

The Tale of Torthelm

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----- The Character



In the Third Age, 1974, Fornost Erain was overrun by the forces of Angmar. Many a fell deed slew the Hope of Men in those days, and Oaths taken were shattered by cowardice and greed; Oathbreakers lived where dead men lay rotting.

In the next year, Earnur of Gondor retook the city, but abandoned its broken battlements to time. With the Witch-king and his forces routed, the ashen wastes and brittle air filled the hearts of Men with as little Hope as can be mustered. It is here that the *Tale of Torthelm* begins in earnest, a young Son of the Gondorian province of Calenardhon, sworn to his Captain. Not all fought on the Fields throughout, and so the bringing back of the dying and honoring the dead are the result of any battle – the task of freeman - and it is on the Fields of Fornost that Torthelm finds Fate.

~ I copied the Professor's poem, *The Homecoming of Beorhnoth, Beorhthlem's Son*, and have repurposed it/rewritten parts of the poem for use within the Middle-earth setting of the Lord of the Rings Online MMO. With the introduction of the Oathbreaker herald for Captains, I wanted to use the Professor's work to tell a tale as to why my Captain should have at her call an Oathbreaker at all, and to give life to deeds past. I do not share the idea that Oathbreakers belong only to Aragorn's story.

The sound is heard on the Fields of a man moving uncertainly and breathing noisily in the darkness.

Torhthelm speaks, loudly and sharply, "Halt! What do you want? Shadow take you! Speak!"

"Totta? I know you by your teeth rattling."

Torhthelm speaks more loudly, hiding his fear with bravado. "Why, Tidwald? You! The time seemed long alone among the lost. They lie so queer. I've watched and waited, till the wind sighing was like words whispered by waking ghosts that in my ears muttered."

Tidwald laughed, coming out of the gloom, his face covered with cloth to fend off the smell of the dead. "And your eyes fancied barrow-wights and goblins. It's a black darkness since the moon foundered; but mark my words: not far from here we'll find the Captain, by all accounts."

Tidwald lets out a faint beam from a dark-lantern. A carrion crow caws. A dark shape flits through the beam of light. Torhthelm starts back and overturns the lantern, which Tidwald had set on the ground.

"What ails you now?"

"The King save us! Listen!"

“My lad, you're crazed. Your fancies and your fears make foes of nothing. Help me to heave 'em! It's heavy labour to lug them alone: long ones and short ones, the thick and the thin. Think less, and talk less of ghosts. Forget your gleeman's stuff! Their ghosts are under cairn; and wolves don't walk as in the days, not here in the Downs. If any there be, they'll be two-legged. There, turn him over!”

A carrion crow caws again. It's only a crow.

Torhthelm speaks. “An ill boding. Crows are omens. But I'm not afraid, not of fancied fears. A fool call me, but more men than I find the mirk gruesome among the dead unshrouded. It's like the dim shadow in this hopeless kingdom yond where search is vain. We might seek for ever and yet miss the Captain in this mirk. O Captain beloved, where do you lie tonight, your head so hoar upon a hard pillow, and your limbs lying in long slumber?”

Tidwald lets out again the light of the dark-lantern. “Look here, my lad, where they lie thickest! Here! Lend a hand! This head we know! Wulfmur it is. I'll wager aught not far did he fall from friend and Captain.”

“His sisters-son! The songs tell us, ever near shall be at need nephew to uncle.”

“Nay, he's not here—or he's hewn out of ken. It was the other I meant, th' Calenardhon lad, Wulfstan's youngster. It's a wicked business to gather them ungrown. A gallant boy, too, and the makings of a man.”

Torhthelm let out a sigh. “Have mercy on us! He was younger than I, by a year. Now so few of us of Calenardhon after the Great Plague. Fewer still after this Battle.”

“An here's Aelfnoth, too, by his arm lying.”

“As he would have wished it. In work or play they were fast fellows, and faithful to the Captain, as close to him as kin.”

Tidwald spat. “Curse this lamplight and my eyes' dimness! My oath I'll take they fell in his defence, and not far away now the Captain lies. Move them gently!”

“Brave lads! But it's bad when bearded men put shield at back and shun battle, running like roe-deer, while the Shadows beat down their boys. May the Light of Gondor blast on the dastards that to death left them to Gondor's shame! And here's Aelfwine: barely bearded, and his battle's over.”

“That's bad, Totta. He was a brave lordling, and we need his like: a new weapon of the old metal. As eager as fire, and as staunch as steel. Stern-tongued at times, and outspoken after Offa's sort.”

Torhthelm spat. “Offa! He's silenced. Not all liked him; many would have muzzled him, had the Captain let them. ‘There are cravens at council that crow proudly with the hearts of hens’ so I hear he said at the lord's meeting. As lays remind us: ‘What at the mead man vows, when morning comes let him with deeds answer, or his drink vomit and a sot be shown.’ But the songs wither, and the world worsens. I wish I'd been here, not left with the luggage and lazy thralls, cooks and sutlers!” Torhthelm signs. “By the King, Tidwald. I loved the Captain no less than any lord with him; and a poor freeman may prove in the end more tough when tested than titled lords who count back their kin to kings.”

“You can talk, Totta! Your time'll come, and it'll look less easy than lays make it. Bitter taste has iron, and the bite of swords is cruel and cold, when you come to it. Then the King guard you, if your glees falter! When your shield is shivered, between shame and death is hard choosing. Help me with this one! There, heave him over - a warg carcass, hulking heathen!”

“Hide it, Tidwald! Put the lantern out! He's looking at me. I can't abide his eyes, bleak and evil as the Witch-king in the moon.”

“Ay, he's a grim fellow, but he's dead and done-for. Wargs and Orcs don't trouble me save with teeth and axes. They can smile or glare, once Shadow has them. Come, haul the next!”

Torhthelm gasped. “Look! Here's a limb! A long yard, and thick as three men's thighs.”
“I thought as much. Now bow your head, and hold your babble for a moment Totta! It's the Captain at last.”

There is silence for a short while.

Tidwald speaks. “Well, here he is—or what is left us: the longest legs in the land.”

Torhthelm's voice rises to a chant.

*“His head was higher than the helm of kings with heathen crowns,
his heart keener and his soul clearer than swords of heroes polished and proven:
than plated gold his worth was greater.
From the world has passed a prince peerless in peace and war,
just in judgment, generous-handed as the golden lords of long ago.
He has gone to Shadow glory seeking, Beorhtnoth beloved.”*

Tidwald speaks. “Brave words my lad! The woven stars have yet worth in them for woeful hearts. But here's work to do, ere the funeral begins.”

“I've found it, Tidwald! Here's his Great Hammer lying! I could swear to it by the haft.”

“I'm glad to hear it. How it was missed is a marvel. He is marred cruelly. Few tokens else shall we find on him; they've left us little of the Captain we knew. Handle the Hammer carefully, Totta, for it is old and of his kin from an Age yond.”

Torhthelm sighs. “Ah, woe and worse! The wolvisch heathens have hewn off his head, and the orcish hulks left him mangled with axes. What a murder it is, this bloody fighting!”

“Aye, that's the battle for you, and no worse today than wars you sing of, when Frida fell, and Finn was slain. The world wept then, as it weeps today: you can hear the tears through the harp's twanging. Come, bend your back. We must bear away the cold leavings. Catch hold of the legs! Now lift—gently! Now lift again!”

Torhthelm speaks. “Dear still shall be this dead body, though Shadow has marred it.”
His voice rises again to a chant.

*“Now mourn for ever Calenardhon and Gondor, from the sea's margin
to the western forest! The wall is fallen, women are weeping;
the wood is blazing and the fire naming as a far beacon.
Build high the barrow his bones to keep!
For here shall be hid both helm and Hammer;
and to the ground be given golden corslet,
and rich raiment and rings gleaming,
wealth unbegrudged for the well-beloved;
of the friends of men first and noblest,
to his hearth-comrades help unfailing,
to his folk the fairest father of peoples.
Glory loved he; now glory earning
his grave shall be green, while ground or sea,
while word or woe in the world lasteth.”*

Tidwald nods. “Good words enough, gleeman Totta! You laboured long as you lay, I guess, in the watches of the night, while the wise slumbered. But I'd rather have rest, and my rueful thoughts. These are darker days, though the Hope is heavy; Beorhtnoth we bear here: no pyres for him, nor piling of mounds; and the Hammer will be given to the good King. Let the minstrels mourn him and his songs be chanted! With learned song they'll lead him home, if we can bring him back. The body's weighty!”

Torhthelm speaks. “Dead men drag earthward. Now down a spell! My back's broken, and the breath has left me.”

“If you spent less in speech, you would speed better. But the cart's not far, so keep at it! Now start again, and in step with me! A steady pace does it.”

Torhthelm halts suddenly.

“You stumbling dolt, look where you're going!”

“For the King's pity, halt, Tidwald, here! Hark now, and look!”

Tidwald looks. “Look where, my lad?”

“To the left yonder. There's a shade creeping, a shadow darker than the western sky, there walking crouched! Two now together! Troll-shapes, I guess, or barrow-wights walking. They've a halting gait, groping groundwards with grisly arms.”

Tidwald spat. “Nameless nightshades—naught else can I see, till they walk nearer. You're witch-sighted to tell fiends from men in this foul darkness.”

“Then listen, Tidwald! There are low voices, moans and muttering, and mumbled laughter. They are moving hither!”

“Yes, I mark it now, I can hear something.”

Torhthelm grabs the lantern. “Hide the light!”

“Lay down the body and lie by it! Now stone-silent! There are steps coming.”

They crouch on the ground. The sound of stealthy steps grows louder and nearer. When they are close at hand Tidwald suddenly shouts out: “Hullo there, my lads! You're late comers, if it's fighting you look for; but I can find you some, if you need it tonight. You'll get nothing cheaper.”

There is a noise of scuffling in the dark. Then there is a shriek and the sound of bones snapping. Torhthelm's voice rings out shrill. “You snuffling swine, I've crushed you for it! Take your trove then! Ho! Tidwald there! I've slain this one. He'll slink no more. If axe and hammers he was seeking, he soon found one, by the flat end.”

Tidwald stands agape. “My dead-robber slayer! Bold heart would you borrow with Beorhtnoth's Hammer? Nay, wipe it clean! And keep your wits! *Oron-I-Anadune* was made for better uses: a fell deed indeed! You needed no weapon: a wallop on the nose, or a boot behind, and the battle's over with the likes of these. Their life's wretched, but why kill the robbers, or crow about it? There are dead enough around. Were he an orc, mind you, I'd let you boast—and there's lots abroad not far away, the filthy thieves: I hate 'em, by my heart, heathen or sprinkled, the Shadow's offspring. You've done an ignoble deed!”

Torhthelm cried. “The King forgive me, and to this I am Sworn as well to beg for His forgiveness.” The third shadow flits closer, and Torhthelm's eyes narrow. “And these evil days, when unregretted lie mouldering, and the manner of wolves the folk follow in fear and hunger, their dead unpitying to drag and plunder! Look there yonder! There's a lean shadow, a third of the thieves. Let's thrash the villain!” The man steps into the darkness bearing the great weight of his Captain's Hammer, vengeance and oath and fell deed fated.

Tidwald speaks. “Nay, let him alone!”

Too late the Great Hammer stroke falls hardest even as a knife of the slain juts from the young Torhthelm's neck.

In the bundle of a millennia hence, Airgoidhwen came unto treasuries in the deeps of Khazad-dum and discovered a Great Hammer with a golden haft; buried long, carried across distance and time by what hands none know. To it, the young Torhthelm lies bound until the Ending of Days; Oathbroken by anger, sworn to ask forgiveness from a King who now lies dead and buried – forgiveness for the ignoble deed of slaying robbers with his own Captain's hammer. Sworn to his Captain and Noble deeds and Honorable war against the Enemy, not to slay crawling dead-pickers with a weapon forged against the Enemy.