



WORLD
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MIDNIGHT



THE BITTER TRUTH

A SHORT STORY BY ROBERT BROOKS

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PART ONE – TO THE BRIM

Regent Lord Lor'themar Theron knew immediately that he had been betrayed. "Oh, Liadrin," he muttered. "I hope you've amused yourself today."

It was not Lady Liadrin waiting at the lodge in Har'athir. It was someone else. Lor'themar quietly chuckled to himself. "An invitation to meet you for a drink, and you send an Amani general in your stead. I suppose that's one way to arrange diplomatic talks."

The Har'athir guardian standing near Lor'themar simply grunted in response, nothing else. "Hmm? Oh yes, guardian, keep up the excellent work," Lor'themar said sarcastically. "*Shorel'aran.*"

The Amani general glanced up, his tusks a sharp silhouette against the warm glow of the tavern. When he saw Lor'themar, his chin lifted and his eyebrows lowered. Oh, Lor'themar had seen that expression before, hadn't he? Countless times on countless Amani faces, always just before arrows flew, blades clashed, and blood spilled. "Oh no. The Regent Lord in the flesh," the troll said. "This can't be a coincidence. Have I been deceived again by one of your people?"





“The both of us, outmaneuvered and ambushed. By a paladin, no less,” Lor’themar said, feigning shame. He was tempted to walk away—what words would be useful to exchange with an Amani? Especially this day. But that would amount to fleeing before an enemy. *And that I will not do.* As Liadrin surely knew. “How embarrassing for us both. Lady Liadrin *promised* you a drink after the summit too?”

The troll sighed. “She *promised* diplomacy. What she *brought* was this gourd.” He gestured to it with his hand. Liquid sloshed within as it swayed on the table. “But we had no cups to drink it. So she said she would find some.” He looked at Lor’themar’s hands. A sharp laugh followed. “And here you are. Two cups. Not three. So, she won’t be joining us?”

“Why would she? She accomplished her mission. Bloodshed is forbidden on haranir soil. So now an Amani and a *sin’dorei* must speak without violence,” Lor’themar replied. He gestured toward the gourd. “What exactly are we supposed to be drinking? That gourd does not look terribly . . . erm . . . clean.”

“No idea. Allow me.” The troll drew a small knife from his belt and, with one smooth motion, stabbed the cork and popped it free. He sniffed the cork, making a strange face. “Whatever it is . . . it’s not meant for living creatures. Let’s try it.”

The challenge was set, the terms of the battle clear. “Of course.” Lor’themar sat at the table and handed over one mug. The troll tilted the gourd, filled the mug to the brim, then handed it back, gesturing for the other.

When both cups were filled, the troll lifted his. “A toast. To being deceived.” Lor’themar raised his own mug slightly. “And to surviving the consequences.”

They both hesitated, saw each other’s hesitation, and then took big gulps of the drink almost simultaneously. It took several seconds for them to regain control of their facial expressions. They almost managed to suppress the urge to cough. *Almost.* Lor’themar cleared his throat slightly. “That . . . must be an acquired taste. Quite bitter.”

“Like licking a rotting pine cone,” the troll agreed. “My name is Torundo. War advisor to Chieftain Zul’jarra. You, I already know. Lor’themar Theron, Regent Lord, shining leader of the bejeweled brigade.” He covered another cough by laughing at his own joke.

“Charmed,” Lor’themar said in his most politic voice, the one he used at Silvermoon galas and Horde Council sessions. “But I feel we’ve met before today. Under less happy circumstances, no doubt.”

Torundo smiled before taking another drink. A sip, and a grimace. “Your paladin friend. How much of this swill did she think we would need to become friends?”

“Friendship between Quel’Thalas and Zul’Aman.” Lor’themar let himself chuckle. “How optimistic. You know what your people did to her parents, I trust?”

“A brutal day,” Torundo said, somber. “To forgive moments like that, impressive.” His tone lightened. “I admire her. So does Zul’jarra. So rare to meet someone of your kind who doesn’t lie with every breath. With today as the exception.”

“She is indeed a better person than I.” Lor’themar heard Torundo’s insult clearly.

Torundo raised his cup again. “Then let us drink to better people than you,” he said, “and everything we admire about them.”

“*Sinu a’manore*,” Lor’themar said. He finished his drink. Silvermoon court had trained him to ease slowly into verbal sparring. This was a delightful change of pace. “Perhaps she expects an empty gourd by midnight and a bargain of mutual aid struck by sunrise.”

The troll finished his own cup. “Ah yes. The grand reveal from the haranir: one people, one ancestry. Elf and troll alike, we are brothers and sisters, how silly our little squabbles, all the rest.” Torundo filled his cup again. “But that’s rude of me. Hagar made a very good speech.”

“She did,” Lor’themar agreed. “Though Zul’jan didn’t seem to think so. Will he come back from his tantrum, or will his childishness cost more Amani lives?”

“We will see,” Torundo said lightly. “He doesn’t bury his anger and deny it, as cowards do.”

Lor’themar finally fired back. “Well, I suppose dignified behavior looks cowardly to those without it.”

“Agreed.” Torundo’s tone was cold as he met Lor’themar’s eye. “Here, let me fill your cup again.” Liquid gurgled from the gourd’s spout. “I have always admired one thing about your people: the endless ability to lie to yourselves. The blood all washed from your hands, the dirt scraped from your fingernails, the streets swept fresh before





you head off to your *banquets and functions*.” Torundo smiled while making those words sound like curses. “Bunch of clean people standing around, pretending they were never dirty. Calling themselves *dignified*. Flimsy masks, and so difficult to wear.”

“Oh. You sound envious.” Lor’themar enunciated each syllable with precision. “Tell me, will it trouble you when Zul’jarra has you commit some new atrocity? She must have learned well from her grandfather. It’s been too long since I’ve seen Amani raiding parties pose dead innocents in creative ways. Perhaps she will turn to the old, familiar style: summoning some ancient problem that my people must lay to rest once again.” Lor’themar put a touch of pity into his voice. “Or perhaps she will find a new approach to teach me her perspective on *dignity*.” He took another long drink from his cup. “Mmm. I am finding a taste for this brew.”

Torundo simply looked back at the Regent Lord for a moment. “I remember a particular atrocity well,” he said simply. “Captured a knot of magisters. And some high-ranking rangers.”

The troll continued. “The chieftain back then always wanted to personally attend to important *quel’dorei*, to repay the hospitality done to him. He held quite a grudge. The lost arm. The lost eye. Some would call such treatment . . . *undignified*.”

“You were there.” Lor’themar couldn’t stop the words from escaping. “When my comrades were butchered, when Zul’jin painted himself with my blood.”

Torundo only smiled at him. “You were right, Regent Lord. We have met before.”



PART TWO – A TOAST

This was war. The same aggression, the same lethal intentions. Only this battle would be fought with words. They both understood this.

“Yes, regent lord, I was there the day you were captured.” The calm response cut Lor’themar more than any laugh could have. “Zul’jin enjoyed himself too much. Let you escape. Cost me brothers that day. But I never hated him for it. Our war had seared his soul to ash long before you crossed his path.” Torundo lifted the cup toward his lips.

Lor’themar barely heard him. He drained the drink, refilled it himself, letting the heat of the haranir’s drink go to war with the icy cold of old memories. “Yes. I remember meeting you.”

“Figured you would eventually,” Torundo said.

“On a different day.” Lor’themar had regained his wits. Regained control. Regained his insight. “Decades prior.”

“Elves have more years than me,” Torundo said. “Too many decades, and I would have been a child.”

“Indeed,” Lor’themar said. He waited until Torundo began to refill his mug again. “An Amani boy in . . . Zen’tamani Village, perhaps?”









Haranir brew slopped over the side of the cup, and now it was Torundo's turn to be shocked. "So, tell me," Lor'themar said, "before they named you general, before they called you the Grizzled, in which village did you grow up, Torundo?"

Torundo had been the first to launch an attack. Lor'themar now wanted to strike back. To reclaim momentum. And the first volley of his counterattack seemed to be working.

"Is something wrong?" Lor'themar asked. "You look troubled. In which village did you live? Perhaps that's the wrong question. If one was destroyed while you were a child, you would have to find shelter in *many* villages."

"Such a clever elf you are," Torundo said. He spoke it as a salute. Or as the gravest insult possible. "Yes, I grew up in Zen'tamani. As did many Amani children. Plenty of whom experienced the dignified ways of the high elves. That does not mean you saw me there."

"You specifically? No, I don't remember that. This would have been sixty years ago," Lor'themar countered. "What I remember most is what sent us to that village. The bodies decorating the caravans. Civilians. Children. Quite profane, even for the Amani. Had you done it to soldiers, it would have angered us. But to desecrate the common folk? You had our attention. And that of Ranger-General Lireesa Windrunner."

Torundo was blinking rapidly but said nothing. He watched Lor'themar carefully, took another drink.

Lor'themar continued. "Some in Silvermoon thought her soft on the Amani. All because she believed in proportional responses. The stories of our actions in the following days?" He chuckled softly. "It quelled those criticisms for many years. Thankfully, it was easy to track the raiders. Amateurish work—but then, cruelty is rarely employed by the competent."

Lor'themar lifted his cup and swallowed more haranir brew. There were many stories of his war against the Amani that troubled him to remember.

This was not one of them.

"We followed them to what was your village. Celebrating their grand victory. There must have been a full wagon of wine in that caravan. We watched them through the night. Let them put themselves into a stupor. When sunrise came, we simply walked in."

Lor'themar grabbed the gourd and refilled Torundo's cup, looking into his eyes without blinking. "Was this not your village?"

"It was," Torundo said bluntly.

"As I said, I don't remember you. I recognize your features, though. Not a child's features." Lor'themar pretended to study Torundo's face. "Who in your family was among that raiding party? Your father? A cousin, perhaps?"

"An uncle," Torundo said.

"Hmm . . . he had your brow, your frame," Lor'themar said fondly.

"Though not your sense of strategy. More's the pity. It was disappointing to capture the whole lot without taking a single wound. They even had a cache of our blades yet were too drunk to use them. We had to find our satisfaction somewhere. I'm sure you understand."

"I certainly do," Torundo said.

"Do you remember how we executed them?" Lor'themar drank deeply. It tasted like blood on his tongue, bitter and metallic. "How we made sure they felt exactly what those in the caravan had felt?"

"Hard to forget," Torundo said. "It was a messy scene. But as you say, cruelty is rarely employed by the competent."

"Your village harbored butchers," Lor'themar said, "and it paid the price."

"Our blacksmith didn't harbor anybody," Torundo said. "He simply cried out when you killed his mate. One of you made it so he never cried out again. And do you remember the thatched buildings that you set aflame? Not empty."

"Hm. A terrible thing, war," Lor'themar said with feigned regret.

"I don't remember you either. I was three, perhaps four." Torundo's voice was free of anger or rage. Just remembrance. "You looked like evil spirits. Gleaming, shining blades, moving from one unarmed Amani to the next. You, completely invincible. Us, completely helpless."

"Then we did our work well."

"Quite well," Torundo agreed. "The survivors fled. Ran to Amani'Zar. And then, when grown, rallied to the banner of a warlord who promised every one of you would pay in blood. And you, in fact, did." The troll savored another swallow. "As you said . . . a terrible thing, war."

“A war that seems close to ending, finally,” Lor’themar said curtly. “Your leader seems especially desperate these days. I never thought your people would be begging my people for aid.”

“Begging?” Torundo repeated, amused. “Chieftain Zul’jarra never asked for anything. Liadrin offered her help freely—as did others—to fight our mutual enemy.” The troll’s shoulders shook with quiet laughter. “You look unhappy. The Twilight’s Blade nearly finished the job you never could. All you had to do was watch. Just like we did, when the Scourge carved your kingdom in half and culled your—”

Lor’themar’s fist cracked against Torundo’s cheekbone, just above the tusk.











PART THREE – THE DREGS

There hadn't even been a decision. Just an action.

Then came the footsteps, shouts. The haranir guardians. Torundo sighed. A happy, satisfied sound. "Guardians, stay your hands. I'm all right."

Lor'themar felt the insult. He had allowed words to crack open his honor. "I . . . I apologize deeply for breaking the truce we agreed to. It will not happen again. Not here."

After a few moments, the guardians relaxed their grip on Lor'themar, though they lingered close. It was clear they would not allow second chances.

Torundo lightly rubbed his cheek. A dark bruise was already forming. "Perhaps it is best that someone else ends our war for us. Neither of us deserves to win it."

Lor'themar nodded his agreement. "Our drinks. Here, allow me." The gourd was getting light. But there was enough for a full cup for each of them, with a bit left over.

"Don't apologize," Torundo said. "Not for something you don't regret."

"But I do value civility. Even toward my enemies," Lor'themar said.

"There's that endless ability to lie to yourself," the troll replied. "You even seem to believe it."

Lor'themar offered an exasperated sigh. "Believe what?"

"That my village harbored butchers. That the drunk Amani you executed were savages," Torundo said. "Your people truly think your hands are clean, don't you?"

Lor'themar Theron was tired now. The fun of this battle had faded.

In most circumstances he would have simply departed. But he had struck Torundo dishonorably. He had breached the rules of engagement. This would be a small penance.

"So. Your village was innocent," Lor'themar said flatly. "Filled with peaceful artisans and farmers and blacksmiths and nothing else? I do hope you can come up with something more convincing than that."

Torundo smiled broadly—and sadly—at the regent lord. "Oh, we had warriors. My uncle among them. And they *had* burned a caravan. But those thin stories from your leaders, you believed them? You were *rangers*. I thought you could tell lie from truth."

"Good luck convincing me those bodies at the caravan did not exist," Lor'themar said. "That their blood wasn't spilled."

"Of course it was real. As was the pile of enchanted elven weapons on their wagons," Torundo said. "What civilian caravan carried those? Did you truly never question the story you were told?"

"There were dead *children*," Lor'themar said, voice not as steady as he would have liked. There had been children. And there had been elven weapons in that village. *Why didn't I . . . ?*

"Accompanying *Farstriders*. Disguised as civilians. They have an unmistakable fighting method. Why do you think the raiders got so drunk that night? My uncle was honorable. He needed to wash the scene from his mind. They were debating what madness had led your people to take such a risk." Torundo rubbed his bruised cheek and took another drink. "What sort of mind thinks of using children as shields?"

"A certain warlord, from what I understand." Lor'themar's voice felt hollow.

"Yes, Zul'jin matched escalation with escalation."

"And yet you're proud of joining him."









Torundo looked at Lor'themar with astonished eyes. "How can you not understand? Centuries of life beyond mine, centuries more to go, and you still think either of us should look back on this war with *pride*?"

Lor'themar said nothing. Just took another drink.

"Maybe your ranger-general knew about the disguised Farstriders. Maybe it was some field leader and we killed him that very day. But since children died, you needed us to be savages. Harder to fight when that vile stench of the day's tragedy was your own fault. Zul'jin loved such conveniences. Every drop of innocent blood spilled lit a fire in the belly of our people. It certainly sent me and others to Windrunner Village. Another massacre. What pride should I take from that?"

Torundo closed his eyes, smiling sadly. "Should I feel shame for it? I never questioned my duties. Like you . . . I certainly could not have stopped him."

"So now you're a general who never had the opportunity to choose for yourself," Lor'themar said skeptically. "Interesting. What were you saying about lying to ourselves?"

"So easy to do, yes?" Torundo's voice was soaked in earnestness. In sincerity. "The war's older than either of us. We lived in the hatred of generations past. We wiped out the enemy where we found them as our friends were wiped out in turn. Horrified by it and enjoying it in its season. We died for it or learned to live with it. *What else could any of us have done?*"

Torundo examined his mug. "Does it matter what our war is about today? Territory or decades-old massacres or just *habits*? We're both bound to it. Can't find our way out. We *don't* want to." The Amani general offered an exhausted laugh.

"I lived for this war," Torundo continued. "Perhaps my time as warrior ends because we make peace, or because we don't. But I won't live too long, regardless." He smiled at Lor'themar, triumphant. "Time is cruel to your people in that way. From birth to death, my war won't last a fraction of yours. Has it felt like forever? How much longer can that dignity last?"

Lor'themar did not respond for a long moment. "Speak the truth. Your old village. Ordinary raiders, not monsters?"

"How can a child's memories know truth?" Torundo said, almost deliriously. "We had warriors who roamed. If they knowingly massacred innocents, it would have been the first time. That's all I know."

Torundo looked sympathetic. "Tell Lady Liadrin I am glad she deceived me. This conversation was a true gift, but I must leave. Extinction awaits my people, at the hands of yours or others."

"Perhaps it does," Lor'themar said. "I wish you the outcome you deserve."

Torundo, already walking away, laughed loudly. "What a terrible curse. I will grant you one in return: *I wish you the forever you think you want.*"

And then he was gone.

Lor'themar sat alone, watching the lodge empty its patrons. The word *forever* hung in his mind in a way he did not like. And the last sip lay bitter on his tongue.

"A terrible curse," he agreed softly.



