

Enmities

The floor in the small crack between the rocks where she was hiding was rough and uneven. Her body shook with fevered chills that sapped the last of her strength. Soft noises from the darkness nevertheless urged her to try to gather her strength; her litter, three babies strong, mewled with hunger. In a little while, she knew, their soft whimpers would change into demanding shrieks echoing around the mountains. The whelps were yet too young to realize the danger of drawing attention in such a way.

"*Gósh!* Be quiet!" Her voice was a rough snarl but it lacked conviction.

It was not the cubs' fault. She should get up and feed them what little she could -- even though it would not be enough. Days had passed since she last managed to venture out of the den and find sustenance for herself. She was dying, and this saddened her. Not because she feared death. Death was a common enough event among her kind and she was long since used to the idea that one day it would be her time. No, she felt sad because when she died, her offspring would die with her. The pups could not yet survive on their own, and there was no one else to care for them.

Still, in a way, she considered herself fortunate. When her tribe lived in the shadow of Lugalbúrz, the sick were put down without mercy. Those who cannot work, are no-good burdens, or so it was commonly held, and only fit to feed the winged steeds of the Nazgûl lords. If they were so lucky, another female might have suckled the pups until they were old enough to fend for themselves. Otherwise, they would also have ended their short lives as fodder. But here, in the mountains, with the snow-capped peaks of the Ered Nimrais towering high above, she was alone. There was no rival tribe coveting her small nest; the Nazgûl were destroyed and could no longer terrorize her into obedience. And she was far from the White City of Men. Nobody would kill her before her time. *Her* whelps might have a chance to continue her line. If she managed to hold on to life long enough...

It was an uncommon occurrence for her breed, such illness. The race of the orc was stalwart and rarely got sick. But a fever had been haunting her since the end of last summer, when she birthed her litter. It slowly drained her strength until she was a mere husk of the powerful female she once was. Though it was more likely that her fever was a result of a birthing in squalor, she believed it was wicked magic, a poison in the air. She convinced herself it was the doing of the new king of Gondor, who was, after all, a Man.

"May Her Ladyship feast on his flesh." She uttered the curse below her breath before recalling that the fearsome spider was likely long dead.

Still, though she struggled to gather enough energy to feed her children, she found it

easy to muster hate and continued to rant aloud in a fevered monologue. "Driven like wild animals, we were. Ugly Elves and Men, they would rout our people from their burrows, murder us without discrimination."

She peered at her brood, which for the moment had gone quiet at the sound of her voice. "Our home was in Nurn, where those filth did not dare come," she said to them. "It was far into the dark lands of Mordor and the Great Eye protected us. But not a day went by that I wasn't told a tale of brutal culling. Everyone knew the stories of murder and cruelties at their hands, inflicted upon the northern tribes of our people, the orc-hai."

She rested for a moment, gathering her breath. With a proud heart, she remembered the warriors of her tribe who helped stem the tide. "Our males were daring and never feared to leave the safety of Nurn to wreak bloody vengeance upon the knights of the Great River or the horselords who live further north."

Her eyes shifted toward the two boys in her litter. "You would make mighty warriors," she told them. "Warriors fit to kill the nasty *tark* and Whiteskins!"

Her head turned back until she gazed at the far wall and bared her teeth in a smirk. "They tasted good, though. Sweet and juicy." She chuckled, and the chuckle turned into a bout of coughing that racked her body and left her gasping.

But killing Men was easy. Elves, on the other hand, were a different matter. It took true skill, and luck, to kill an Elf. The males were not often so fortunate, but when they were, the tribe always had a great celebration -- even if it was sometimes whispered that the Elves were kindred to the orc-hai.

"*Sha!*" She snarled at the notion with sudden anger. "It can not be true! It is the Elves who hunt us most vindictively since the dawn of time."

A tiny claw curled around her wrist, startling her from delirious reverie, and Karguk, her eldest, hauled himself onto her chest. She grinned with motherly pride and used some of her meager strength to help him up further. An instant later, sharp fangs closed around a teat. She shifted, trying to find a more comfortable position while her son struggled to draw the nourishment he needed so badly.

She gave a deep sigh. "Oi, bold Karguk, I fear you will never learn the taste of Man-flesh."

The future had not always seemed as bleak as it did today. For a long time, the orcs withstood the enemy intent upon completing their massacre; they flourished as a race, growing stronger and more numerous every day. Sauron, the Great Eye, watched over

them, and the Lord of the Nazgûl offered them dominion and riches.

"They promised treasures beyond imagination from the Men cities and Elven realms. More meat than we could ever dream to eat. But the most important thing," she informed her offspring, "they promised a place where you could grow into strong and vigorous orcs."

In return, the orc-hai's protectors demanded loyalty and labor. And the tribes were loyal. They labored. They paid a high price, counted in blood and sweat. Sauron sent out large numbers of fighting orcs to raid and plunder and sow terror in the lands held by Men, and many did not return. Every slave was put to hard work to sustain the companies. But still it was not enough; their protectors demanded ever more from their ferocious servants. So every able-bodied orc, male or female, was sent north, to toil in the bleak lands of Gorgoroth.

"They were demanding masters, the Nazgûl," she continued after a long pause. "We built tall towers for them, and smithed thousands of blades. Their whips drove me while I fletched arrows, made bows, twined and waxed bowstrings. I quarried stone blocks from the Firemountain's slopes to be used as projectiles, and built barges to sail the Great River. I worked the skin of my claws. Look!" She raised a limp hand and indicated the calluses on her palm. "Got that while I hacked, hammered and sawed in the dust at the foot of the mountain."

Yes, the orcs had given their masters their all in preparation for what was to be the Last War. Their work, the great lords said, would drive Men and Elves into the sea. And she knew the objective had been close. Tantalizingly close. If but for another turn of fate, she would be gorging with her tribe, her litter growing fat with her milk, without fear for their future. But it was not to be.

She drifted with the memories, never noticing how Brugagh replaced Karguk at her breast after a short but fierce struggle for dominance. In her mind, she was back before the walls of Minas Tirith.

Vast hordes of Mordor's armies march across the Ephel Duath. The black masses are a wonderful sight to behold and she is awed by it. The troops parade on the fields of Ithilien, shielded from the hateful sun by dark fumes that Mount Orodruin spews out. The vanguard, far ahead of the main body of the army, crosses the Great River on the barges she helped built, driving the enemy before it, back behind their walls where they believe themselves safe.

Before the city's gates, she is working among the many pioneers who dig trenches and light fires. She hauls carts that carry the basalt blocks, and loads the catapults. She jeers

with the others whenever another of the stones hit the city in a cloud of dust, leaving behind a mass of destruction. Marrow-curdling howls of pleasure rise from the masses every time mighty Grond hits the great gate of the city until at last the wood splinters and the orcs pour inside. When the black ships of the Corsairs -- Men, yet their allies under Sauron's rule -- sail up the River, the orcs cheer and her voice is loud among them. Soon, the orcs tell themselves. Soon. Bloodlust is on her, driving her, until she feels no hunger, no pain, no exhaustion. The heady scent of fear drifts down from the crumbling walls and she revels in its stench. She can already taste the flesh of her enemies, flesh that she will feast upon in celebration of victory. Soon.

But then their fortunes change...

Sauron's dark cloud dissipates. The sun, ever hated by the people of Mordor, shines brightly, making her ache for shelter. The Lord of the Nazgûl, her Master, of whom it was said no man could slay, is slain nevertheless; and as the fear of his wrath leaves them, another fear, even more cruel, comes over the orcs. For from the black ships do not pour the Men of Umbar that they expect, but hundreds of wraiths, more terrible in their fury even than the Nazgûl. And among them stands a Man. Rumor told of the returned King of Men, the heir of Isildur, the ruler of old who once defeated Sauron himself. She had not believed the rumors, yet here he was, tall, strong, and dreadful in his ire.

A moan escaped her at the memory and she woke with a start. The stark fear she experienced that day held her frozen so it took her a few moments to realize it was a dream, no longer real. But it was real, once. Sheer panic had raced through rank upon rank of black orcs, catching them all up in its terror. And she ran. She did not think. She spared no thought for where she was going. Terror drove her on, fright for herself and her unborn litter, still safe in her womb. She had stumbled blindly, farther and farther away, until much, much later she came to her senses and found herself among green, rolling hills with white mountains looming high above.

She was alone, insulated from news, yet instinctively knew the war was over. The orcs had lost. Their fate was sealed, their race doomed. And if Men or Elves found her, she would suffer a terrible end and her whelps would never be born. She did not dare turn back, and so she ran on, deeper into the forest, higher into the mountains until at last she could run no more.

And that's where she was now. In a narrow crevice, feeble with fever and three brats clamoring for her attention.

She had given birth in the way of her people: alone, without aid, crouched above a hollow filled with leaves and grass to make a soft receptacle. She turned her head away

from the wall to look upon her spawn and she flooded with pleasure despite her dire situation: she had produced three strong cubs, two of them sturdy sons and one fine-looking daughter with long arms and wide hips. Yet she despaired at the world they had to survive in. Hunted by the victors, chased to the end of the world and beyond, with no place left to hide. What future was it that they could look forward to?

But it no longer mattered. They *had* no future. Soon, she would die, and they would die with her. The line of her foremothers, the lineage of Skullgrinder, would be wiped off the Earth forever with the passing of its last daughter, Drukh from Nurn and her three babes.

Still, life was tenacious. Drukh was not yet ready to give up the fight and clung to what little hope she had left. When Silge in her turn pulled her brother away and took his place at her breast, she struggled to sit up. Her daughter was sucking hard in an attempt to draw what she could from her mother's dried glands.

She had no forewarning, when all of a sudden a shadow fell over them as something blocked the entrance to the small cave. She looked up in alarm and a sharp hiss escaped her when she saw a Man standing in the opening. It was a sign of the bad shape Drukh was in that she had not scented his presence or heard his approach with senses honed through generations of wariness until he revealed himself.

She hated herself for trembling in the face of the enemy as she pushed Silge off of her. The pup whined in protest even as her mother's hand searched for a weapon. But Drukh was too weakened to move much and could only stare up in abject horror while the Man gazed down upon them. In her eyes, he was hideously fair, like so many of his kind. Tall, broad-shouldered, strongly muscled. She knew he was no weakling. This Man was a warrior, and she was certain her end was near. She was like unto a helpless suckling, an easy kill, and while she prayed for a swift end, she waited for the blade to come down.

Yet, though his sword was unsheathed, he did not raise it. Numerous expressions crossed his features but she could not read any of them. Drukh had no experience with the faces of Men. At last, he cursed in the Elven tongue she despised so much and turned away, leaving a ray of sunlight to fall onto the floor.

Her yellow eyes blinked in surprise. She gaped at the empty spot where he just been standing and failed to comprehend. Why was she still alive? Why had he not used his sword to spill her insides onto the cave floor? It could not be fear that kept him back, of that she was convinced. He had the look of a warrior, and even a Man couldn't be as blind as to not see her frail and helpless state. So, why, then? She shuddered when another thought occurred. Perhaps this was a game. A cruel play, like the games the descendents of Ungoliant played with their prey. He would be back soon, and her end

would be all the more terrible for the delay.

But time went by, and he did not return. He was still outside somewhere, though, not far away. This she knew, for she could scent him, now that she had learned of his presence. Panic assailed her and she tried to shift her limbs. She had to leave! She should take Silge and Karguk and Brugagh and find another place to burrow in. But her strength was waning and she could move only a feeble arm.

Drukh was still pondering the strange behavior of her enemy when she found her vision was dimming. It was growing dark, despite the sun that shone into the entrance of the cave. She felt so tired, she decided to sleep for a few minutes. *Perhaps*, she thought, *I will understand better after I have rested*. She closed her eyes, his pale face hovering before her mind's eye for a moment. Then darkness folded around her, and Drukh Skullgrinder from Nurn knew no more.

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