allies' initial assault, so the Dark Lord could not be spooked into action, while the Black Tower's underlings combed the Gladden Fields in desperation. One of the council members, the humble Grey Wizard, or Staff-elf as he was better known, came to discern this biding of time for the distraction it was, and later revealed to his councilmates the Necromancer's schemes upon the Hill. An attack soon followed, and the Dark Lord fled back hastily to his far eastern fortress.

Rumblings, however, of what was left behind in the old fortress began to disturb the White Wizard, until an itch overcame him to raid what might remain, at least before the Dark Lord may send his thorough Ring-wraiths first. Orcs, in the White Wizard's eye, appeared best suited for such a task—his own searching may arouse too much suspicion, while Men were seldomly loyal, and Elves remembered too much of the previous Ages. With Orcs, though, those cowardly, subservient creatures, stealing was to be expected, achieved, and shrugged aside by all, even the Dark Lord, if he knew. None of this was made known to the Orcs upon their arrival.

Atop the Black Tower, the Citadel of Obsidian, Orcs four in number were brought into a new dark council, led by the voice of the White Wizard. Unknown to the other Orcs, the Wizard took them all aside, alone, and spoke to them in secret before the council could meet, filling the head of each with ambitions and tasks known only to themselves. Of the four brought to council, Shobo the Foul and Krudhog the Cruel were two, chosen as representatives for the near east and excelled raiders of Men and the weak. The third to appear claimed the title of Blugs Nastyman, an Orc-goblin native to the Misty Mountains of the north, well familiar with the region and its nosy, Dwarvish neighbors. The fourth, Gutrok the Abominate, belonged to the Orc-tribes of the far southeast Black Lands, his Orc-people having long been converted to nomadic ways in the disarray and vacancy of the Shadow Throne.

The White Wizard, or 'Old Man' as the Orcs took to calling him, in private promised to Shobo generalship over a league of new warriors, a force forged from the Black Tower itself that could contend against its strongest Man-neighbors. Greedily Shobo accepted, under the condition that he will slay anyone disloyal to the Old Man's quest, maintaining the order of his mission. To Blugs—that hunched and sniveling thing—he promised the heads of the Dwarves that wronged him, so long as he keeps tabs on all the filched items, maintaining the integrity of the mission. To Gutrok, the fat and lumbering fool, he promised the return of Middle Earth's true Dark Lord, as well as a protected exodus back to his Black Lands, and even a treasury of arms befitting the ancient ones. In exchange, Gutrok will slay the remainder of his company and return alone with the White Wizard's most anticipated relic—the shard of a rare and Glittering metalwork, rumored to have been hidden in a chamber that will only open to certain 'magic words' entrusted, of course, to Gutrok. Unknown to him, Shobo received these special words, too, for he served as failsafe against Gutrok's pride, but with the instruction that they were to be used if the mission were doomed, or in the case of Gutrok's unfortunate absence. Finally, to Krudhog the White Wizard promised nothing, since he found Krudhog untrustworthy and expendable, with an odd, Man-like shimmer in his eyes. He served just as another body, too closely bound to the terrible Shobo to not partake alongside him in this council. Instead of yielding a promise, or a prize, or a temptation to Krudhog, the Old Man merely commanded obedience, and demanded the Orc-man not get in the way of the others.

Together assembled with their secrets in mind, the four stood circled about the Old Man at the apex of his fortress's tower. All were illuminated by the moon, half-waxed, and a torch that the White Wizard held above his hatless head. Presenting a map to the dark council he directed the four to their destination, the Hill of Dark Sorcery, and foretold the chambers they'd find that may contain what they seek.

'The journey,' the Wizard said, 'should not be difficult for...those of your nature. I recommend, as you may have already assumed, to avoid the eastern path alongside the Misty Mountains, for it is protected by prowling Elves and shambling, hungry things of the forest. To the west, or *through* the mountains, would be best, considering Blugs, as you know, belongs to the Orc breed that dwells nearby. He should, I hope, be your guide to the northern reaches, where the old Dwarves' dwelling of the Black Chasm lies. From there to the east, you may cross the Great River and find yourselves thereafter on the abandoned Hill.

'To aid you, I have many gifts to give, in good faith, with no charge, which should make your travels at least something of *ease*, compared to its undertaking without. For all of you I give cloaks of shadow, weak on their own but, when combined with the sneaking prowess and night-eyes of Orcs, will surely make its wearer imperceptible. Still! I give more, much more. For each of you—a ring, fashioned crudely and with the poorest of materials, I'm afraid, yet *awake*, and strong enough to detect anything worth returning to me in your thieving. Finally, to bolster your haste, I grant you all plates and helms of Elvish steel. They are ancient, of course, though Elvish steel knows no age and seldom wears away. With this, you should have all that you need, and I expect your findings to be great, should you follow my *exact* directions and heed *exactly* what's been discussed here this night in my Tower.'

The silver-tongued Wizard—not yet fully turned from Good but rightfully having no compassion for Orcs—pulled forth from a chest nearby four shabby cloaks and four shabby rings and four shabby plates of armor. The cloaks were insignificant, merely black and shaved from the backs of fell-beasts, while the chest plates, though steel, were forged by the hands of Men in service of the Black Tower's local forges. The rings, however, were almost true to his words, although he did not provide the backstory of their making, nor their subservient connection to another crude and magic ring, hidden somewhere upon the White Wizard's person.

(I have garnered that, unlike the One Ring and the many others that gathered to it, the Wizard's rings were not of the legendary Grey Glitter steel from previous ages—which he dreamed could be found in the bowels of the Hill of Dark Sorcery. A remnant item or piece of this Glittering steel, as the Wizard had heard, may still lie in some hole there, told to have come from a weapon once been wielded by the Lord of Dark Lords, before its splintering and pilfering by the lesser Dark Lord—that Shadowy One who come back and then fell as the Necromancer. Even without that incredible metal, the rings forged in the Black Tower's shops were somewhat remarkable, for none but the White Wizard knew so much of ring-making, except the Dark Lord himself, which the Wizard's scholarly knowledge unknowingly descended from. The 'Orc rings'

were bound to another master ring, one that could enhance the Old Man's influence and connect him to the others by thought—though, admittedly, its effect shone weakly, compared to what he might achieve with that lost, mythic, Glittering steel.)

Donning their gifts—apart from Krudhog, who haphazardly wore only the plate and cloak out of disdain for 'dainty jewelry'—the Orcs were given leave of the Tower and urged on that a greater reward shall be received for the greater the findings, and, most importantly, the faster the return the better. Krudhog, embittered by his secret reproach by the Old Man, pocketed his ring for the time being, thinking he'd prove his wits without it, while the others fancifully eyed their shining fingers. Some food and drink were provided as well, carried in travel upon Gutrok's hugely grotesque back. Yet the thieving crew cared little for the food of Wizards and expected better eatery along the way, whether found in the mountains or slain in the wild.

The direction in which to begin was a toss-up, for upon reaching the inclining mountainside Shobo rejected trekking through it, though Blugs insisted his caverns above and below were quickest. Gutrok exclaimed, to the dismay of Blugs, that he'd only trust the goblin as far as he could throw him. So Shobo, in devilish agreement, proclaimed that if Blugs can reach, with his head, a jutting or face of the mountain ahead, he'd earn proper trust in his insight. Before Blugs could flee the wager, Shobo grasped the little mountain-Orc with the might of his warrior hands, then tossed him into the air from where he stood. The throw proved more impressive than Shobo predicted, sending Blugs straight into a wall of stone several meters beyond himself. Then the company of Orcs, laughing at the squishy impact and whimpering of Blugs—upon some rather sharp and jagged stone—were compelled to follow such wise and appropriate counsel for the inner-mountain path after all.

Snow had not yet fallen in that season, so to reach the mountains' innards from a precipice above was no worse a struggle than a bore. After a day of climbing, the Orcs approached an entrance to a cave in the night, and met three lurching, guarding Orcs—all reasonably hesitant at first sight of such strange and foreign-fashioned Orc-folk. Blugs, with permission, puffed up his chest and began leading the company deep into the tail-end of the grand Misty Mountains.

The four would-be thieves marched uninterrupted, in fine time making camp near a lesser Orc-settlement: an abyssal 'goblin town' perched over the pit of a dusty mine. To celebrate the advent and progress of their quest, they clinked and threw back pints of 'Orc liquor,' strong and foul to their liking. Orc-goblin chieftains rarely received visitors, and so, scouting the coming Orc company well in advance, mountain emissaries were quick to flatter with drink in exchange for stories, or any good word from the surface of the east. Those four miscreant drunks—that unlikely council of Shobo, Gutrok, Blugs, and Krudhog—continued their campaign in this way through the tunnels and cities and caverns of the depths, getting drunker and boisterous, grunting tall tales and dark jests, while raising to fury bleak hearts of Misty Mountain Orcs who longed for the Dark Age to return.

Within several sloshy weeks, the goblin-rousing party reached the old Dwarves' dwelling of the Black Chasm. The four thieves, begrudgingly, were allowed passage once more, though this time by their harsher and taller folk from the east of the mountains, just north of the Elvish forests. Having traded much of the White Wizard's food-gifts, the Orc company bellyached and argued and fought for more rations. The Black Chasm Orcs, however, only furrowed their brows and bemoaned their own wanting, for the Elves just outside of their mountain-keep held a fortified outpost, blocking the steady flow of Orc hunters and suppliers. The traveling company grew curious and carefully shared drinks with the Chasm folk. They poured heavy-handed and caroused like fools, until their mountain brethren grew bold enough to show them this 'Elvish blockade,' though it would be a detour from their quest for the Old Man.

Coming down along a boulder-hidden path, the Orcs gathered silently at the base of the mountain, untouched by the Moon. Ahead, a circular outpost at the edge of the forest—really no more than a watch tower in the trees—glowed from its windows in the dark of the night. Few could be seen at that hour moving from within the Elvish garrison, and so a terrible plan, wicked and vile, came to light.

Shobo in his cloak and hood, with a branch in his hand, walked unattended before the sight of the Elves, feigning the character of a hermit lost aimlessly in the woods. He cried out, 'Oh, my Bold. Oh, my Flower-daughter. Wherever have you gone? I cannot see you, but I hear the Hound calling. Where are you? Where are you?' Stirring could be heard from inside the outpost, and though the Elves remained hidden and wary, the Orcs knew too well of their tendency to pry into a stranger's business. From the boulder-strewn lip of the mountain, where scattered stones met the grass of the land, the remaining three of the questing company, along with their new gaggle of underlings, crept below the tree-station as some climbed up to its tower.

Shobo, still wailing and stumbling, waited for the sign that the Orcs had discussed. With the Chasm-folk in place, Krudhog finally flashed back and forth the tip of his dagger, and so Shobo fell prone to the ground in a beastly howl. The Orcs above took up the call and leapt through every opening to slay the Elves within, stabbing and thrashing and tearing at them with all their hungry, starving wrath. Below, Krudhog and Gutrok ignited the brush and tossed lit torches into the windows above. Any Elves yet alive fell swiftly from their tower, gobbled up or slain by those that waited on the ground. Blugs and other Orcs still within grabbed what food they could and jumped out and away from the hungry, licking flames. The wooden garrison fell emblazoned to the ground, as the smell of roasted Elf singed the nostrils of those mischievous Orcs, joyful for the feast these strangers had blessed them with.

Saying their farewells, the traveling Orc-company embarked with new meats and full stomachs to the east. A day's travel led them far to the banks of the Great River, which they

soggily crossed, before turning south to the forest that withheld their destination. Another day of search and inspection in the darkness of tall trees yielded at last the dazzling and sky-soaring spires of the Hill of Dark Sorcery, egging on its travelers in bedazzled, intrigued spirit.

To the surprise of the other three, Gutrok began to sing during their climb up the Hill to the fortress—something Orcs were not often wont to do. In deep and throaty notes, Gutrok sang out frightful, grinding verses, which complimented well his noxious, meat-stained breath.

Gnash and thrash the weakling thrall,

Mercy cries the dying slave,

My Frag, I'll slay and kill them all,

By Eru, you I will not save.

To boil their minds like ours in hate,

To flay their flesh as mine is pained,

My Frag, let none be joyed or great,

By Eru, none are ever saved.

As Gutrok crowned his song with a belch of a laugh, Krudhog, struck by names familiar to his heart yet ones he'd never heard, inquired to him, 'Frag? Eru? Who are these you speak of, by which our enemies are never saved?' However, butting in, Shobo said, 'Nothing but a fantasy, boy. He speaks of nonsense, fables for the Elves and old fools.' Raising an eyebrow, Gutrok paused and pointed a sausage-finger at Shobo. 'Watch your tongue, blaspheming moron. I speak not of nonsense; I speak of the gods! Grand and vindictive, the very makers of the world, those responsible for our plight and woes, here in this divided land of light and shadow.'

'Nay,' Shobo interjected, 'it is but babbling of babes! Tell me, when has your bloody Frag ever come to aid you in battle? When has the day-bright Eru ever come to aid the Elves in their makings? Never, I say! For they are but stories and legends for weak minded shells! Eru, this ultimate One, is but a construct of the mind, an image of order and imaginary excuse for an Elvish destiny, made without *us*. Frag, too, is but a similar construct, made by lowly Orcs too incapable of channeling their fear and rage into power, which they so naturally possess! Do not speak anymore of children's tales, dolt, or I shall prove you wrong once more.'

'Even if that's true,' Gutrok protested, 'that cannot account for why we are here, living in this world, nor why all that we cannot see personally still affects us. For I agree with you, raucous fool, that Eru is but a myth, although I cannot agree with your slander of Frag, our dark and first terrible Lord! He is of a cloth similar to Eru, but true, and present, and the father of our people. Look around! It is he who created all that we see before us. Childrens' tales, you say, yet I know true fear is felt when I evoke the name of Eru before Elves and Men alike. They know

they doubt his Goodness in their minds, and the true Lord of Dark Lords, our Frag, was He who shaped the lands with his hands and carved mountains with his teeth, forever the ruler of this realm. Bah! An airhead such as you could never understand these complexities beyond yourself.'

Shobo approached Gutrok and shook his fist in his face. 'Complexities,' he questioned, 'beyond me? Nothing is beyond me, except what I have yet to take or make for myself. Why don't you look around? I see dirt, rocks, trees, and things of matter. What I can't see, instead I smell, or hear, or taste, like your filthy loins, or your mother's rear. Never has a thing such as Eru or Frag ever spoken to us, nor walked the lands beside us. Even if what you say is true, and at least one has done these things ages ago, we are abandoned now. Abandoned! There is only us and the land and those things that wish to take it from us. We are forced to forge our own destiny and assert ourselves, or else be forced upon and submitted to the blackness and emptiness of death! You are not a soul, fool. You are flesh—stinking, rotting flesh. Never forget that! You stupid son of a thog! Ask me where Frag is again when I feast upon your heart!'

Gutrok halted his climb. Quite shaken by this, the fat fool felt challenged by an aura of strength in Shobo's words that he knew only in his dreams, or from the bellowing of shamans in the far east. Blugs attempted to cut in, and declared, 'By reason alone, we are surely left to fend for ourselves in the world. Shobo, great warrior, you've seen the ways in which life begets death, and death begets life, I'm sure. Gutrok, noble blooded, I'm sure you can see that Shobo cannot be discounted, for whether Eru or Frag exists is irrelevant to the matter, as, surely, we must prioritize the immediate world we live in, not the gods that hide or laugh mockingly at us, hm?' The two taller Orcs glared down at the Orc-goblin.

'He has a point,' Gutrok admitted, 'though I cannot grant you the disavowal of our Dark Lord. His sacred knowledge—praise him for it—has been passed from generation to generation of Black Land Orcs, of which I am a receiver. My true god, Frag, is but the word for Evil in our pure-kept tongue, sometimes the word for War in your own nigh-western, but we worship him rightfully nonetheless, for he is all that we live for. Our Lord knows this, as I know this, and you must know this, too. The gods are not merely beings that walk among us, but forces beyond our control that puppeteer our every movement, our every ambition, bringing us to some...absolution...in the end of its ways. See you not a constant, invisible desire that leads you everywhere? Hunger, lust, humor, thirst, destruction; all are embedded in us, but why? Well, they are the slaves of our reason, with our ultimate end then being to enslave all else around us. We Orcs are unique to the world, being higher in existence than every worldly creature. We possess all that the plants and animals and Men and Elves do, yet to us alone is the gift of reason or rationale granted. Other fools are led by guess-work, instincts; we alone are driven by the domination of invisible extremes, our gods, to perfect the mind in greatness, our liberating Lord. Do others recognize this? Rarely, but why care when we are still the Chosen? Can you still not see the gods in this? And what does this rationale do for us but drive us to sweet, sweet violence? Violence has always been the conclusion of reason, you see, so violence our end must be, we strong few of mighty reason. Gods are in *this*, for they are forces pulling and pushing the pieces

of the world together, honing the perfect specimen, the inheritors of the earth, the ravagers of all weaker life—the Orcs! Correct me if I'm wrong, dunce, yet I see no flaws in such a learned way as this.'

Shobo stood awhile and glared hard into the sharpened, boasting eyes of Gutrok. His face was proud and bragging, feeling righteous in—at least what he thought was—the stumping of his peers. 'Mark you this,' Shobo finally replied, 'your words may hold some power, but my own reason, as I will gladly show you, shall ever be stronger, you filthy drongo!' And so, with that last expletive, Shobo swiftly drew his iron blade from its sheath and fully set it upon Gutrok, hewing his head in two and spilling all the reason from his mind. Blugs, horrified, fell back and muttered 'Dear Frag' to himself, but naught could be done anymore. Krudhog, silent and still as ever, held stern to his grim face of stone. Something of this holy talk, divine or not, had brought before his mind's eye, at the moment when Gutrok's had been cloven in two, the face of the Lady—she who rescued him from death, long forgotten by his disturbed debauchery. She cried out from the heavens of the mind to him and the chief who deserted her, but Krudhog remained unmoved. The image dissipated, and when they became world-aware once more his real eyes met, with full attention, the awful and gross sight of a comrade reduced to mushy worm food. Turning away, Krudhog continued his march up the Hill in silence for the remaining to follow suit, as they soon did.

The fortress loomed imposingly on its Hill, having three dark spires that clawed out above the trees and a fanged maw of a gate still sealed in its walls. For an old fortress, let alone what was once a palace of the Dark One, its size was meagre, resembling the crude and elementary castles of Men long ago. The three still living in the company made their way to its dark-iron gate and searched for a loose stone from the wall nearby, discovered by the Old Man in his past to reveal a mechanical lever within when removed. Shobo, feeling the looseness of one great brick of stone, yanked it from its place and discovered the secret hole foretold. He reached deep into the walls until his shoulder could go no farther. Laying hold of a cold metal object, he grasped it and pulled the internal device in his direction. Though the lever broke in his effort, the gate still opened slightly and allowed the Orcs enough room for passage inside.

Within its outer walls the ancient fortress stood even less impressive and more ruined than before, despite the impressive tales of its military significance. The Hill of Dark Sorcery had surely seen its fair share of destruction above the surface—for up close its towers appeared crumbling, its bridgeways looked fallen—so the Orc invaders chose to skip the obvious and descend to the lower chambers of its dark and dingy belly.

After only a short time of chamber trekking, Blugs and Shobo came across the first of many dungeon laboratories, tucked away at the end of a long and winding, unlit hall. Krudhog, having split from the others to cover more ground, searched elsewhere and hopelessly, guided by a single torch and not the supposed "ring of discovery" he forgot had been stowed away. As Krudhog stumbled through oily-black arches into cobwebbed catacombs, the other two Orcs

fumbled with crates and boxes and stone-hewn edifices in vain. None up to this point had thought to question the peculiar silence of the fortress, nor its apparent absence of squatters, animals, or the remnant crawling things of spaces abandoned.

After fruitlessly searching several cages and places, the temperamental Blugs reached a point of stalling frustration. He returned to a room he had already ransacked and sat himself upon one of the empty and cylindrical stone platforms nearby, which happened to be plentiful, though unhelpful, in every space the Orcs probed. No tools or items or treasure could be found, but the platforms jutted strangely and tall from the floor with only dust upon their surfaces. Blugs, however, merely worried then for his aching feet that dangled over the platform's edge. He glared at the returning, empty-handed Shobo in resentment, partly for the slaying of Gutrok, yet mostly out of annoyance from his gabbing. After Krudhog went off on his own in the initial descent below the fortress, Shobo blabbed and jabbered on 'the sword and sowing of blood as redemption for all, whether giving or receiving the blade, and the necessity of Orcs to give more of the blade than they take, except when one poisons the Truth and the Will,' or whatever he said to justify himself against Gutrok.

'What a krunk,' Blugs thought. 'I'm sure even I could come up with something cleverer than that.' Turning his eye to his own hand, Blugs noticed the ring on his finger, which had remained dull until then, appearing to glow ever so slightly as it rose in the air. He stood up on the platform, pointing the ring around the room to wherever it glowed brightest, and so Shobo, noticing, came to Blugs' side and eyed his own ring, finally glowing in the space where they stood. He shoved Blugs to the ground and wiped dust from where the Orc-goblin sat, revealing the carved script of a language neither had seen before.

Soon the two discovered that all the platforms, nine in total within that one space, each spanning three feet in circumference and four feet in height, were all carved on the top in this fashion. With Gutrok gone, Shobo knew his time had come. He told Blugs to stand near the wall and trust in his actions no matter what happens, lest he also wishes to share some of his reason with him. Placing himself in the center of these, for the platforms were patterned in two concentric circles about the room, Shobo raised his arms and, with a dreadful grin, spoke the magic words of the White Wizard. Six ghastly, terrible words were uttered—hailing from the Black Speech of old in its purest, most potent form.

'*Thrak burzum, pushdug, agh ghâsh búbhosh,*' he commanded, and the platforms glowed red with fearsome sorcery. All nine glowed hot, and a smaller, hollow platform, beholding what seemed to be strange items and trinkets and scrolls, rose from within every one of them. Immediately Blugs ran up to the Glittering things, bewildered and awestruck at the unnaturalness of them all, and unsure of which to take for himself without falling to danger unknown. Shobo, however, had felt and seen a part of the far wall glow hot, too, as he spoke and chose to approach it past the platforms. Where he saw the burning light in the face of the stone he pushed, and a thick, ancient door unsealed itself, unveiling a small, hidden room with an altar at its center.

Krudhog, lost deep in the catacombs and forgotten halls of the Underhill, eventually crossed paths with the vestibule entrance of a colossal, underground crypt. Within, the walls ran far and wide, aligned with stone coffins and tables upholding venerable tributes and unfamiliar devices. It was at this same time that Shobo spoke at a distance away in the Black Speech, unknowingly waking something inside the shadowy veins of the fortress, but to Krudhog all was still cloaked in darkness. Remembering the ring in his pocket, the growingly desperate and ill-sighted Orc-man took another glance at his surroundings, bedecked with nothing but junk, garbage, and nothingness. He pulled the ring out and gingerly twisted it around, wondering if he should emasculate himself to the will and aid of the Old Man after all. 'To see such a slimy puss-bag shocked at my not needing his help would be a glorious thing,' he thought to himself, 'yet I'd be a fool to return empty-handed.'

Having finally placed the ring upon his crusty finger, his jaw slacked in surprise, for what had been darkness around him suddenly became, with aid of the ring, a brightly lit area splashed with the red glow of some magic, hidden source. Symbols and secrets, too, began to glow ahead of the approaching Krudhog as he snuck and stepped into the mausoleum, lined and etched red across the luminous coffins and floors and walls. His opinion of the ring had shifted to the positive, for it truly appeared to grant him a second sight unimaginable, though he would remain ignorant to the Evil unleashed that bolstered his ring-gift tenfold. Peering out to the faraway end of that vast and vivid space, Krudhog's eyes stopped atop an archaic altar, gleaming with what looked to be a glass orb, shining within by flickering reds and oranges, as if it were aflame. Krudhog proceeded to the altar and dumbly beheld the orb, glassy and clear, as well as warm from a distance with some mystical, drawing heat.

Warily, he reached for it, but at his touch his body jolted and broke into a seizure, unable to move from where he stood. He helplessly shook and sputtered and foamed rabidly at the mouth. The black mane on his head, always greased down and around his ears, rose straight away and high from his scalp, turning white at its sides, like a man struck with lightning. His eyes, always having been of a dark amber, fell wholly dimmed and black, until finally reflecting the flame of the orb that took him hostage.

In the blinded enchantment of his mind's eye, a voice called out to him with slithering whispers. The voice grew colorful before his flaming imagination and formed silhouetted figures, relaying images and motions of a people and place, well beyond his own knowledge. He saw what seemed to have once been the Hill of Dark Sorcery, bright and sleek in its infancy, and later fallen from splendor when taken as a shrine to Death. An odd-looking being, tall and beautiful and clad in oily armor, walked proudly through its halls, hallowing its metal and stone with the screaming and torture of Men and Elves alike. While such peoples were chained, strapped, warped, and deformed by dark magic unparalleled within, from outside the fortress Krudhog could see—in his floating, detached, spectral vision—bitter and ruined souls in the sky

drawn down to the three spiraling, jagged towers. Green and ethereal they flew about, sucked in with reluctance yet burning with desire to bear flesh again at any cost. In this way they were brought down to the bowels of the Hill, took up the flesh of the dead, or the living, or whatever vessel the mysterious and beautiful one forged, before mirroring the image of Krudhog's own kin. Terrible, horrible, pained, and miserable, the reforged souls rose once more as Orcs, loosed to the world to be awful and multiply their vicious, disgusting ways.

As Krudhog sputtered and beheld his Evil vision, Shobo, in another part of the fortress, attempted to grab at what the secret altar of his secret room had raised on a stand above itself: from busted hilt to fractured edge, a Grey Glitter blade—or at least, a greater fragment of one—that bent like a wave across its sharp contour, with runes—incomprehensible—tattooed along its spine. Without a second thought, perplexed by the sight of its cruel beauty, Shobo took up the blade-fracture with his bare hand. At his touch he bellowed out in an excruciating, piercing howl. Within the timeless moment his skin had first felt the Grey Glitter blade, a great mass of suffering and despairing voices, reaching from beyond the ether, called out to him in legion—though, unlike Krudhog's lasting enchantment and vision by the orb, this Glittering spell and the souls of the blade had eased their grip upon Shobo's mind in an instant, needing little more than a shock to open the chained door of Shobo's Evil will.

That Orc, previously known as the disreputable, scarred, and humanoid Shobo, fell to the will of the blade, transforming into and resembling something else, far, far worse than his already unpleasant form. The shape-shifted thing, blackened and monstrous and more beast than Man, turned around to face Blugs, who by then was standing in the door frame of the altar-room in starry awe, with the speed of lightning. The Grey Glitter blade, ripped from its stand, was thrust fully to the hilt—or whatever one might call what was left of some shattered hand grip—through the Blugs torso, halving the Orc-goblin along his pudgy paunch of a center-line. The thing that had once been Shobo jittered and twisted in a cacophony of pain and delight, feeling the life source of Blugs—or whatever one could call 'life' in an Orc—seep magically through the blade, drawn up into the wielder's own monstrous chest. Like a beast enraged, the Fell-Shobo leapt from the room and away from the dungeons, seeking an exit out of the halls that then echoed with screams from nowhere.

Krudhog, finally released from his flaming grip of Evil, dropped the orb in pure shock and felt choked by the darkness around him. The red glow had vanished. All around himself he witnessed only death, decay, and dark. He, too, transformed by the encounter, though in another way unprecedented, split fast away to an exit, an opening, anything that allowed him to escape to fresh air. Once he retraced the Underhill labyrinth and reached the outer courtyard of the Hill of Dark Sorcery, he paused and trembled, sighed long and heavy, then chose to wait on and meet his comrades in the open night, empty-handed or not. However, his breath shook and caught up again, for he saw, far down the slope of the Hill, a figure bounding and trampling, with garb akin to Shobo's, yet with a massive, Glittering blade in his hand and purpled blood glinting off his charred skin in the moonlight. Whatever the beast or imposter was, it roared and whimpered as

the pair—blade and wielder—ran wildly together. Though confused by such a sight, the weary Krudhog, having his soul touched by the flame-orb—and unknowingly opened to the ethereal web of dark things imperceptible—knew somehow both the monster and his blade came from within that Hill of Dark Sorcery, and the pair called out in a voice, or possibly voices, from a place invisible and strained, beckoning for an end to their plight.

Diminished and assuming the worst, Krudhog fled in madness to the river's shore for drink and then, after a splash or so in the face, to the tunnels of the Misty Mountains once more. The Orc-goblins, recognizing the collapsed and broken Orc as one from that earlier drunken company, gave him refuge for a short time until his chills and sudden spasming would reside. In a week's time, he recovered just enough to be guided again through the southernmost passageway, yet never once spoke of the events that occurred at the Hill. Coming to the base of the mountain range where the journey began, tired and desperate, Krudhog thought best to suck up his pride and seek relief from the Old Man of the Black Tower.

Rather than acquire the aid he expected, Krudhog was met with a fury reserved by the mighty for battle alone. The Old Man flashed with such a rage that the Orc-man feared he'd be floored and splattered from the sound of wrathful words alone. 'Imbecilic, incompetent, insufferable, incongruent creatures,' the Old Man shouted. 'Must I do everything myself? I regret that any of you at all survived such an inexcusable failure. Yet,' he paused, 'I see you are not...wholly without use. No, I feel it, can see it in your strange eyes, your touched appearance. You have been given sight by something, something terrible, and magical, and ancient. Tell me everything you saw! Tell me! Tell me!'

Seeing little choice in the matter, Krudhog relayed what he had been shown and the latter happenings of his quest. The Old Man stroked his beard and turned away for a long and breath-holding moment when the tale had ended, back in his Black Tower. Krudhog wished to be angry, furious even, for he desired nothing more than to blame the trickery of the Old Man for the loss of his brothers in company, as well as the lingering disturbance of his own mind. However, he could only feel then fear and misery, reflecting—perhaps for the first time—how his own decisions led him to this place, and how, again, he would submit to the words of another person, much stronger than him. Then, with a fraudulent smile, the White Wizard faced the Orc-man, loomed over his person, and proclaimed how clear it was, how obviously clear it was, that the only solution for their new problem relied upon Krudhog. He, who knew the patterns and habits of Shobo well, simply has to locate the blade through him, now that its rumor is proven true, and then bring it back, 'with haste.' When he asked the Old Man how he should do this, he was commanded to follow the conniving Wizard up his long and winding staircase, which lead to the Tower's top.

The White Wizard with Krudhog in tow, having marched to the open air impaled by his Black Tower's peak, raised a hand to the sky, flourishing with a glimmer misshapen and unequal rings that he wore on his fingers. Closing his eyes, the White Wizard's body seemed to turn

without moving, feeling out for the crude ring he had lost, and he pointed, with bedecked and shining fingers, to the distant far east. There Krudhog became tasked, with the magic of demand, to journey alone without any gifts. The recovery of the blade presented itself as a mere formality of contract, expected of Krudhog in his completion of servitude to the White Wizard, but he could never imagine for himself the significance of what Shobo held, possessed. The Old Man knew, however, and had to suppress an itch of regret, with his stern and bushy brow, for the Evil he unleashed in his meddling. The Grey Glitter blade of the Lord of Dark Lords, that lost and legendary Sword of Devouring, found an unusual host to satiate its hunger of souls and—rather than be melted down for the making of new rings like that old fool had planned—threatened to undo the barriers between the realms of life and death in the mortal world.

Fell-Shobo's trail of destruction made its way east, though it diverged to the north of where he and Krudhog had once hunted and stole the lives of Men. Farther still it led distantly into the arid Brown Lands, the waste-space of an antiquated era, which curses all that tries to grow there. Cloaked, struggling, and traveling in the night, Krudhog followed the Fell-Shobo's gore and devastation across forgotten small towns and tribe-remnants—their destruction resembling not the bloody work of a single Orc, but that of an entire Troll party's effect, perhaps lost to a war-born fervor or some slash-and-burn sickness—until he had come to the desert lands of the Uttermost East.

The weather proved unbearable for the Orc-man, losing more and more articles of his armor, day after day in the searing heat, only to regret his loss later, as he soon froze in the night's sweeping, sandy chill. For seven days he walked in agony, and for seven nights he shivered in fear. Slowly, his rations thinned, and water was nigh impossible to collect. On that seventh night, a desperate madness overcame him, for he climbed, fasted, to the top of a great dune and lamented out loud, with the last of his strength and sanity, echoing far and wide across the empty nothingness of desert wastes. He collapsed and fell into a deep sleep, during which he felt, in his last cusp of consciousness, as if the hand of the Lady, his infantile protector, combed through his hair with a song she would sing of better days to come. Before long, Krudhog's damaged and racing mind descended into darkness, and he became lost to the purging throes of the desert.

A great amount of time—that even I am uncertain of—passed from that moment, until at last Krudhog awoke to morning light, spewing through the entrance of a cave. Lain within that cave opposite to the light, he discerned the far entrance too small to be made by Orcish hands, though around him the space appeared broad enough to fit a full company, or two, or three, of Men if they so desired to occupy it. Sitting himself up and looking down at his person, he noticed the remainder of his armor and clothing removed, for he wore only a white cloak with a fabric belt. The charred remains of a fire cooled dimly near his feet, while large, clay vases lined the walls around him.

Groaning to his feet, as stars filled out his vision, he stumbled over to a vase and discovered it full of water. The ragged Orc-man drank of it until he was sick and forced to sit back down again. A rustling sound then scratched at the edge of the entrance, so Krudhog, returning to his senses, shrank back into shadow and readied himself. Expecting some lude creature or viperous she-witch, he couldn't help but squint confused as a tall, aged, and bearded man entered and stood before him instead. Krudhog jumped in alarm, flattening against the wall for support, for he then mistook this stranger to be the Old Man of the Black Tower, come to revile his failed efforts. The stranger's appearance resembled the Wizard in his horrid height, evil eyes, and noble nose; however, the stranger stayed silent, smiled, and offered his open palm in peace.

'Easy, my friend, easy,' the old man said. 'Here you may rest and drink to your health. No one is coming to harm you, my son. Be not afraid. Please, be not afraid. Some call me Darkness-slayer, but I prefer East-helper. Here, here, are you hungry? Please, eat, I beg of you, friend, eat.' Hesitant, though too tired to argue, Krudhog came forward. The two together ate bread and bitter juices, dining in the sanctity of the dune-cavern. When full, the old man asked for the Orc's purpose in the desert, and though Krudhog would have told the stranger to stick his questions somewhere crude, he did no such thing this time. He felt compelled to tell the East-helper of his mission, to recover the Glittering relic blade of the Hill of Dark Sorcery, and all that led up to it. He could not explain why he desired to tell all that he could to this stranger. Perhaps the Orc succumbed to desert madness, perhaps he lapped at lingering delirium, but he felt at ease with him, anyhow, in a way he'd known only once before, decades ago.

The contents of his journey, and soon the yawning memories of his youth, spilled forth from Krudhog's aching, dried-out maw. Hours must have passed in his telling, for the sun dipped below the horizon before Krudhog finished confession, alleviated thereafter by the welcome hand and open ear of the stranger he knew now he owed his life to. Even if his truth-spilling came from madness, he could not lie to himself that, above all else, it felt good to be treated by another with respect, born of neither fear nor ambition.

Long into the night, the two spoke of phantoms, sick men, and great horrors lost to the lakes and woods of old, yet also of small sanctuaries, new beginnings, and a budding hope from this far, far east, still unknown to the despairing west. Krudhog partook in this gratefully, as if he truly wanted to hear what this other person had to say—not from any deep place of deception, or even some stupor of the mind. His limited experiences had him convinced that this stranger must have used magic anyway—for the East-helper, likewise a Wise One, too closely resembled the Old Man, did he not? However, unseen by the Orc-man, ancient stains of ugliness washed away from him in his new compartment, purified in the desert and by strange happenings of late. Cleanliness to him was new, both inside and out of his rancid, Orcish skin, and he found the subtle scraping of spiritual filth burned as much as it soothed. How could he believe his situation to be but folly, or maybe a dream, when the Truth would find him only too late?

Krudhog knew by the morning that his prior duty—in part to a brother, in part to a master—could not be so easily left behind. His mind, under the veil of sleep, fell to nightmares of war and death, of the flaming orb and the oily fortress, until he awoke and knew his heart twinged for one looming, final adventure. The East-helper understood, and bade him eat and drink again, as the Sea of the Uttermost East yet sat very distant from their cavern, in a place most remote, where a fiend such as Shobo should think to retreat to. Welling fear grew into doubt, and doubt grew into shame, for Krudhog knew he could not compete with this monster on his own—let alone accomplish the total undertaking without certain death. His guilty-red hands were not enough by themselves anymore, for dark magic was at work, too dark for an Orc to force his hands against again.

Eyeing this hopelessness, the East-helper drew close to the readying questling. He assured Krudhog that fortune can and will be as good as certain, if only his will remains strong. If fear of Evil threatens to buckle him, he must protest the Evil with faith of a gifted Word of Power, for on his own he surely can do nothing at all. The Orc-man was shocked to hear such advice, for he gravely mistrusted—and by then had enough of—magic, but the East-helper insisted magic held no sway in this battle of forces.

‘The Word I give you is only a call for help,’ said the East-helper, ‘from the heights of the world, although no one, not even I, deserves to ask of it. I do believe, however, that if you speak this word from the earnestness of your heart, or whatever is left of it, there is a chance that One may listen, and your foe shall be brought to his knees before Him.’ Krudhog, wiping the grime of dark thoughts from his mind, thanked him and left the cave, seeking the sea.

The days stretched on, and the sun began to wane, greater and greater with each passing day. Finally, by the shivers on his arms and crackle of power in the air, Krudhog assumed he came close to his goal. The waxy outline of a city soon came upon his path, crouched low before him as if a mirage. However, the city was no image at all, but freshly toppled ruins—what once must have been a small town—slowly drowning in the light of nearing, violet dusk.

Approaching, he observed columns and structures, all snapped and shattered, buried deep in the sand. In the distant background of the city, the first sea his eyes would ever see churned and splashed beyond the broken mess before him. As the sun gave way to hiding low and the stars took its place, a creeping thing appeared to crawl out from some fallen structure—perhaps an illusion, in those final moments of light. The thing must have been a person by the way that it moved—a decrepit and wounded man, mayhaps, in Krudhog’s best guess—yet it could only move so far and reveal so much before some huge, hulking creature dragged itself out from under the sand nearby, lunging straight over to this fleeing fool. The hidden hulk, that creature, was heavy and heaving, breathing with a feverish, starving lust for the prey it sought. Before that wounded person could roll himself over and slink away, he was struck down and impaled into the earth by an enormous, wavy blade that sundered him in two. In an instant he withered to a husk, no longer a person of both flesh and blood, while the hulking thing stooped low upon him in voracious ecstasy.

With a reasonable guess that this creature had to be Shobo, but utterly and monstrously transformed, Krudhog snuck stealthily to a dune perched near the city's border for a closer look. Shobo, indeed, this thing turned out to be, yet now swollen and engorged with blood and darkness, thrice the size he ever was. His eyes and ears and hands were blackened, as if burnt by some searing flame, though the mean bastard's crooked nose and that scar across his jaw were prominent as ever. Krudhog, in a sudden fit of courage, stepped forward to the beast that Shobo had become, and the beast raised his head in surprise. Though the Orc-man had braced for impact with the raging beast's fury, Krudhog was met by the mournful face of an animal in pain, drooping with sadness and contorted with weeping.

'Help me,' the beast muttered. The Orc-man's chest thumped and bade him raise his hand in truce, but a shriek of many tortured souls assaulted Krudhog's ears, for that Glittering blade the beast still held would not abide any offer of peace.

Anger suddenly overcame the beast, and he thrashed in pain at the sound, quickly retracting the blade from the earth to face the Orc-man before him. '*Thrak burzum, pushdug, agh ghâsh búbhosh,*' he cried out in agony. '*Thrak burzum, pushdug, agh ghâsh búbhosh. Thrak burzum, pushdug, agh ghâsh búbhosh.*' With every repetition of the curse, he grew louder, shaking the sands beneath him and raising a green glow, far across the star-glinting ground. Corpses, limbless and mangled, crawled from the sand to the surface of their ruined city, while Krudhog found himself awestruck at this ultimate outcome of unnaturalness, the truest and most Evil reward of great violence, *their* violence, finding its morbid and ghastly end in the scene unfolding around him.

Yet, despite the dark deeds developing, Krudhog stood his ground in terror and recalled the Word of the East-helper. Before the beast could attempt to do harm, the Orc-man held his arms up and outstretched, with no weapon or tool in his hands. He looked the beast in its eyes and concentrated on the thumping of his own heart, hoping it may beat loud enough for the One to hear. In a voice greater than his own, Krudhog called to the heavens and shook the earth with his Word: 'Avatyar!' The beast, stunned by the force of this calling, then stumbled back and stared, dumb and deafened by the light and sound it produced.

Those corpses that dragged themselves from the sand in malice faltered, their slack-jaws fixed agape at the Word's resounding echo. The beast, recovering and raising himself to his fullest, most monstrous proportions, knitted his brow and hefted his sword into the air. '*Thrak burzum, pushdug, agh ghâsh búbhosh,*' the beast hearkened as his minions rose again glowing. 'Avatyar!' Krudhog shouted in reply. The dead fell once more to the sands and the beast stumbled to a knee, twisting his face into such semblance of discomfort that Krudhog, out of pity, almost chose to restrain himself. Yet he stood his ground.

'Avatyar! Avatyar!' he echoed, and moved progressively closer to the beast that was Shobo. Though he, that monster, swung his sword in wild fury, cleaving at sand and sky alike, Krudhog walked forward without harm and continued to push back the beast, closer and closer to

the water. ‘Avatyar!’ rang out, and the beast recoiled. ‘Avatyar!’ shook the ground, and the beast fell back into the lapping waves. ‘Avatyar!’ silenced the dead, and Krudhog stood in reflection of the sea’s twilight waves. ‘Avatyar!’ brightened the stars, and the beast nearly submerged himself, shrinking back in fear, while Krudhog’s arms were held high above his head. The water and the waves that washed over the beast began to clear a seared layer of blackness from his skin, exposing, in part, the old face of Shobo below.

For a moment, the world dropped into silence. The waves and wind of the desert were all that the Orcs could hear. The natural world’s ringing gently regressed as the two, in deep fixation with the other, came to an understanding. Once thought impossible for their kind, one could see some greater power had bound them both, held by the light of something true, and bright, and shining, beyond what language or reason could ever muster.

The Glittering blade, without power to repent or forgive its mistakes, cried out one final time in desperation. Though neither Orc desired to move, Shobo could not will himself to stay his haunted arm or bear to drop the blade—for its hold was still great and powerful on his heart. So, beyond the bond of brothers that stayed his fury, he thrust the blade forward anyhow with a miserable, heart-wrenching yelp. Struck through his center, Krudhog sputtered a gasp of blood, did not drop his gaze.

‘I’m sorry,’ Shobo whimpered.

‘I forgive you,’ Krudhog said. The sea’s Mercy, gripping their ankles in mud and tugging their limbs with the tide, drew the Orcs farther into and under the waves. Together, the Orc and Orc-man became overtaken by water, cleansed from the world at last.

Though I wish I could relay to you what became of the blade, or whether the East-helper came to recover the Orc-man in time, I cannot say, for this is the end of the tale told to me by the Sisters Weird on that awful night. If I may, however, suggest a greater story than this, if you are inclined to know more, which earns for Truth and Good a victory similar yet more than what I have to offer, then look elsewhere to the written word of Old. There in the records, our history, lived and won in the face of great Evil, found itself preserved in archaic annals—by a Hobbit, no less, both meek and unseeming—which better still than I illuminates the proper end, or all that was lost in my repeated tale, and all that was gained ever after.

Go; reach out to those with eyes too blind and ears too deaf, so that their hearts may open, and the world may be heard for what it is and can be.