

The Rusting Dawn of Screaming Teeth

The wind, a mournful dirge from the peaks, whipped Elara's braid across her face, stinging her cheek with icy spray. The mountain village of Oakhaven, nestled at the foot of the Dragon's Tooth range, was typically a place of quiet industry. Today, however, quiet was a luxury they couldn't afford. The air, thick with the scent of pine and fear, crackled with an unnatural tension. In the distance, beyond the treeline where the forest began to claw its way up the stony slopes, a discordant chorus was rising: a guttural, ululating screech that burrowed into the bones and refused to be ignored.

Goblins.

Elara, her calloused hands still stained with the ochre dye she'd been using on her latest pottery commissions, tightened her grip on the bone-handled knife tucked into her belt. She was a craftswoman, not a warrior, but in Oakhaven, everyone knew how to defend themselves. Survival demanded it.

Her father, Torvin, a man built like a gnarled oak, stood beside her, his usually kind blue eyes hardened with grim resolve. He was the village elder, and the weight of his people rested on his broad shoulders. He adjusted the leather thong securing his worn war hammer to his back. "They're coming down from the Whispering Caves, Elara," he said, his voice rough as stone. "Faster than I'd hoped."

"The usual raiding party, father?" she asked, though she knew the answer. She had heard the tales all her life. Goblins, drawn by the meager pickings of Oakhaven, periodically raided them, a frustrating, albeit predictable, nuisance.

Torvin shook his head, his eyes fixed on the tree line. "No," he stated with a chilling certainty. "This isn't just a raid. This is... a *horde*."

A shiver ran down Elara's spine. A horde. That meant not a handful of scavenging goblins, but a swarm. A tide of gnashing teeth, sharp claws, and chaotic violence.

The first of the goblins burst from the trees. They weren't the hunched, sickly creatures of Elara's nightmares, though they were undeniably grotesque. They moved in a disorganized frenzy, their mottled green skin glistening with sweat, their small, bloodshot eyes fixed on the village. Some were armed with crude axes and scavenged swords, others with rocks and sharpened sticks, and a few with strange, crudely crafted contraptions that spat balls of fire and noxious fumes. They were a repulsive wave of chaos, each one a nightmare made flesh, and there were far more that Elara had ever seen before.

"Now!" Torvin bellowed, his voice cutting through the rising cacophony. "To the palisade!"

The villagers, already preparing for this eventuality, surged into motion. They were a hardy people, accustomed to hardship and struggle, and years of goblin raids had forged them into a resilient force. The children were rushed into the stone-walled mead hall, a sturdy structure designed as a last bastion of defense. The men and women, armed with axes, spears, and bows, took their positions along the wooden palisade that encircled the

village. Elara positioned herself beside her father, her heart hammering against her ribs.

The first wave of goblins slammed into the palisade with savage fury. They scrambled, clawed, and howled, their shrieking cries echoing through the valley. The defenders met them with a wall of steel and stone, pushing back against the relentless assault. Arrows whizzed through the air, finding their marks with sickening thuds. The clang of metal on metal rang out as axes and swords met crude goblin weaponry. The air grew acrid with the smell of woodsmoke, blood, and the pungent odor of goblin musk.

Elara, wielding her knife with surprising precision, stabbed and sliced at any goblin that managed to scramble over the palisade. Her hands dripped with the viscous, green blood, and the screams of the goblins rang in her ears. This was far more intense than any raid she had experienced before. The goblin numbers seemed endless.

She saw a young boy, barely more than six years old, who had been left behind, struggling in the crush of the fight. A goblin, its teeth bared in a feral grin, was bearing down on him. Without hesitation, Elara leaped forward, shoving her knife into the goblin's throat. It fell backward with a gurgle, its body twitching. She scooped up the boy, his eyes wide with terror, and thrust him towards the mead hall. "Get inside! Now!" she yelled, her voice hoarse.

The fight went on, a brutal dance of death and survival. The villagers fought bravely, their bodies slick with sweat and blood, driven by the primal instinct to protect their homes and loved ones. But the goblin horde was relentless, their numbers seemingly inexhaustible.

Torvin, his hammer a blur of motion, smashed goblins aside like ragdolls. He roared with each blow, channeling all his fury into his attacks. Yet, even his strength seemed to be waning as the sheer weight of the goblin assault began to take its toll.

Elara fought on, her arms aching, her breath ragged. She had never seen so many goblins, and she knew that they couldn't hold out much longer. She glanced towards the main gate of the palisade, it was beginning to crack. Despair threatened to overwhelm her, but the memory of her family, her purpose, her village, gave her the strength to keep going. She knew that if the goblins breached the palisade, they would be overrun, and all would be lost.

In the midst of the chaotic battle, a commotion erupted near the main gate. Several goblins, far larger and more menacing than the others, had pushed their way to the front. One of them, adorned with crude bones and feathers, stood head and shoulders above the rest. It carried an unusually large club studded with obsidian shards, and its eyes blazed with a malevolent intelligence. This was no mere goblin. This was a leader, a chieftain, and he appeared to be directing the attack with a terrifying calm.

"They have a chieftain now!" roared a man named Borin, a wiry hunter whose face was already smeared with goblin blood. "He's ordering them! We're done for!"

The chieftain let out a piercing shriek, and the goblins redoubled their assault, their fervor fueled by his chilling command. The palisade groaned

and splintered under the relentless onslaught. It was evident that they would not be able to hold it for much longer. Desperate times called for drastic measures.

Torvin, seeing the imminent breach, roared to his villagers, "Fall back to the mead hall! We make our stand there!"

The villagers, fighting a rearguard action, retreated towards the mead hall, their faces etched with grim determination. The goblins, with terrifying shrieks, surged through the collapsing gate. Elara, her body screaming in protest, followed behind, pulling a wounded neighbor by the arm. Once inside, the villagers quickly barricaded the mead hall's heavy oak door with tables and benches.

The goblins hammered at the door, their shrieks and howls growing louder with each blow. The ground trembled with the force of their assault. Elara watched, her heart pounding in her chest, as the door groaned and buckled under their persistent attacks.

Inside the mead hall, the villagers were a picture of weary resilience. Children were huddled in the corners, their eyes wide with fear. The wounded were being tended to with makeshift bandages. Torvin rallied his people, his voice hoarse but firm.

"We are Oakhaven!" he thundered, his war hammer held high. "We are the children of the mountain! We will not fall today!" His words, a desperate plea, seemed to give a small spark of hope to the faces around him.

Elara knew that their situation was dire. They were outnumbered, outmatched, and trapped. The goblins would eventually break down the door, and when they did, the battle would spill into the enclosed space of the mead hall, a place where their defenses would be minimal. She looked around at her fellow villagers - friends, family, neighbors - their faces illuminated by flickering candlelight. They were counting on her, and she could not let them down.

As the goblins continued their assault, Elara's gaze fell upon a collection of her latest pottery pieces stacked near a stone hearth. An idea sparked in her mind, a desperate gamble born of desperation.

She remembered an anecdote her grandmother had told her, about a time when a large swarm of hornets had attacked their family farm. Her grandfather, in his desperation, had thrown a pot of honey into a campfire. The result, the rapid boiling and release of intense, hot steam, had driven the insects away. A crude, if not somewhat dangerous, weapon.

Without further ado, she began to move quickly, grabbing her largest pottery vessel, the one she had been working on earlier that day. She quickly filled it with the hottest water they had been able to save from their kettles, and some of the leftover ochre dye she had been using, a vivid red ochre specifically.

"What are you doing, Elara?" Borin asked, his eyes narrowed, "Are you going to throw hot water at goblins?"

"Yes," she said, her voice surprisingly calm. "But it's going to be more than just hot water." She added some herbs from her pack, and stirred them in with a few of the leftover embers from the fire. Her grandfather was a

skilled herbalist before he passed on and had taught her many things. She hoped, in this moment, that the knowledge he imparted to her came to good use now.

Her mind raced, putting together the concoction. She reached for one of the heavy wooden stools at the back of the hall. "Borin," she said, "help me."

Together, they positioned the stool near the door, behind the barricades. Elara carefully placed the cauldron on the stool, ensuring that it would be in the direct line of the entrance. She then took the smoldering embers and nestled them inside the cauldron, adding more wood, and watched as the contents began to bubble and froth. The red ochre made the steaming liquid resemble a pot of boiling blood.

"What exactly are you making?" he asked.

"It's going to burn," she stated simply. "And it's going to stink."

Borin gave her a dubious look but remained silent as she began to add the final ingredients - a pungent blend of herbs and spices she had been using for her dyes, including dried nettles, crushed juniper seeds, and a particularly potent variety of wild garlic. The mixture began to release a thick, acrid smoke that filled the mead hall, making everyone cough and choke.

With the contents of the cauldron now bubbling and overflowing, Elara looked at her fellow villagers, her determination blazing. "When they break down that door," she began, her voice loud enough to be heard above the din, "we give them a taste of Oakhaven's fury."

A fierce grin spread across Torvin's face. "I like it," he stated, his hand tightening on his warhammer. "Get ready!"

The goblins' relentless assault on the door reached its climax. With a final, ear-splitting crack, the door splintered apart, and the horde surged into the mead hall. The chieftain, his eyes glowing with triumph, was at the forefront. The goblins, their weapons raised, howled with anticipation.

As the goblins poured through the doorway, Elara, with a roar of her own, tilted the cauldron. The boiling, red-tinged liquid surged forward, hitting the first wave of goblins with a force that sent them reeling back, screeching in pain. The noxious herbs and spices in the water burned their skin, and the fetid, acrid smoke filled their lungs, causing them to cough and gag.

The chieftain, momentarily stunned by the unexpected attack, roared in frustration. He rallied his remaining forces, attempting to push through the chaos, but the goblins were disorganized and disoriented, their eyes watering and their skin burning. The mead hall was filled with a chaotic mix of hisses, roars, and the sickening sound of flesh sizzling.

Torvin and the other villagers seized the opportunity, their pent-up fury unleashed. They charged into the disorganized goblins, their axes and spears finding their marks with deadly precision. Elara, her knife dripping with the goblin's blood-stained ochre, waded into the melee, striking with a precision born of desperate courage.

The tide of the battle had turned. The goblins, no longer a cohesive force, were scattered and disoriented, their initial advantage gone. The acrid

mixture was continuing to boil and steam, creating a fog of burning madness in the entryway. The chieftain, his face contorted with rage, attempted to rally his forces, but the villagers fought with a newfound ferocity.

Elara saw her father fighting desperately, his strength failing. A large goblin, larger than the others, had managed to get behind him, bringing its rough club down. It would have crushed him. She ran forward, shoving her knife into the giant's arm, causing it to release its grip. The club thudded onto the floor, narrowly missing her father's face. She helped him up, her body shaking with adrenaline.

"Father, are you alright?" she asked, her voice trembling.

He straightened up, holding his war hammer firm. "More than alright, Elara," he said, a glimmer of pride in his eyes. "Just needed a little push." He roared then, swinging his hammer, sending more goblins to the floor.

The battle raged on, but the goblins' numbers were dwindling. The villagers fought with a coordinated ferocity, their desperation giving them a strength they did not know they possessed. One by one, the goblins fell, their bodies littering the floor of the mead hall.

Eventually, the chieftain, realizing that the battle was lost, let out a guttural shriek and retreated, followed by the surviving remnants of his horde. They scrambled back through the ruined entryway, disappearing into the forest.

Silence descended upon the mead hall, broken only by the ragged breathing of the villagers. The air was thick with the smell of blood, smoke, and the pungent stench of Elara's concoction. They had won, but the costs were heavy. Many of the villagers were injured, and the mead hall was a scene of carnage. But they had survived.

Elara stood beside her father, their hands clasped together, watching the forest line. "They're gone, father," she said, her voice exhausted but firm.

Torvin squeezed her hand, his eyes filled with a mixture of grief and pride. "Yes, they are," he said, his voice thick with emotion. "But their absence does not mean we are to rest. We will bury the dead, tend to the wounded, and rebuild this village, stronger than before."

The villagers, slowly recovering from the ordeal, began to tend to their needs, their grim faces turning into smiles of relief. They had fought off a horde of goblins, an army that would have overwhelmed any other village. They had been tested, and they had not failed. They were Oakhaven, and they were unbroken.

Elara walked out into the remnants of their village, her body aching in every place imaginable. The sky above was beginning to show signs of the sun rising, yet the air remained cool and somber. She looked over her village, and saw that while all was damaged, nothing was truly broken. Her home would be rebuilt. She would rebuild it.

She looked down at her hands, still stained with the red ochre. They were the hands of a craftswoman, hands that had shaped clay and imbued it with beauty. But today, they had spilled goblin blood. Today, her hands had saved her people.

As the sun rose over the Dragon's Tooth peaks, casting a golden light over the ravaged village, Elara felt a surge of determination. The goblins had attacked, but they had not won. They had underestimated the people of Oakhaven. And Elara, the craftswoman who had become a warrior in a single, terrible night, knew that they would never forget the day they faced Oakhaven's fury. She looked up at her mountain home, and a small smile spread across her face. They had survived. And that was all that mattered.