

The Twelfth Century
by
The Dark Lord Insidious
(just call me Sid)

**A New Beginning:
Zombies
&
Skeletons
&
Not So Elvin Princesses,
Oh my!**

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**### Chapter 18 ###
Metal Shop ###**

There are those who say I play favorites... well, anybody with a pair of eyes, a working brain, and the freedom to speak their mind is likely to say I play favorites, which really (working brain and all) gives the orcs grumbling in the corner more credit than they deserve.

Anyhow, their complaint has something to do with how I let the Dwarves get away with murder. (I don't.) But that's the complaint. Whatever, there's no pleasing some people -- and in my opinion, there's no sense trying to please some people -- especially orcs... even if their present complaints may have some basis in fact. But you know what they say, give an orc an inch, and, well, you've given an orc an inch; and we can't have that now, can we?

(Geez, a lot of hostility there. Maybe I'm going to have to go visit my guidance counselor -- I think we may just have to get one of those guidance counselor chaps for this here HS -- and talk to them about some of my unresolved anger issues. In the meantime, take it as fact: orcs suck -- grumbling orcs even more so.)

And to better understand what the orcs in the corner are grumbling about, it might make some sense to mention that we're in metal shop class, now. And for lack of a better local, said metal shop class is being held at the smithy located smack dab in the heart of the Dwarf enclave (just like every smithy and/or Dwarven enclave that I know of). And really, considering Dwarves love for creating things out rock, ore, metal, and gems (precious, semi-precious, and/or otherwise), one couldn't ask for a better metal shop than that. I mean, they've got the fire, the forge, the hammers, the hammer poundy onto thingies (anvils, I guess they're called, now that I think about it), and all sorts of chains and ropes and pulleys and other complex looking gadgetry to move all the heavy equipment around with. Like, right now, they're using said chains and pulleys and things to move a catapult off center stage. And if I had to guess, I'd bet that piece of equipment has a central part to play in what the orcs are grumbling about. Darren (the Dwarf in chief) had been lecturing about the finer points of siege craft -- something that neither I nor the rest of the class was paying the least bit of attention to, least of all the orcs. And so, to liven things up, he asked for a volunteer, selected an Orphan Orc by the name of Orley when no other volunteer stepped forward (I guess the younger Dwarfs had been paying attention and knew what to expect, otherwise, you know they couldn't have volunteered fast enough); and then, having selected his victim, Darren strapped poor Orley into the very catapult that is now being moved offstage and launched him towards the winds... or rather, would have launched him towards the winds if we weren't underground and there hadn't been a wall in poor Orley's way, so he didn't make it very far. But he did make a fine sort of 'Splat!' sound as he hit the wall at more or less point blank range. And the whole episode served as rather ingenious object lesson as to why someone might want to pay

attention to a Master Dwarven Smithy while they are talking (whilst in their den, at least).

Anyhow, this so called ‘ill’ treatment is what the orcs are presently grumbling about, while (oddly enough) the rest of the class watches in eager anticipation as Darren moves a ballista into position. (If I had to guess, I’d say we’re in for another one of those object-lesson/demonstration things before too terribly long.)

“Oh, man. That is so unfair. Sid, wouldn’t let us get away with doing that to a dwarf,” one of the younger orc observes. And although it may be true (probably is, I’m just not willing to admit it as such), the real point is that orcs wouldn’t be able to pull it off. Look, we’ve been in metal shop for a good half hour now and working replicas of pretty much every mechanism of destruction, device of torture, or odd Rube Goldberg contraption out of any comic you might care to name line the walls and hang from the ceiling. So, it’s not like the orcs would have to build something from scratch, all they really need to do is just sort of pick and choose, but you can bet your last silver that if they did choose, the one they would pick would invariably be in need of some kind of repair or it would simply malfunction. Here, see. There they go. Otto has slyly pulled a crossbow off the wall, cranked it back, loaded a dart, aimed it at Darren (the motive, revenge for what he did to Orley -- who is still trying to peel himself off and/or slide down the wall), but for all these efforts, when Otto pulls the trigger, does he hit Darren? No. Osprey (yet another mongrel orc) takes the bolt to the back of the neck. “Ouch!”

And suddenly, Otto is in front to the class holding a shield for protection as a giant (ballista) crossbow bolt is launched at him. No need to go into the gory details. Let’s just say, the shield didn’t work last year, it didn’t work this year, and it won’t work next year. But I think the students are getting the point, bad behavior will not be tolerated in Darren’s Smithy! Not from orcs! Not from anybody! But especially not from orcs!

(Stupid orcs. Can’t maim them fast enough if you ask me.)

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Of course, it might only be fair to make a little disclosure, here. I don't like orcs. OK. Just kidding. I suppose I've mentioned that more than enough at this point.

Beyond that little tidbit of trivia, I may have mentioned sometime in the past that Dwarves are never just Dwarves. They're either Copper Field Dwarves or Deep Gold Vein Dwarves or Wandering Dwarves in Search of the Next Big Score or something like that. And the Dwarfs in this here metal shop (and most, but not all, of the Dwarves around the crypt) call themselves Insidious Dwarves, which on account of some perceived favoritism I bestow upon them -- totally misperceived, I assure you -- some mispronounce it as Insidious's Dwarves... as if they were at my beck and call. I mean, they are. But no more (or less, for that matter) than anybody else in my domain. And really, it's not my fault that the Dwarves are the only ones in the crypt smart enough to name themselves after me. I mean, I could always go for a few Dark Elves or whatnot. Who wouldn't? But no such luck. And it is the Dwarves alone who take pride in place and have taken on the name.

Truthfully, I don't even know why I mention this, now, at this juncture. Perhaps boredom. I may like Dwarves, but that doesn't mean they aren't meticulously tedious in their speech (i.e. boring) especially when it comes to craft; and let's face it, that's all they ever really talk about. So after talking about the technical details of this and the obscure providence of that (couldn't tell you exactly what as I wasn't listening any more than the orcs), Darren is talking about the group project due at the end of the semester (which considering the odd timeline things have been taking, probably will be before the week is out) and when that time rolls around (whenever it is) everyone in every group has to turn in something; but then, since we are talking about Dwarves here (they never do anything alone) folks can work together. And if the entire class wanted to, they could get away with handing in just the one project. Dwarves really are Commie Bastards -- and I mean that in the most dangerous pinko subversive, who would have thought a race so blatantly gold-grubbingly greedy could be so group minded and altruistic at the core...

Um, I lost track with where I was going with that.

So, let me put it like this. Suppose I liked Orney, Otto, Osprey, or whatever (which I don't, as they're orcs, but suppose I did, which I don't), and upon splatting said (disliked, but theoretically with the suspension of disbelief liked) orcs against a wall (via catapult), impaling them with a tree trunk (via ballista), or chopping off a limb (one can only hope with one of those blade slicing trap mechanisms that they used to sell on late night TV as a sort of home robbery deterrent system, sadly pulled for safety reasons) that I decided that Darren had gone too far (obviously not possible when it comes to dismembering orcs); and so, I decided to ostracize Darren and send him out into the Mist beyond the cemetery gates as an outcast -- or what's that word for when you send a bloke away and don't ever want him to come back, under paint of death? Well, anyhow, if I did that, then all of Darren's brothers (or at least some of them) would tag along and join him in exile (and I guess that's the word for it -- exile).

I mean, that's why there's always Seven Dwarfs (ala Sleeping Beauty and the Seven Something or Another's) or Twelve (ala There and Back Again, and kudos if you actually recognize it's original name) or One Hundred and Twenty Four (300, I believe is what most folks know this story as[but let's face it, a single -- gold grubbing if commy minded -- Dwarf defending his ancestral homeland is easily worth 2 ½ Spartans, 237 goblins, 4,567 orcs, or 10,958 movie magic extras).

Um, I seem to be having problems concentrating today.

So, where was I?

Oh, right.

Point is, if I exiled Darren, all his lot (brothers, sisters, uncles, nephews) would likely go with him. It's happened before (not to me, of course) and it'll happen again (the colonization of Iceland coming rapidly to mind, and then later Greenland -- named as such because of the marketing fiasco naming a place Iceland turned out to be. Sven, you're a farmer by trade and you have your choice to colonize either Iceland or Greenland. Well, which do you think Sven chose? Yeah, that's right, Iceland. Sven was an idiot -- probably a half-orc-berserker now that I think on it...)

But this isn't a history class. And given the fact that for whatever reason I feel need to share random bits of historical errata, that maybe goes a long ways towards illustrating exactly how boring Dwarven lectures can be. I mean, in comparison to this, Mog's class went by in a flash (a flash that sends shiver down my spine and I recall most unwillingly, but at least it was fast -- as in, it went by in a flash.)

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But Dwarves don't believe in clocks.
'It's over when it's over,' they've been known to say.
Perhaps I've just got a bad attitude. I'm a Dark Necromancer, after all. And I've got a reputation to uphold.
Bad attitude? Check.
Hatred of orcs (rational or irrationally based -- as if a hatred of orcs could ever be considered irrational)? Check
Inability to focus on boring Dwarven lectures? Check.
Along with most of the class, I think I'll rest my head and take a short nap.

###

And then, suddenly (yawn, stretch, along with the nap), the lecture is over. And Strathmore, Jack, and a few others are trying to decide what to do for their project.

"We could build a catapult." (So, maybe trying to decide is a bit inaccurate, catapults are always popular in this sort of endeavor.)

"Yeah, use it in the game to make field goals."

"Or launch someone into the end zone," Jack suggests, eyeing Strathmore.

"Or an orc into the stands."

But Strathmore is still lost in the dream of flying through the air, arcing over the defense, ball in hand, "Would I get double points for that? Field goal and a touchdown?"

He seems to be looking at me, but it's too early in the morning (and/or too soon after a nap) for me to respond to something like that.

All the same, Abby feels the need to advise (Me no less!), "That's a question, Sid," as she sort of moseys over along with Ned, while interjecting a second question after the first, "Can we join your group?"

"Yes," Strathmore quickly answers (first to the second) before reiterating (second to the first -- which really doesn't sound as poetic as one might have liked, nor as confusing as I had hoped), "So, what about it, Sid? Double points for a flying touchdown through the uprights?" And though it's a simple question, in the thirty seconds this has taken, I have not changed my stance on early morning and/or post naptime question answering and/or the lack thereof.

So, "I'm not refereeing the game, that's Trent's job. Ask him." I suppose some might argue that's an answer (and a decision), but then again, it's really more like pushing it to the side -- or an attempt thereto, however ineffectual.

"What do you mean? Of course, you're refereeing the thing."

"It's a thousand to one odds against the orcs," Abbey advises conspiratorially, which may sort of sound like a non-sequitor, but sort of gives credence to the overall feeling in the graveyard (rumor mill that it is) that I will be refereeing the blessed thing.

And, "Well, that would explain why no one will take me up on my hundred to one odds against the orcs," I sort of muse.

"Yes, that. And everyone agreed it wouldn't be fair if you had any money riding on the game, Sid."

"What?" Maybe I should say that again, only, you know, louder this time. "WHAT?"

"Hey, I like taking your money as well as the next guy," Strathmore sort of snickers, "But then, come to think of it, I've never actually won a bet with you... or even heard of you losing a bet to, like, anyone, ever."

"Odd winning streak, that," Abby chimes in.

"And so it was decided that no one would take your bets this time around," Mata decrees, decides, as she says so it will be, the elves have spoken, and all that, you know, "to keep it fair."

“But that’s just it,” one Dark Lord (me in particular) points out, “That makes betting against,” or for, I was a bit excited, so I don’t know which I said or which would be correct, but the fact remains that would make betting against, “the orcs a good investment.”

“But it wouldn’t be fair,” Mata reiterates, while Mine’irva just sort of looks smug. You know (or at least, I know, I mean, I just know), this was all her idea.

“It was Mog’s idea, actually,” Abby advises (and it would appear that she’s big on the advice this morning -- like most mornings).

“And you listened to Mog?” (Must I be the voice of reason?)

“We listened to the voice of reason...” (No, clearly you did not!)

“And fair play.” (Pshaw! I say, Pshaw to your notions of fair play, Mata.)

“As it whispered into our ear,” Abby concludes. (Of course, it’s clearly a lie, as Mog’s idea of a whisper is a loud bellowing yowl.)

Still, what does it matter? “You know the orcs, still, aren’t going to win,” not if I have anything to say about it, “Goblins either,” I add as Gary sidles up to the table.

“I’ve got a wager for you,” the little guy says nonplussed.

Really? “Now, you’re talking.” (Finally, someone will take my bets. I was expecting to have a lot more riding on the game by now, which is to say, I was expecting to have at least something riding on the game by now. But alas, it was not to be.)

“Not you, Sid. Sorry.” (I do not need your pity, Goblin!) “Rather, we were hoping, Strathmore...”

“Against the Goblins?” he sort of snorts -- snorts, snickers, sniffs, and/or whatever. In truth, Strathmore is in high form this morning -- even for a high elf. And speaking of high, let’s just say that there have been more than a few fingers lost to the metal working machines this morning on account of substance abuse and leave it at that. Welding torches and Drip do not mix. Operating sharp bladed cutting tools while under the influence of K’fr is a bad idea. This public service message has been brought to you by Insidious: The Dark Necromancer (purveyor of find potions, elixirs, and until very recently, the most active bookie in this here crypt.)

Anyhow, when we last saw them (mere moments ago) Strathmore was busy snorting (sniffing, scoffing, etc.) at Gary's proposal. And being at a bit of a loss for words, when it's his time to speak, all he manages to get out again is, "Against Goblins?"

To which Gary replies, sort of indignantly (and I think it's cute when Cobalts and Goblins get all indignant; but when orcs get indignant, I just sort of find it annoying.) Anyhow, "Yes, Elves, Humans, all in your group, against us," meaning Grant, Greg, Gilligan, Gunthrie and the rest of the Goblins who have clustered around

"Fine, you're on. Ten gold?" Strathmore agrees.

"Don't trust yourself for a hundred?" Gary asks, upping the ante.

"Fine, make it a thousand."

"A thousand it is," and it is agreed, Gary says while spitting on his hand and holding it out so as to seal the deal. And it's sort of disgusting (Goblins spit not being anything I want near my personage, don't even like stepping on the stuff), but Strathmore is game (for the wager), spits in his own hand, and the deal is struck, the wager made (and the bet is on).

"A thousand gold says we'll be better teammates on this group project than you," Gary says in such a way that it's clear he had this little switcheroo -- last minute rewording -- gambit in mind all along.

"What?" Oh, and just by-the-by, Strathmore says, "WHAT?" again, only a little louder this second time with almost with the same level of incredulity that a Dark Necromancer might say it upon learning that he's been ostracized (but not exiled) from the betting action. "No, that's not what the bet was for. It was who was going to win the big game."

"Nobody mentioned the game, just a bet, which you accepted without asking the terms... but if an elf can't live up to his word of honor..."

"Fine, whatever."

"It's a bet then? You're not going to renig?"

"An elf does not renig," Mata assures the Goblin.

To which, what else is there for Gary to say, but "So, what can we do to help."

But then, here, I suppose, is where we have the answer to the question of what else there is to say as Jack helpfully (or not so helpfully as the case may be) quips, “You can lose the bet.”

And I suppose there’s a great big mind-teaser of a riddle in there somewhere vis-a-vie if you’re betting to be helpful, can losing the bet on purpose be interpreted as being helpful?

But I suppose that is a question that it might be best to push off as long as possible; if not, forever.

And then, not that Ned has anything great to say at this point, but he feels the need to speak, for if he speaks and is spoken to, then hasn’t he been implicitly accepted into the group? So with that in mind (as in, I think I may have previously mentioned that he has little to offer at the moment), Ned asks, “So, what are we going to build?”

And after a round of, “I don’t know.”

“Beats me.”

And, “What do you mean? I thought we were going to build a catapult?”

“Yeah, weren’t we supposed to build a catapult or siege engine or something like that?”

Anyhow, after the obligatory round of meaningless jabber, Abby points out (rather helpfully, as she often does), “Even the orcs can see the writing on the wall.” Of course, here, I feel the need to qualify her poorly worded statement. Can the orcs see the writing? Yes. Can the orcs read the writing? No. But then, that doesn’t change the fact that they along with most of the rest of the class (OK, all of the rest of the class) has teamed up with the teachers. “Maybe we should join everybody else,” Abby observes (rather than advises, mainly on account of how sick and tired I -- for one -- am getting of the little Apprentice’s endless advise -- however good, pertinent, and/or obviously brilliant it might be).

So, after a moment more (perhaps as she waits for someone else -- anyone else -- to say something), she sort of shrugs and says (neither advising, observing, or surmising for once, but simply stating as fact), “Personally, I have always wanted to watch a master smith at work.” And with that, she walks over to join the rest of the class up by the

forge. And after a moment's hesitation (but only a moment's), she is joined by Ned, Jack, Mata and Mine'irva; but only as Strathmore walks over do the Goblins follow behind closely on his heels.

"Remember," Gary whispers (and not like an orc mind you, but all silent like so I actually had to cast a spell to hear what he was saying), "if we go splat against a wall or take a spear to the gut or anything like that, you're not really doing your job... er, I mean, living up to your end of the bargain/bet, which would be poor point of honor if you lost, a bet to a Goblin, right?"

Hmmm. Goblins aren't that stupid after all.

Orcs on the other hand...

"Ouch! Ow! Ow!"

"And that's why it's important to keep your hands clear of the anvil," Daren advises as yet another Orc starts this weird sort of primitive tribal dance thing where they hop around clutching their hand, toes, heads, and/or whatever appendage was just hit with a hammer, going, "Ouch! Ow! Ow!" I mean, sure, you know it's some sort of reflexive action and nothing like learned culture or art, but the entire performance has a soothing quality about it -- an honest, un-rehearsed, genuine air about it -- which I find oddly refreshing and that brings a surge of joy to my heart every time the dance starts anew, "Ouch! Ow! Ow!"

Of course, as Mine'irva and the rest step forward, all this is forgotten (by Daren, at least, probably not the orcs or goblins in attendance, but they matter not), "Ah, elves. I have long waited this day. Mine'irva..."

And I guess, Strathmore has the wrong idea, as his hand reflexively goes to sword, which in turn causes the Dwarves in attendance to reach for ax. But whatever Strathmore thinks Darren had in mind, it is not the case.

"Worry not, brother," Darren coos reassuringly to Strathmore as he turns his attention to Mine'irva, wrapping his arms around her (lucky freakin' Dwarf), and guides her motions from behind (as I suppose is required whenever an older man teaches a younger lass most anything -- algebra, tennis, or more specifically, how to work a forge and hammer).

“That’s it. Hold it firm, but loose, you’re in control here. And just give it a light tap... like that. And now, you, Strathmore,” Darren says commanding the elf, as only a Dwarf at a forge can command another, “Strike where your sister has indicated with the heavy hammer: as she does, in the way she does, only harder. Think of it as a study in leverage,” he advises Mine’irva, as she leverages her brother’s blows, as the Dwarf leverages hers.

And very quickly the chorus of “Ouch! Ow! Ow!” is replaced by the blow, counter-blow of a Dwarven forge hard at work.

Personally, I wonder what they are making.

I hope it’s something good.

And not like last semester.

Spoons, they made spoons last time.

And really, there’s only so much you can do with a spoon.

But a letter opener. Well, now. That has real potential.

Or a pair of pliers heated in a forge, now talk about potential for fun...

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And then, of course, there is the ending refrain of, “Ouch! Ow! Ow!” from the few idiots left working on their own (S-Kelly, Frank, all the orcs with nary a brain between them, and a few others, but mostly those who were smoking under the bleachers).

And a misplaced stroke means a missing finger, here.

And a slip of the wrist means a broken toe, there.

Smithying is dangerous work, I’ll have you know -- all the more so if you’re still under the effects of the Drip: it doesn’t just wear off, you know. It has to be cured.

“Mu-ha-ha-ha.”

“Mu-ha-ha-ha.”

“Mu-ha-ha-ha.”

And you know, I might just have to start ending every chapter with that refrain. It has a sort of pleasant ring to it, if you ask me.

“Mu-ha-ha-ha.”

“Mu-ha-ha-ha.”

“Mu-ha-ha-ha.”

Cough. Cough.

Hack. Hack.

Wheeze. Wheeze.

It’s all the smoke in here from the forge that’s getting to me. So, perhaps I should go for a walk, get some air, and leave them to it.

{{{Chapter End}}}