



BROKEN REALMS

# THE CLOBBERING

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Bokkrog rolled his head from side to side with a series of loud cracks, shook out his arms and gave a few practice swings of his beloved spiky mace. The tribe had gathered around the two of them, hollering and hooting like wald-apes after a kill; only the shaman was quiet, staring balefully right at him from behind a mask of blue woad-paint.

His challenger, Grakka the Spear, was springing up and down in the mud on his long, nasty-clawed feet. He was taller than Bokkrog, rangy in the arms, all gristle and sinew and with no good eating on him. Probably weighed about half as much as him, too, especially with the basher-armour covering Bokkrog's body from head to toe. But his opponent was younger, full of the fire of confidence, and he had a mad toothy grin that Bokkrog didn't like one bit. Maybe this one would slip his jagged spear blade through a gap in his armour and end it all. Or maybe not.

The spiky plate armour had saved his life more than once; its metal had a strange blue tint to it, and the rest of the tribe said it was lucky, maybe even blessed by Gorkamorka. Carting it around every day, Bokkrog didn't feel so blessed. It weighed an absolute ton and made every one of his muscles ache, especially his bad knee. And that was to say nothing of the pounding headache that was now resonating *thump-thump-thump* in the back of his mind. Too much squig brew the night before, perhaps. Or maybe he was just getting old.

The lanky git came for him, spear outstretched. Bokkrog snorted in contempt as he parried. He went in to snap the polearm in half, but the spear looped around, avoiding his crushing mace as quick as a snake. The tip shot out and struck him in the gap between chestplate and big-jawed mask. Took a chunk of his throat, too. He felt blood trickle into the pit of his collarbone. If Bokkrog hadn't twisted at the last moment, it would have gone right through him.

*Let the youth get in a few hits. Let him get overconfident. Then the mace would do its work.*

Another thrust from the spear. Too fast. This one clanged off his helm, making his ears ring. The crowd hollered and crowed. Bokkrog muscled forward, knee aching in protest, then swung out his mace with a roar of outrage. Grakka hopped back out of reach, a guttural *hur-hur-hur* audible despite the roar of the crowd, before lancing out with his spear once more. This time, Bokkrog caught it behind the tip with his off hand. He pulled hard, the spiked hilt of his mace coming up to meet the stumbling youth. It caught Grakka in the armpit, tearing away a flap of skin and muscle. The crowd howled its approval as the youth fell back, spitting fury. *Laugh that one off, ya git.*

The spear spun around, hilt out to draw the parry. Then the pointy bit came round so fast that Bokkrog couldn't do anything but turn into the blow. It clanged hard off his breastplate, the great slab of metal chiming like a bell. He lowered his head and charged, arms outstretched to stop the youth dodging out of the way. Grakka leapt up, planting a foot on his shoulder and pushing up and over to land with a splash in the middle of the ring. Bokkrog staggered on, one hand sliding in the muck as he fought to keep his balance. The laughing crowd was right there next to him. He felt a boot in the small of his back and another on the back of his neck. Bokkrog growled and swung his mace at them, but they had pulled back. That Grakka had plenty of mates here. Too many by half.

Bokkrog hissed through his teeth, proper angry now. He stamped forward, ready for that spear to come in once more; he had little choice, given the difference in reach. He just had to take the hit on his armour and then return the blow with as much—

Grakka kicked a spray of mud right in his face. It was all in his eyes, and with his helm on, there was no way to wipe it off. Blinded, he charged on instinct. Something hard and killer-fast hit him in the knee – the bad knee, at that. In a blaze of pain, his leg buckled. The shaman's words drifted through his memory amidst the agony. *Walk with a limp, Bokkrog, and see wot it gets ya.*

He felt a hard kick to his throat, opening the wound there, and he went over in the mud. Too heavy to get up. It felt like he had swallowed his own tongue. Then a burst of pain shot through his chin, the top of that deadly spear pushing in to gouge at his face. Bokkrog roared in indignation as the nasty, jagged blade levered off his mask. He somehow got to his knees, wiping away the muck from his eyes just in time to see the silhouette of Grakka bringing down his spear like a club. *Thwack.*

Then only darkness.

It was twilight when Bokkrog came to his senses. The crowd had gone, as had his armour, cut away from him with careless, probing knives that had left a dozen gouges and slices in his flesh.

He sat up, taking in the score of wounds gleaming bright red across his body. The thumping in his head was ten times worse now – *THUMP, THUMP, THUMP* – but, weirdly, it didn't hurt. Neither did his wounds. Quite the opposite, in fact. His blood fizzed, making him feel strangely energised as he got to his feet. The breeze felt clean on his exposed skin. Invigorating, even.

The shaman was still there, staring balefully.

'You feel it?' he croaked.

'The thumpin' sound?'

'It not sound. It feeling.'

Something clicked in Bokkrog's mind. Above the shaman, the clouds were being blown by a hard wind. One of them looked a bit like a charging boar rider slowly pushing its way through wall upon wall of thick white clouds. No. Not a boar rider. Something far bigger. More primal.

A god.

The shaman came towards him, dipping his gnarled fingers into a pot of fungus woad. Bokkrog let the old orruk smear the bright-blue pigment on his face and chest, too entranced by the clouds to stop him.

'It's time, in't it?' said Bokkrog.

'It is.'

'He's comin', in't he?'

'He is.'

'Better get goin', then.' Bokkrog shucked off the last of his armour straps, picked up a decent-sized bone from the detritus at the edge of the camp, and set off towards the thumping sound in his head. His knee didn't hurt, for once. He felt... ready.

'Better had,' said the shaman absently, staring up at the clouds.





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