

## THE STORM BREAKS

03 Lamashan, 4707 AR

There comes a point in any climb where mountain and man become one, where the landscape finally dominates your senses and there is only you and it, nothing more.

Our miserable trek across the lesser peaks in the Mindspin Mountains tested my faith in the wayfinder once more, but despite each gully, scree slope, and cliff we had to cross on its whim, I continued to follow its unwavering needle.

We had been climbing all day, and even though we had started at dawn, I hesitated to think we'd make the ridge by nightfall. The pathway (if such a perilous ledge deserves the name) seemed to be without end, and I wondered if I would come across the gods themselves at the summit. At last, the wind picked up and I could hear the roar of it crossing the ridge above. With renewed energy, I jogged the last few steps onto the crest. From my vantage point, I could see a huge bowl of land below, a massive cauldron of dust and stone cowering under a sky thick with the threat of storms. Yet it was not the landscape that held my view.

It was the armies.

A black stain filled the valley, stretching from side to side. Row upon row of dark figures huddled in tight

clusters around high banners, too distant for me to make out their emblems. Yet there were other rallying points as well—the lines of severed heads held aloft on spears, or a man-shaped tower of metal cages filled with impaled figures and gibbeted prisoners screaming for mercy while crows swooped and pecked at them. Huge ogres clad in rusted steel wheeled the iron man on the edges of the battlefield, for battlefield it was, or would be when these sickened ants set about each other.

Joskan trudged up toward me. “Resting already?” he asked. Then his eyes fell on the sight ahead and his jaw dropped visibly. “Great. Just great,” he said.

“Looks like there’s trouble ahead for us,” I said, surreptitiously checking the wayfinder, which pointed straight through the valley, with its brooding clouds and teeming hordes. I could see that any deviation would take us onto jagged drops and peaks around this bowl.

“You mean to go straight, don’t you?”

I nodded.

“And let me guess—nothing I could tell you about the journey ahead will stop you.”

“Correct.”

“You do realize that going ahead is certain death?”



"We've been through worse."

"Believe me, we haven't."

I shrugged. "Maybe, but straight is the way we go."

"You've spent too much time amongst the orcs," he growled. "Do you even know what 'trouble' means?"

"I think so."

"I'll ask you that question again, later." He hooked his thumbs in his pack straps and gazed across the valley. "I can see several tribal banners. And there's a stench like war rhino, unless I'm mistaken." He tossed his head back and gulped at the air.

"War rhino?" Cries of beasts and orcs echoed up to our lofty perch.

"Let's just hope you only get to imagine what they look like." He set down his pack, drew out an empty ration sack, and cut two holes in it.

"So, you're the guide—can we do it?"

He sniffed again and stared at me earnestly. "If we can cross before the battle starts—maybe. But there are two problems."

"Which are?"

"Well, first things first—they'll scent your stink a mile away. Rub this on yourself." He tossed me a small, hard toadstool which, when I did as I was asked, made me reek like the grave.

"I'll not ask what you use this for. And second?"

"Put this on." He threw the sack at me, the rough burlap now complete with two tiny eye-holes.

The sack was tight, and there was a strong smell of oilskins and onions that made my eyes run. The two holes barely allowed me to see anything, and I became instantly afraid of suffocating.

"Good enough, though you'll want to rub soil into your skin and gear to darken it as much as possible. And for the love of the gods, don't say anything—nobody down there will be speaking your tongue, and besides, your reedy voice sounds like a woman's." He had a point about my voice, so I refrained from mentioning that I was actually fluent in Orc, and instead set to work rolling in the dirt, grinding the dark dust into my pores. Finally I stood up, disheveled and reeking.

Joskan looked me up and down. "Good enough," he said. "It'll have to do."

Was that a smile?

We watched the forces below as we ate our meager meal, cutting thin slivers of meat from our rations and savoring each sip of water.

"How soon will the battle start, do you think?" I asked.

"This is no battle," he said. "This is merely a squabble."

I looked at the orcs, hundreds of them, and wondered what sort of disagreement had brought this situation about.

"Very well then, how long before this 'squabble' becomes nasty?"

He sniffed at the air. "I can smell meat roasting," he said, inhaling greedily. "They're preparing the Last Feast—what some orcs call the Gorging. They will not fight until sundown tomorrow."

"And who is fighting who, exactly?"

"That won't be easy to tell until we get down there and I talk, although I have a nasty feeling that this is a kresk."

"A kresk?"

"A general free-for-all, winner takes all."

"You mean they'll fight until only one tribe is left?"

"Or one orc. We should go."

Descending a mountain is almost as hard as climbing one, and it was dark before we reached the valley. Taking those last few steps very cautiously, we began to close in on the first group of orcs—the perimeter of their camp surrounded by lines of severed heads on crude poles.

"Well, that's good news for a start—the Cleft Head tribe." Joskan's dirty teeth flashed in the collective glow of campfires springing up across the valley, slowly being joined by orc music—a mixture of grunts, shouts, and swearing.

"And it's good news because...?"

"They're wimps, well known for being last into battle and first out. Just thank your puny gods that we didn't have to meet the Defiled Corpse orcs. Now, let's just try to mix in with the group and make our way through as inconspicuously as possible."

Joskan led me through the drunken rabble that formed the Cleft Head tribe. I caught site of at least two giants and a half-dozen ogres as we walked cautiously through the camp. The smell and smoke of charcoal concealed much of the goings-on, but I saw a lot in that first walk. Several orcs charged at each other across a long field and butted each other in a game called "rutt." Others were eating or playing a dangerous gambling game with woodaxes and blindfolds, or else dallying with their grotesque mates in full view of the others. Many of the orcs dragged long lines of heads and skulls behind them, and I was reminded of the daisy chains children on the edges of Barrowood make to ward away wights.

We passed a battle-menagerie, which Joskan whispered was a common enough sight in orc battles: cages of weird, deformed, or just plain violent monsters. I saw tar-daubed griffons and howlers, wolves and scorpions, and several huge creatures for which I had no name.

So taken was I with the sights and smells of the orc camp that I failed to look properly as I was walking and clattered into a huge, brutish orc. I tried to think of the Orc word for "apologies," then realized that there was no such thing. I muttered something under my breath, hunched my shoulders, and attempted to carry on.

Trust me to pick the biggest thug in the camp to bump into—this orc was huge, with a train of eight human heads



behind him and a ridiculously large weapon in an oiled sack. Worse, half his face was missing, no doubt the result of a previous battle. Half-Face walked quickly after me, his train of heads bouncing and dragging as he hobbled. A group of smaller but equally ugly orcs followed in the wake of his head-chain, snarling insults. I noticed the head of one lay at right angles to his shoulders, and one side of his face was flat, as though he'd been run over by a cart. A giant, meaty hand landed on my shoulder, spinning me around.

"You smell bad," Half-Face grumbled in Orc. He pinched me hard, then sniffed me again and murmured, "You smell... strange..."

Suddenly Joskan was at my side, breaking the huge orc's grip on my shoulder. "Back off," he snarled. "This one's mine."

"A female!" Half-Face grinned broadly. He stepped back and reached into his sack, drawing forth a ridiculously large three-headed meat cleaver. "I call my weapon Fleshwrecker," he said, eyeing me lasciviously.

"Why?" Joskan asked.

The giant looked momentarily stunned by the question, and I took the confusion as my signal to strike. I stepped forward and punched him hard in the gut, twisting to put my whole body into the blow. He staggered back, and within a second my sword was in my hand. Around us, a space was rapidly clearing. Half-Face eyed my weapon with a mixture of amusement and disgust.

"My brood-mother used to sew clothes with something like that," he chuckled. Then he swung his cleaver heavenward and roared, "Fleshwrecker!"

"Come on, woman!" An orc with a huge slit across his face shouted at me.

"Woman! Woman! Woman!" The orcs around us began to chant, happy for the entertainment. Money changed hands, hands changed hands, heads changed hands as we circled around, eyeing each other, Joskan and I trying to get on either side of Half-Face.

I began to work defensively for position, sure that the cleaver would soon tire its wielder. I dodged several arcing blows before ducking and tumbling past my opponent, who swung one last time and missed, his cleaver sticking into the ground. I turned and thrust my sword into the orc, who merely stared at me, his mouth parting again in that sickening grin. He began to pull the sword out of his wound, yelling and laughing as he did so, only to have Joskan reach around from behind and slit his throat neatly, kicking his feet from under him. Before Half-Face even hit the ground, his kin were falling on the corpse to rob it.

"Beaten by a woman!" a tall brutish orc cried out in laughter. Another orc—one without a nose, ears, or a lower jaw—tried to say something and failed, much to the amusement of the others.

"You'd make a good brood-mother." Slit-Face eyed me with his one good eye, the other lolling blindly whilst his hand fumbled for my shoulder.

"You're not her type." Joskan said, placing a bloody arm between us. Slit-Face paused, obviously considering the odds, then shrugged and moved away.

"That was lucky," said Joskan. "Next time we won't be. Don't let it happen again."

We moved quickly on, trying to mingle with the revelers, who variously staggered and sang and cheered. We were cutting quietly behind a line of jeering orcs when their noise suddenly stopped. The bag over my head left little visibility, but I could tell they were watching something with rapt attention.

"Warriors!" A booming voice split the air above. "Tomorrow we go to victory! Any insult must be avenged, and I, K'zaarg the Drover, will feast on succulent flesh, and the cracklings will be the finest we ever tasted!"

A roar struck up around us, the orcs slapping and grabbing each other, clanging weapons and swearing oaths, headbutting each other and biting their arms until they bled. I was pinched and pushed and prodded until I lost sight of my companion. Suddenly, a massive fist grabbed me from behind. I was carried aloft and turned, coming face to face to bag with an ettin of great size, one head spilt by a terrible wound, the other missing an eye. On its back it had an iron cradle in which stood an enormous orc, his chest bare above rolls of fat and his body so huge that his legs could barely support it. He pointed one thick finger at me.

"Will you kill tomorrow?" the chief shouted.

I nodded.

"Will you rend and bite and gouge?"

I nodded again, gasping as the fist tightened.

"Good, my mighty one." The chief looked away and the ettin lowered its hand, still gripping me tight. "Bring out the Forsaker!" the orc ordered.

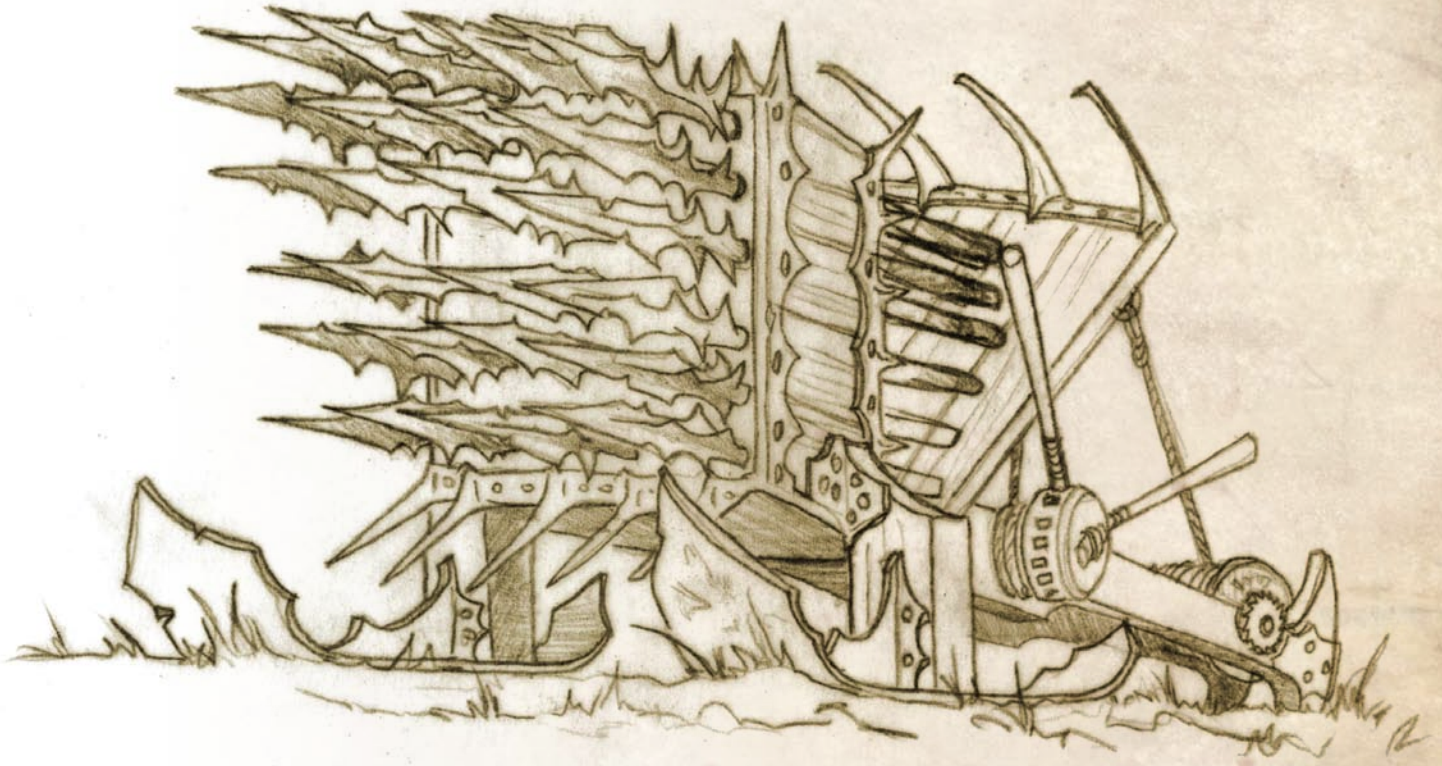
A great drum struck up and a pair of mammoths came shuffling slowly through the crowd, driven by a dozen whip-wielding orcs. They dragged a colossus of iron and timber, spikes and corpses into the clearing before the chief—a siege machine of such size as I had never seen. An orc dressed in violet robes and carrying rolls of parchment stood at its summit, surrounded by a dozen ballistae and catapults of enormous size.

"Behold," proclaimed Violet Cloak, "the Forsaker!"

The Forsaker came to a stop with a tremendous grating sound. I could see timbers straining and iron bolts close to popping. From my vantage point, I caught sight of Joskan once more in the crowd, signaling me to remain still.

"Inventor, you have done well. Let us send our enemies a little starting gift!" The chief waved and the orc in the violet robes pushed a lever.





*Orcs love big weapons.*

For a moment, nothing happened, then the heavy catapults arced upwards, flinging their loads high into the sky. The crowd cheered.

“Reward the inventor!” the chief yelled.

Then something within the straining mass of timbers gave way. In a matter of seconds, the mighty siege weapon—made by orcs who are, on the whole, not noted for their engineering skills—began to unravel. The collapse of the towering weapon took less than a minute—a minute of chaos, splintering wood, and screams. When it finished, the Forsaker lay in ruins, with orcs dying beneath its broken limbs. The orc in violet was dragging himself from the wreckage in terror.

Mocking cries and jeers came from across the valley.

“Take the inventor to the Wheel of Unending Woe!” roared the chief, urging his ettin mount through the crowd. The giant cast me casually aside and I fell heavily on the ground.

I took the momentary confusion as my signal to leave and dashed through the crowd, soon locating my companion, who’d had the good sense not to move in the chaos. Fatigue was taking its toll on me now, and I found my eyes growing heavy. “I’m exhausted,” I said.

“We can’t be far from the edges of the first camp,” Joskan replied, “and I saw signs of the Defiled Corpse tribe ahead. I’ll ask around, you rest here.” He indicated a large timber crate filled halfway with strange, warm

globes. I climbed in and presently found myself drowsing.

Joskan returned shortly.

“So what did they say? Is it the Defiled Corpse tribe?” I asked, anxiously.

“Yes.”

“And what did the Cleft Head orcs say about them?”

Joskan made a dismissive gesture. “They said they’re crazy.”

“Crazy? *They’re* crazy?!”

“That’s what they said.”

“Any chance we can go through tomorrow? I’m not sure how much more of this I can take tonight.”

Joskan nodded and joined me in the hefty crate, half-burying himself in the globes and shutting the lid. Together we fell into an uneasy sleep, surrounded by the sounds of the orc camp, the growl of the thunderclouds, and the voices of orc mothers telling tales to their young about the Happy Fellow—the elf who comes to eat children who smile in their sleep.

I was moving as I woke. My guide had a look of concern as he peered from a crack beneath the crate’s lid, his face lit by the drab gray of day.

“This is bad,” he said. He looked worried, and I became aware that we were being pulled by something.

“Has battle been joined?”





*Joskan's definition of "trouble."*

"Yes, but that's not the bad thing." He hauled me upright to the crate's edge, and through the narrow crack I saw that we were being pulled by a great horned beast—a war rhino. Other animals flanked us, some pulling catapults, some simply cavalry, with orcs on their broad backs. The beasts were as big as houses—things of war clad in spikes and leather and whirring blades, great howdahs lashed to the backs of some by tight leather and iron straps that had become part of the creature itself. Others were like living siege engines, with rams and towers and ladders. On each screamed orcs, some firing great ballistae at will and laughing as they did. A huge windmill spun at the top of one howdah, a mass of black ragged sails spinning in the storm, skulls and fleshy heads spiked on its ends.

"What's the windmill for?" I asked, gaping.

"Decoration."

I kept scanning the field and noticed that several beasts pulled catapults with wooden crates loaded and ready to be flung.

Wooden crates like ours. I mentioned as much to Joskan.

"Yes, but that's not the bad thing, either."

"No?"

"No. Now that it's daylight, I've noticed that these globes are full of rockwasps."

"Rockwasps?"

"Hornets about the size of a rat. Sometimes shamans catch 'em and seal them in wax with tiny air holes. They catapult these into battle, and they burst on impact and cause havoc."

"Great."

"Oh, and the sting is fatal."

"Pity you didn't see them last night."

Joskan shrugged. "It was night."

"I thought orcs were good in the dark."

"I was tired, and I'm only half an orc. I have my mother's eyes."

I grimaced and picked up one of the waxy globes very carefully. I could see dark shapes within now, and faintly heard their angry buzzing.

"This, by the way, is what I would define as 'trouble,'" Joskan said.

So there we were, trapped in a crate of rockwasps about to be catapulted into the air to land, broken, amongst an army of orcs, surrounded by swarming insects whose sting is death.

"Any reason why we aren't even now sprinting for freedom?" I asked.

"Can't," he said, thumping on the roof of the crate, which rose just enough to reveal the weighty padlock thrust through its latch. "They must have locked it sometime during the night, probably to prevent accidental opening during launch."

"I thought you said they wouldn't fight until sundown."

"I guess I was wrong."

"K'zaarg!" A cry came up from the catapult next to us, and the crate on its platform was hurled skyward. I glanced hopefully at my companion, who shrugged his shoulders.

"K'zaarg!" Another crate flew, and another.

The sky broke above us and thunder roared.

"K'zaarg!" an orc voice nearby screamed, and I saw a hand reach for the rope to fire us heavenward.

I closed my eyes.

There was a second yell and a deafening crack as a ball of fire broke above us. An orc fell, screaming as he was crushed under the wheels of our catapult. We saw more bodies fall from the burning howdah. I slapped Joskan's back and laughed, enjoying a moment's relief before the jostling increased and I understood our new fate: our driver dead, the catapult thundered forward into the heat of battle, towed by an out-of-control war rhino.

Joskan began to batter himself against the crate, to little effect. The globes clattered ominously as we crossed the rough terrain. Ahead, through the rain, I could see a cliff approaching. I fumbled in my pockets.



"Keep still, damn it," I said. "I need to concentrate."  
 "Of course!" Joskan grinned. "A spell for the warping of wood!"

I shook my head, fumbling deeper into my pockets.  
 "A spell to open locks?"

I sighed.

The rhino sped on, the drop closing.

"A spell for—"

"Shut up!" I yelled, and triumphantly pulled out a tiny piece of shiny stone.

"A pebble to the rescue. Great." Joskan began punching at the crate once more, yelling as he saw the drop closing.

Lifting up the lid of the crate as much as I could, I yelled as I touched the piece of mica to the lock's haft. There was a resounding crack, and then it sundered and split. With a bound, I burst open the lid and leapt for safety, rolling as I hit the ground. I looked back just in time to watch helplessly as Joskan, attempting to do the same, had his axe snag on the lid. He was halfway out of the crate when the catapult vanished over the drop.

I heard a distant crash, followed by the sound of buzzing.

I picked myself up and dashed to the edge, now visible as a low stone cliff some fifty feet high. At its foot lay the crushed remnants of the catapult, pinning the rhino to the ground. Several huge black hornets flew into the air, eager to join the battle. Nearby orcs began to run.

"Lift me up, gods damn it!" My companion clung to the cliff beneath my feet.

"How did you...?"

"I prayed to an orc god at the last moment. Orc gods always listen. Now stop talking and start lifting."

I laughed as I leaned over and pulled him up. The sound of battle intensified all around us, and through the driving rain we could see combat joined on all flanks. I pulled my wayfinder from my shirt and checked it again, then followed its course away from the cliff and into the gray murk ahead.

The smoke and rain turned the battlefield into a muddy swamp in moments, blood mingling with rain and flashing lightning. We fought orcs where we had to and ran past them where we could, our stealth forgotten in the press of bodies. Arrows flew randomly, a burning head sailed past, and a huge rock crashed near us. At last we came out on top of a low hill, from where we could make out our situation better.

The clouds above were almost touching the ground now, so heavy were they with the storm. Lightning flashed down into the battle, some of it no doubt called by orc shamans, and the rain pelted the chaos until it was impossible to pick out who was fighting who.

Then something incredible happened. As Joskan and I looked on in awe, the sky above the battle suddenly howled, and a wavering finger descended from above, a needle of cloud that tore at the ground it touched, dancing across

## ORC SIEGE ENGINES

The orcs of Belkzen are fond of using bizarre war machines in their battles, many of them as much deranged works of art as effective weapons. While most of these are designed by the clan-neutral Steeleaters of the Foundry, occasionally orc leaders commission independent designs, with mixed results. A few common types are listed below.

**Battle Barrow:** This metal-shielded wheelbarrow provides complete cover for the archer hidden inside. The orc conscripted to push it is rarely as lucky.

**Crushing Wheel:** In close-packed battles, few weapons are as feared as this massive steel rolling pin. Whether pushed by orc or beast, it can be counted on to flatten everything in its path.

**Earthmaul:** This enormous hammer functions like a sideways-mounted catapult, and is capable of clearing wide swaths of enemies.

**Harvester:** This aurochs-pulled threshing machine is a long line of whirling blades that can be pulled through battle with great effect.

**Manticore's Tail:** This massive ballista fires a dozen or more spears at once in a devastating, if wildly inaccurate, rain of steel.

the land and consuming everything in its path. Bellowing its fury, it began to spin, flashes of lightning dancing with it as it rotated faster and faster.

The finger of the gods had come to the battle, a thing the Shoanti have a whispered name for: Yaponcha, the Angel of Storms. The tornado grew in noise and fury as it tore through the battle, lifting orcs and steeds as it raced, an inescapable scream of crushing wind.

Below us, the orcs were laughing. Laughing as the storm tore through their armies, picking up great rhinos and siege machines and bending them like corn in a breeze. Laughing as the roar burst their ears, as weapons and debris—given insane speed by the tornado—flew with terrible effect through weak flesh. Laughed as they rode into battle in a world gone mad with noise and anger and hate.

"Nozalu'rg! Nozalu'rg!" they screamed.

I asked Joskan what it meant.

"Apocalypse," he answered.

I realized that the orcs must think that the world was ending.

And they were laughing.

Our flight from the battle was one that gives me uneasy sleep. After what seemed an eternity, the noise became calm. As distance lost the battle behind us, the blood and combat became merely an uncomfortable memory.

Yet something remains with me still. Something that is beyond explanation.

The laughter of the orcs as they thought their world was ending.