

I don't own Tolkien, something I would never believe myself worthy of. Nor do I own HP.

This won the HP poll, which was made of short stories I knew I could get done this month with a hell of a lot of RL stuff happening in the shorted month of the year. Thus you get a second serving of this fic.

Warning: This is a Thorin centric, war centric chapter. I had hoped to put in a portion for Harry but wasn't able to get it done in time. I hope you all enjoy this despite that, and how I portray Saruman at this time: thoroughly not on the side of angels, but very much playing his own game and a long one at that. I also use a lot of Khuzdul words occasionally.

I'm posting it here now, so you all can point out mistakes or inconsistencies before I post it over on fanfic by the end of the month.

Now, without further ado... Let the carnage commence.

### **Chapter 30: War is Just Another Craft to be Mastered**

At around the same time that Harry and the army of Varni's Folly began to use the equivalent of dwarven magic to march all the faster to Spider's Bane, Thorin and his army had yet to reach the territory of Red Rock, yet were already preparing to face their first major battle. Or at least, most of his army was preparing for it. And to be sure, Thorin acknowledged that his scouts had faced numerous small-scale battles as they pushed into Zigûr-khaz (Blacklocks) lands. Still, this would be the first large-scale battle, and Thorin acknowledged a bit of what another man might have called nerves as he contemplated the battle to come.

Shaking any concern away, Thorin turned to look at his officers while the work went on in front of them to craft the battlefield to his liking. Hearing the shouts of foremen at work on the berm and, further away, the ditches to the flanks of the two thousand men in this makeshift redoubt, Thorin felt pride surge within him. "Well, gentlemen, are we ready? Are there any concerns anyone would like to share? The enemy is on the horizon, so now is the time."

He tried not to let it show, tried not to let it impact his thought process, but Thorin knew without a shadow of a doubt that he, his advisors and Erebor as a whole had put together the greatest army the Sigin-tarâg (Longbeards) had been able to field in literal ages. Not since the time of Khazad-dûm's might had such an army been seen. *My father's army in the war against the orcs in the Misty Mountains might have been larger, but in zabâd (steel), we have that army beat.*

The word 'zabad' was far more encompassing than the word it translated to in common: simple steel, like the metal. But among dwarves, if you changed the inflection a bit, it came to

mean more than just the material. Zabâd came to mean willpower and strength. *And now comes the fire to see if we are truly up to the task. Well, for at least four-fifths of the army.*

At present, Thorin had only three corps with him and his own corps, the label he used to describe a force of a thousand infantry with their own siege train. Siege train, not baggage train. The forty-eight ponies assigned to each corps instead carried saddles marked by Potter-Surehand Runic Arrays, lightening the load and keeping the ponies comfortable, bug-free and more. On their backs, those ponies carried the parts for scorpions, large, cart-sized siege weapons repurposed and redesigned to be used in the field. Each thousand-man unit could operate on its own with scouts, siege weapons, supplies, and crossbowmen under the command of a commander, one of Thorin's Nâlbarâk Râdûn.

The term translated to "finger commander," and, thinking about his friend Harry's response to how that translated into common, Thorin held back an inappropriate chuckle, as it really didn't translate well. Historically speaking, that title was given to those men who could be trusted by a king as he would the fingers of your own hand. It had meant a king's honor guard, but Thorin had turned it to his own purpose, using it as a rank for the commanders of his corps, the better to foster a spirit of camaraderie and zeal.

Thorin, Balin and his other advisors, even Ani, had been very careful when choosing them, just as Dwalin had been very careful in choosing the dwarves in Thorin's personal guard. For as his guard would watch Thorin's back in battle, the Nâlbarâk Râdûn would act as his voice and fists when his attention was elsewhere.

With Thorin acting as his own corps commander as well as overall general, Tholi was the youngest of the four Nâlbarâk Râdûn, hence why Thorin kept him close most of the time rather than let his corps march on their own away from his supervision. Tholi was a cousin of Dori and Nori, both of whom were with the army, having declined to go with Fili and Gimli when they learned that Harry and Tauriel would be going with the younger dwarves, by way of their mother's sister.

Dori had joined Thorin's guard, while Nori had joined the scouts. Dori was still one of the strongest dwarves in Erebor, even if he wasn't as skilled in combat, and he had added a few inches to his waistline over the past decade. Nori, who hadn't changed all that much physically, was one of the best when it came to moving unseen and silently over unknown terrain and got along extremely well with the Zigûr-khaz, although his skills as a bowman weren't very good. He preferred to sneak up on the enemy with daggers.

Their younger cousin was well-regarded, but Tholi was not combat-tested on this scale as a commander. Yet he had taken to learning on this campaign well, and Thorin was well pleased with him in turn.

Now, as he felt his king's eyes on him, Tholi spoke up, as it was dwarven custom in such meetings that the youngest would first lay out any concerns they had, then remain silent, listening and learning. "I am still concerned about the overall terrain once the other corps go on the attack. Defensively, **we're** in a good position. We've had time, and the berm is being built up very well. Those collapsible shovels that we brought along are working magnificently, and we will have a wide enough wall for the enemy to assume that we mean to make a stand here. But the enemy has slowed significantly today. They might just pull back and escape the trap entirely, or worse yet, spot one of the other corps moving into position and attack them instead."

"It **is** a risk, as is the fact that you haven't allowed your siege trains to deploy," agreed another voice while Thorin was mulling over how to respond. This voice belonged to Matias, the man of Dale who King Bard had put in charge of the eight-hundred-strong force of archers that Dale had agreed to hire out for this campaign.

Matias was a tall, powerfully built man who had fought in the Battle of the Lonely Mountain. He also liked to shave, which had proven both a problem and a source of hilarity among the dwarves. How can you take someone seriously if they continually shaved off what little facial growth they had every day? Apparently, the man had sensitive skin or some such, and couldn't handle the itch of growing a proper beard. Yet seeing him up every morning practicing with his men and then again in the evening had won him some respect. Even if many a dwarf still snickered at him behind his back about it.

"I have no doubt that my men will perform our task well, and we've trained well enough with your men to perform the maneuver you want. I'm simply concerned that we might be getting a little too complacent when it comes to assuming superiority in our scouting in comparison to theirs," Matias continued, exchanging a nod with Tholi.

"I would agree, but recall that our scouts have been leavened by a number of Blacklocks scouts, and they and our own men have spent the past three days retreating in the face of the enemy host. By this point, the enemy knows that the force they are facing has been reluctant to engage in a large-scale battle. They also 'know' because our scouts have cleverly left signs of it, that we were recently joined by more troops."

That had been Nori's idea. Thorin and Tholi's corps had pulled back after their scouts reported a significant enemy host was pushing towards them, letting the other corps move in to flank the Easterling host. Nori had then come up with the idea of laying out tracks to show that the original host they had been chasing had been joined by more men, thus giving the Easterling commander a reason to explain why Thorin and Tholi's troops would suddenly decide to stand and fight.

*Well, that and the fact there's no real place to go for days in any direction,* Thorin admitted. While the army had seen several small hamlets situated around rivers or good farmland, the last of them had been days ago, an empty, abandoned hamlet of twenty houses or so whose people had fled further westward.

"They will have the bit between their teeth and won't be looking at their flanks," he said aloud, then gestured ahead of them to where a wall the size of a dwarf's waist was being quickly erected by the dwarves there. Working on a rotation, that makeshift defensive structure was four hundred yards across, crossing the flat terrain between two hills. "Instead, they will be looking at what they assume to be our best hope to defend ourselves, and that the work isn't finished yet, that we have left our flanks open. They will come up those hills fat and happy, eager to come down on either side of a fortification, encircle us, and then wear us down with superior numbers."

"I'm also concerned about whether or not they will have any spyglasses among their scouts," Matias warned. "With one of them, they will surely be able to see far more of our army than we would like before coming to grips with us."

Saruman interjected at that point, leaning on his staff as he too surveyed the work in progress, a faint smile of a craftsman observing others at their art on his face even as he answered. "That is indeed a concern, considering how many such devices are in Blacklocks hands."

*And my word, wasn't that a surprise. I knew that the Zigûr-khaz were excellent with glass and brass, but to know how much glass the House produces for its own people was astonishing. Not as astounding as those odd saddles and their magical runes, which I still haven't been able to study, blast it all, but still.*

Keeping the bubble of frustration that acknowledging that fact brought to the fore, Saruman continued, his tone thoughtful. "And yet, I do not think that you need to worry about their **scouts** having such. Their commanders might be by this point, but the Easterlings are an incredibly regimented people, as we have seen when examining their dead. They show this in how all their helmets are the same, how they organize themselves, the troopers of the Red Hand as their elite, and numerous other things. Anything they discover, be it food or dwarf-made items, would go back to the communal loot pile, the Tithe, they call it."

Every dwarf there, even Thorin, snarled and spat to one side at that, their gazes turning fierce. All dwarves hated the idea of someone else taking items made by their hands without pay, and worse, the men of Erebor had seen what the enemy left behind when they hit a settlement at this point. While Ani's kinsman had reported this invasion was worse than any

other they had seen, but to view the dead, the destroyed hamlets and worse had been disturbing in the extreme.

Saruman smiled faintly in commiseration, his voice turning both soothing, yet also almost academic in its analysis. "Moreover, I questioned the prisoner the scouts took a few days before they came in contact with the enemy host. I used numerous terms to describe a device that could be used to see distant objects, and I saw no recognition on the prisoner's face despite speaking in his own tongue."

Saruman's voice was one of his special gifts, just as special as his skill with his hands when it came to crafting or learning. The Red Hand warrior that they had captured, the leader of a group of scouts that had gotten just a little too close to the army, had fallen under Saruman's sway within a few hours of simply being in his presence, listening to his voice. After that, communication had taken the better part of the day for Saruman to both learn the Easterling language, which, thankfully, had much in common with other human languages he had learned in the past, and to learn as much as he could about the enemy.

Despite that, Saruman hadn't learned much actionable intelligence. For one thing, the enemy clearly understood the point of information control, as the man had no idea about anything on the tactical or strategic level. For another, when Saruman started to ask questions about the command structure of the Easterlings as a whole, the man had begun to break away from Saruman's control.

Somehow, the demands of the man's religion had given him enough strength to fight off the Istari's words. That had surprised the transformed Maia, and he still wondered a bit about how that had come to be even now. He knew it had to be something based on sacrifice and perhaps a Nazgûl's touch in some fashion, but how was in question.

*Admittedly, I could have done more, but Thorin has proven remarkably difficult to influence as it is, and I do not wish to use the full power of my voice in front of him or any dwarf just yet, not until we are in formal discussion about getting access to those magnificent runes of Potter and their own make,* Saruman reflected internally, even as he said aloud, "However, the Easterlings are also human. They have had several days to set in their minds that this army is retreating from them, unwilling or unable to give battle, and that it is far smaller than it actually is. Even if the enemy commander receives reports to the contrary, the sight of this wall, the frenzied activity upon it, will still entice the Easterlings forward. It is a good plan."

Thorin acknowledged Saruman's words with a nod, then looked over at Tholi and Matias to see if they had any other points to raise. They didn't, and the group got down to deciding which unit would go where in the upcoming battle.

As they did, Saruman turned away, shifting forward to peer into the distance as if trying to see the enemy, while his mind was elsewhere. Because up to this point, this journey had been a personal failure. Oh, to be sure, making inroads with Thorin and his kingdom was a good thing, and being here certainly helped his standing with the dwarven Houses as a whole, but his real reason for being here was to learn as much as he could about Potter's runic arrays, his abilities. With Harry not here, the second objective was stymied, but the dwarves were proving remarkably recalcitrant. The runes were themselves embedded into metal plates built into the metal saddles, so Saruman couldn't simply examine them. And not a single dwarf would even talk about them without, as Thorin had laughingly put it, 'a contract of equivalent exchange'. Saruman had laughed it off at the time, but still, it frustrated him.

*Still, patience. While I haven't learned anything about the dwarven runes or Potter's magic, I have learned a lot about the Easterlings and the dwarves in general. I also know Thorin is personally carrying some other rune-based surprises for use in emergencies. I will just have to wait for an opportunity to convince him to share. Once he calls me a friend, as he does Potter, I will hopefully be able to use my voice to manipulate him further. Although I will have to be careful of the Arkenstone. Its influence on Thorin is something I have no way of anticipating,* Saruman thought grimly.

It was pushing midafternoon by the time the enemy came within sight of the wall in the form of a forward element of barely two hundred horsemen. They wheeled their mounts back out of sight over the horizon through the semi-rocky hills that made up a part of this terrain, and not an hour later by the turn of the clock, the enemy army came into view.

Numbering some eight thousand, the Easterling force was made of mostly light infantry with a leavening of heavy infantry here and there, presumably from richer-than-normal clans whose troops had been used to make up this host. There were a lot of swords and axes out there, while the heavy infantry, to a man, wielded the strange, four-pointed maces.

Among the light infantry, their armor was a mixed bag: some had only leather cuirasses or gambesons, while others had scale mail, almost up to the level of lamellar armor on the heavy infantry. Yet as Saruman had said, every Easterling in that army wore the same heavy helmet, a design made to hide their faces and heads from the world just as much as protect their heads.

There were also a few long spears, but Thorin could only see a few scattered handfuls of archers. Moreover, as the scouts under Nori had reported, those archers were not organized into their own units. *That is the only real oversight in terms of logistics and training we've seen from the Easterlings so far.*

The controlled, organized manner in which they shifted from a marching column into blocks prior to the attack showed Thorin again that the Easterlings, for all their savagery, were indeed an incredibly disciplined force. *Well, so is ours. We will see which of our zabâd is tougher soon, and I know which I will wager on.*

Within moments, the enemy army had spread out. They assumed a front of around half a mile, encompassing both the hills to either side of the apparently makeshift defensive fortification that the dwarves had thrown up. The heavier infantry among them were pressed forward into the center opposite the wall, while the two hundred cavalry circled around at the back of the enemy army, providing a ready force to exploit any gap. The enemy stiffened their lines on either flank, with the center a bit weaker in numbers but heavier in armor.

Thorin observed all this through his spyglass, a master-crafted work from Ami's family, from where he stood on the defensive step behind the berm his folk had made. A faint smile appeared on his face as he pulled it away, looking over at Dwalin. "They've taken the bait. Send out the runners."

Dwalin grunted and signaled to two younger dwarves nearby, who raced off. They would head back and away from the battle to grab a pair of ponies, whereupon they would circle out wide in either direction to take word to the two other corps still in the area.

Communication like that had been an aspect of the army that Thorin had to work **hard** to get right, and it still wasn't as good as he could've hoped. He had hopes that eventually the birds of Erebor, the thrushes and shrikes which made their home on the mountain, could be used to carry messages, but that would take another few decades of training and effort with the birds themselves, as well as his own commanders. Not all of his folk had the touch with the birds to understand the language of birds as Thorin and those of his line could.

"Here they come, boys," he nearly crooned, keeping his words in Common because there were humans within hearing range, specifically a group of fifty archers hidden in a ditch behind the front line. That had been a minor annoyance since the campaign had begun, as it kept them from using Baraz-felakuz (Sharing of Will) to push their pace, but it hadn't been necessary either. Now, those archers were going to prove their worth in Easterling dead.

"Here they come, fat and happy. Let them come close, almost to our before releasing our bolts. Let them step deeper into the trap, and then our fists will close upon them. They have gotten used to fighting our Blacklocks cousins. They will find us a very different beast. By the end of the day, I don't want a single one of this particular band of plundering scum to escape!"

The army answered their King's words with a growl, and had the enemy come within range enough to hear the timbre of that sound, they might well have questioned some of the assumptions they had made coming into this battle. As it was, they didn't. Not ten minutes later,

they came within range enough to pick up the pace, charging forwards as their archers released arrows at the dwarven defensive line. There were few of those arrows, and they clanged harmlessly off the dwarven chain mail or helmet at that range.

Every dwarven warrior within Thorin's army was armed according to their own personal preferences; he had yet to convince his folk of the need for that, even if he had forced them to concede that some tactics demanded different weapons or even shields. But they were armored uniformly.

First was the heavy helmet. Simple in design, these had a thick underpadding to protect the head from any blow, as well as the face and neck. Chain mail, made in such intricate finery that one couldn't put a needle through it, let alone a blade. It was made of the finest metal that Erebor could produce and covered the dwarves from their shoulders on down to their ankles.

Coupled with a heavy gambeson underneath to help against impact and a chest plate to guard their chests even more, such was the armor of the Sigin-tarâg that they didn't actually need shields, allowing many to wield double-handed war hammers and axes. In the case of Thorin's own bodyguard, Dwalin wielded Grasper and Keeper, while most used sword and shield like Thorin himself. Or, in the case of Dwalin, a cudgel because he lacked the skill to use a sword properly and preferred to just hit something as hard as possible.

When the Easterlings charged, they were met by the crossbow bolts of the army of Erebor. Rukhs-fabar (Stiffbeard) and Sigin-tarâg designed those crossbows; they were ingeniously made with various gears to increase their power. There were only two hundred and thirty with each corps, such was their expense, and Thorin watched avidly as they fired in volley for the first time in this war.

A \*THWUNG\* noise filled the air as all two-hundred and twenty crossbows fired as one, slamming into and through several of the heavy infantry. Armor or shield, it mattered not, as most of those bolts penetrated entirely through a shield and deep into armor and the body underneath. Hundreds of men went down, forcing their fellows to charge over their bodies.

At a bellow from Dwalin, that line of dwarven warriors fell back, and the next, including the honor guard, hopped up onto the battle step.

Axes, swords and hammers lashed out and downwards into the humans as they crashed into the wall, hacking and thrusting at the dwarves. Yet the berm and the fighting step removed the Easterlings' height advantage, and Orcrist stabbed deep into and through a man's lamellar armor at the shoulder.

Of course, this attack wasn't supposed to do much but keep the dwarves' attention on the front of the enemy host. Instead, it was the flanks that were supposed to truly do the killing.

Soon after the center of the enemy army slammed home, the wings moved, coming up and over the two hills to either side of the dwarven line.

However, that plan ended on the tips of Dale-made arrows as the enemy army crested that hill. One moment they were roaring and charging up and over the top of the hills, then they were dying.

Hidden on the opposite slope from the enemy, Matias and his second-in-command had split their part of the army. Four hundred and twenty-five men were hidden on each hill, and now fired up into the front line of the oncoming enemy.

Fired, then fired again, and then again. A trained archer of Dale could have an arrow in the air and another following it before the first one struck, and this they proved now, laying down a withering hail of fire as the enemy came down from on top of the hill.

Dale longbows were what, back on Earth, Harry would have likened to Welsh or English longbows. A man of Dale had to be able to pull and fire a bow, as tall as six feet and with a draw of a hundred and twenty pounds, for at least an hour before they could be accepted among the growing Dale army. The arrows from those bows punched through any kind of Easterling armor, even their helmets, and men died in droves, only for more to then stumble over their dead.

Still, alone, those archers would not have been able to break the enemy flanks. But they weren't supposed to. They were instead supposed to break the front lines of that host, and this they did.

Now, the line of men shifted to open up lanes, allowing the dwarves on the flanks to perform a charge uphill. The dwarves moved through those lanes, reformed and then charged, hammering into the already reeling enemy with as much momentum as their legs could give them.

Thorin had coined this move the Reverse Slope Charge, putting his trust in his people's endurance to be able to run uphill and still be in fighting shape despite their heavy armor. Now Tholi led his corps from the front on one side, while Noli, the chief logistics officer of the army, led the rest of Thorin's corps on the other. They charged up the hill with a roar of "Baruk Khazâd! Khazâd ai-mênu!" and crashed into the already fractured lines of the Easterlings, pushing hard up and into them. Sheer momentum and weight allowed them to push the Easterlings back up over the hill and then down the other side, heavy axes and hammers rising and falling, slaying and sending an Easterling backward with every strike.

In the distance, the enemy commander must've stayed well back from the battle, for now he began to respond. A series of horn calls, loud yet somehow oddly fluting at the same

time, sounded out over the battlefield, and Thorin grunted as he slew another Easterling. “I wonder what kind of beast created that horn?”

“I’ll be sure to check when we kill the dung licker using it,” Dwalin bellowed a laugh as Keeper sliced into the head of an Easterling. Grasper slammed into the side of another, crushing lamellar armor and ribs.

Whatever beast the horn came from, there was no doubt as to the nature of the order being given. The enemy army slowly started to retreat, trying to reform on the flanks. Those units that had yet to press upwards onto the hills fell back in good order, even opening up lanes for their fellows to retreat through as the dwarven flanks pressed on down the hill.

It was clear to Saruman, who was well behind the battle and watching it through his spyglass, that the enemy was trying to form its own defensive formation. Then, the last portions of the trap struck.

Even as the enemy reformed, even as Dori and Noli called their own folk to halt and dress their lines, from over hills to either side and slightly behind the enemy army came two more of Thorin’s corps. The fifth was elsewhere, providing a backstop in case another enemy army was out there, circling south and wide. Nor was it the only unit among Thorin’s force that had done so.

From the back, charging into battle along the more level terrain directly along the route the enemy army had taken came the boar riders from the Iron Hills, Dain’s contribution to Thorin’s army. Five hundred strong, Saruman had to shake his head at the sight of them. *The idea of a dwarf riding a boar should be comical, but that is only if you are unaware of how boars differ from pigs, how big they can be, or see something like this.*

A dwarf named Durok led them. He was a familial relation to Thorin, from Dain’s brother on his wife’s side. Unlike Lea Frosteyes, Dain’s wife, who was named for the whiteness of her eyes and the fact that she had been born one of the coldest winters in dwarven memory, Durok was outspoken, gregarious, and seemingly larger-than-life, just like his brother-in-law. He was also a hard commander, and Thorin smiled as he heard the horns of the boar riders, then the higher horn calls of the other two corps over the tumult of the battle in front of him.

Now, even the heavy infantry of the Easterling host with their Rad armor and Blood Hand heraldry recoiled, shifting backward. They meant to fall back into the rest of their enemy, but Thorin wasn’t about to let that happen. “Over and at them!” He roared, suiting action to his words as he leapt up over the defensive berm, landing on the other side adroitly. He charged forward a few steps to remain in contact with the enemy, taking a blow on his shield as his blade hacked into another Easterling.

Behind him, Dwalin and the rest of his personal guard followed suit instantly, bellowing war cries as the rest of the army followed. This was further aided by the fifty archers from Dale directly behind the berm. They charged out of their hiding places and fired over the heads of the dwarves.

What little cohesion the heavy infantry had was lost at that point, and the dwarves pressed them hard back and into the enemy's reserves.

Trapped between the anvil of the two corps under Thorin and now threatened by the three hammers coming in at them from all sides, the Easterlings pulled back, tried to reform, tried to create their own defensive circle. However, before they could, the boar riders crashed into their cavalry, pushing them into the back of the infantry force. The two sides of the trap closed in just as Tholi and Dori's troops hit, and any kind of cohesion among the Easterlings started to give way.

Men fought other men, trying to push out and away from the trap, only to run into dwarves at every point. Their superior numbers mattered not at all any longer, and arrows continued to hammer into them as the men of Dale moved up to the heights of the two hills, firing down into the horde. "That's the way, boys," Matias shouted, his voice sounding almost calm, even lazy despite the thrum of his bow releasing by his ear, the sounds of battle rising from below. "Keep it up and put them down."

From the other hill, his second in command shouted the same thing, even going so far as to sing a little line from a song that had begun to be popular among the men of Dale's army. "Pick your targets and let them fly. Let's see how many of these bastards we can make die~!"

The dwarves roared and shouted, some of them even starting a dirge of their own, and the Easterlings had nowhere to go, and nothing to do but die.

By the time evening fell, the battle having started in the afternoon, the last of the Easterlings had been slain, although there was a bit of a problem. Thorin had only belatedly recalled that they needed more prisoners to question, but his attempt to capture them failed.

The moment one of them had found himself being hauled into the dwarven lines, he had slit his own throat with a hidden dagger. Two others, who had been knocked unconscious in the battle, instantly bit through their tongues the moment they woke up. A fourth, not marked by the Blood Hand and only having a few ritual scars on him, was the only prisoner they could take.

Alas, the young man didn't know much, even under the gentle questioning of Saruman. They learned a lot more about the enemy's logistics and their diet, as well as a bit about their

clan structure, but nothing more before even those gentle questions pushed the man over the edge, and he bit out his own tongue despite Saruman's efforts to stop him.

Saruman's voice was not like the Imperio Harry would reluctantly use nearly two weeks after this battle occurred. His voice made him seem like a friend, a gentle touch on the mind, a voice that made you listen. Now, Saruman found that religious fervor was, strangely, enough to let the Easterlings break his gentle hold. In contrast, Harry's Imperio simply had Harry force his will upon another, a mental fog that suppressed the target's mind.

Listening to the wizard describe the meals and how the Easterling infantry were fed, Thorin nodded at some of the man's insights as to what it meant for the speed an Easterling army could march. He had come to respect Saruman's mind by this point, although the man's understanding of dwarven propriety left much to be desired. The man was incredibly inquisitive, and while he was willing to share his own in return, he seemed somewhat put off by Thorin having simply laughed at that and asked for a proper contract between them before he would discuss the various runic arrays on the army's ponies. *Which isn't even considering a few of the emergency arrays I have hidden in my pack.*

"Well, if there's no actionable intelligence to be gleaned, that's that. This is still a victory," Thorin said, turning to address his officers. "Now, tell me of the cost. How many dead, how many wounded? How many bolts and arrows have we gone through?"

Moments later, a Zigûr-khaz scout who acted as Nori's second in command could not keep from speaking up. Given the fact that they came from different Houses and the Zigûr-khaz troops weren't actually under Thorin's command, the true relationship was far more fluid than that, yet his shock and dismay were evident. "Only ten dead? Only ten dead? Even if my folk used the same strategy that you did, we would have faced far sterner losses than that!"

Wincing a bit internally, Thorin acknowledged that. The dwarves of House Zigûr-khaz preferred well-made gambesons, metal bracers, and shields rather than heavy armor. Their land simply had little iron, and there was always something more important on the civilian side for it to be used for.

This was not a disparagement of the Zigûr-khaz. They were speedy on foot, far more so than any Sigin-tarâg. They were very, very good skirmishers, and all of them also used small, well-made crossbows they could fire as fast as the men of Dale. Their work in alchemy and glass had also produced bizarre but deadly siege weaponry, and their map-making skills were incredible.

But in a pitched battle? Much of their skills would be wasted, whereas the men of Erebor were far more suited to that kind of brutal clash.

Still, Thorin knew his fellow dwarves well enough to downplay that fact, shaking his head. "I don't think you put enough emphasis on those tactics, Agni. The Easterlings are indeed fierce fighters, but caught like this, with the back of their lines, the place that should have been the final bulwark of any organization shattered by the boar riders, and caught in a trap, they couldn't use their numbers against us. Then it came down to individual warriors against our own."

"And your better equipment," Agni retorted, getting to the heart of the matter with a bluntness any dwarf could appreciate, trying hard not to sound as if he was jealous, which he very much was. "Your ability to use longer ranged weapons in close combat was also quite telling. I hadn't realized it would be."

"It was," Thorin acknowledged, again trying hard not to prick the man's pride in his house. There were many things the dwarves of House Zigûr-khaz did very well, but metallurgy was and had always been a Sigin-tarâg House obsession, and even then, Erebor produced some of the finest steel that any living dwarf had ever seen in quantity. Only Khazad-dûm, with its minds of mithril, coke and other ores, had ever made finer. *Well, and the elves, given Orcrist. But even the elves have never had armor as good as mithril.*

Because of that, they had indeed gone through that entire battle with only ten of Thorin's dwarves dying for thousands of Easterlings. There were many bruises, even a few broken bones. Worse, a few eyes that had been lost to desperate Easterling daggers. Yet that was scant expense after a battle like this.

*And it is good to know that those strange maces of theirs cannot penetrate our chain mail very well. The points are not anywhere near fine enough, and their strength nowhere near enough either,* Thorin thought complacently. His own armor had taken several hits from those maces, and while his arms had bruises on them, especially his shoulder where his chest plate ended, that was all.

Turning, Thorin looked over at the two corps commanders who taken part in this battle. "What of your own men?"

Khounuk was an older dwarf, as was Foldorin, the only corps commander who had not taken part in this battle, though not as experienced or old as that worthy. Khounuk had served in the war against the orcs in the Misty Mountains and been among the warriors with Dain to come to their kinfolk's aid during the Battle of the Lonely Mountain. He didn't have as good a head for terrain as Thorin would like, but he was a firm believer in logistics and had shown a marked enthusiasm for the scorpions that made up the army's siege train.

They hadn't used those in this battle, hence why Khounuk was looking a little grumpy even as he bowed to his king. "Four dead among my own corps, my king. One was just damn

unlucky, lost his footing, and a dagger caught him through his beard and over his gorget. Worse luck, that was Saltiz, my second-in-command. I'll need to find someone to replace him."

"Do so, but if you don't find someone up to the task, I'll canvas my corps and Tholi's for someone to transfer. Mik?"

Mik was a younger dwarf, a decade or two younger than Thorin himself. He was a former scout who preferred to let his axe do the talking, but was just as good at leading as the other Nâlbarâk Râdûn despite his personally taciturn nature. "Only two dead among my folk. Lots of bruises and broken bones, but they'll heal. More importantly, our scouts found one of the supply catches the Blacklocks told us was in the area."

He nodded to the group of Zigûr-khaz representatives, turning the nod into a full-on bow. "With your permission, good dwarves, I'll send some men back to it to start digging it up."

Those supply catches had come as a distinct surprise to Thorin when he entered Zigûr-khaz territory. He had hoped to live off the land, but had envisioned local forces coming out from their holds or scattered hamlets that had yet to be ravaged to meet him with food and provisions, as well as joining him for significant battles.

However, that had not been the case so far. First, there weren't very many large-scale forces outside the three holds of Red Rock, Parn's Tower, and Green Spike. Second, Thorin had badly underestimated how far the Easterlings had invaded. They had pushed smaller raiding forces, like the one he had just crushed, and smaller ones **well** past House Zigûr-khaz's three holds, despoiling the lands further westward rather than concentrating on besieging one or all of those holds.

This had obviously smashed several of those hamlets and the farms around them. A few on Thorin's route had been intact, but not many over the past four days. Worse, his scouts hadn't found any intact ranging ahead and to the sides of the army.

However, his wife's house had learned from the last war against the Easterlings. Most of those hamlets had been empty of dwarves by the time the Easterlings hit them, fleeing to Red Rock, Green Spike or further westward.

Parn's Tower, the northern and easternmost of the holds, was the only hold currently being besieged, as far as Thorin knew. Moreover, the House had, acting with a unanimity that Thorin could only nod respectfully at, created hidden, buried caches of sealed foodstuffs and other supplies. In particular, arrows, crossbow bolts and throwing hatchets. Everything their people would need to fight a guerrilla war against invaders.

The throwing hatchets weren't exactly useful for most of Thorin's forces... and only half of the reason for that was the poor quality of the metal being used. Bronze, in this case. But the

crossbow bolts were very useful, as every house used the same size bolt for its handheld crossbow. As for the food, that would vastly help Thorin's logistics..

"Get in touch with your siege trains. Other than any wounded who can't march, transfer the ponies to Mik's command. We will go through the food in that cache to fully replace our own. We will then proceed on the assumption that we can find similar caches when needed. There's no need to slow down to forage." He turned to Agni. "If you could send some of your own with Mik's troops, I will send Noli along as my assayer to write up formal contracts for the goods taken to reimburse the proper parties after this war is over."

The term Assayer wasn't wholly accurate, but with Saruman there, Thorin wasn't going to use the dwarven term. But nor was he going to balk at creating a proper contract for the material used. If he didn't offer, the Zigûr-khaz were in a bad enough way right now to not make waves, but later, there would be recriminations and bad feelings. Something Thorin didn't want with his wife's folk.

When all the Zigûr-khaz dwarves nodded, tugging at their black, curly beards in respect, Mik nodded as well, before looking at Thorin, his voice cold. "Also, don't look to my corps to take prisoners any longer."

Thorin blinked at that, one eyebrow rising, and Mik gestured over his shoulder to where his force had marched in a curve to the north and east. "We found not one but four hamlets out there, all smashed. Unlike the others we've seen, their folk all stayed. Dead to a man, dead to a... a dam." He hesitated on that word, but spat it out, and all the dwarves snarled as he went on. "Worse, it's obvious that whoever did the deed took their time with a few of them."

There were further growls of anger and oaths of rage at that, while Agni and the other locals spoke oaths of vengeance in Khuzdul, forgetting for a moment that Saruman was there.

Thorin allowed his people a few moments to rage before holding up her hand and gesturing another young dwarf who had been hovering nearby forward. "I understand. Don't worry, my honor guard can handle taking any prisoners from now on." *I hope.* "Matias, unless you have something to add, I think it's time for us to listen to Foldorin's messenger."

That worthy had arrived mid-battle and charged into the fight. The youngster was looking a little sheepish now, as he should have remained behind, waiting to speak to Thorin.

"I'd like to send some men to examine this supply cache of yours, see if we'll be able to repurpose the arrows that you short folk use for our bows, although it's doubtful. Still, even the arrowheads will help our own supply. We'll probably only be able to recover one out of every ten arrows that we fired in this battle in condition to be reused, and that goes for the

arrowheads too. Of course. We'll also make an accounting of what we take, and you can take it out of our pay for this war, King Oakenshield."

Thorin nodded in agreement, while most of the Ereborans chuckled at Matias's comment. In contrast, the Zigûr-khaz scowled a bit, barely mollified by the words about making an accounting of what the Men took. They were not used to working with humans at all, and it showed in their reactions to comments like that.

"Also, make certain you remove any marker or indication of what was there. Such supplies would be almost as useful for the Easterlings as for us, and we don't want them to know anything about them." With that final order, Thorin finally turned to the waiting messenger.

The far younger dwarf, around Ori's age when he had died in the battle of the Lonely Mountain, bore the mark of Foldorin's corps. This was a silver lacquered slash on his chainmail that set him aside from similar messengers from the other corps, gold for Thorin's, and other colors for the rest. His chain mail was further specially crafted to only fall to just above his thigh, letting the dwarf who wore it run as best he could or travel by pony easily.

"Now for you, my young man. What does Foldorin have to tell us?"

"King Oakenshield, on your orders, Foldorin followed his own nose for time after breaking off from the rest of the host once this plan was devised. As such, he ventured further southward than was planned for, following a stream. There, he met up with a mixed host of Zigûr-khaz, around a thousand five hundred by our estimate. Most were farmer folk who had fled westward, but the core of it was made of warriors from Red Rock and Parn's Tower."

northern and easternmost of the three still-existing holds of House Zigûr-khaz Parn's Tower was a thin tower of natural stone, barely a fifth of the Lonely Mountain's width, jagged in shape and only about twenty stories tall, built up around the bottom as with most mountains. It was a mountain hold, which the Zigûr-khaz dwarves had spent centuries making their own.

Thorin had never visited it, but had heard tales of it, and knew that while it could be taken by a swift assault if the locals were unwary, once warned, only a siege would be able to break it. Like with any dwarven hold, a siege like that would be costly in the extreme in terms of time and lives. An equation that the Zigûr-khaz made even worse with their alchemical knowledge and their siege weapons.

From the reports he'd gotten before starting his march from Erebor, the Easterlings had set one of their armies there, encircling the mountain hold. They had then sent most of their forces deeper into Zigûr-khaz land. Those had then broken up into small, for the Easterlings,

armies of seven thousand or less, with the objective of burning and despoiling as much of the land as they could.

Of course, there were other fortifications, such as the hamlets they had seen before this. Such midsize communities weren't really a thing in Ereboran, Dale or Iron Hills territory. For the Iron Hills, that was a deliberate order of the last few kings, while there was no need for such from a population standpoint for Dale or Erebor.

In dwarven terms, these hamlets weren't anything to brag about, but they were well made; stern stone outer walls, stone houses, and all designed with an eye to defense, matching the small keeps or forts of Men. Stonework like that was, along with engineering, something that all Dwarven Houses were able to do to a certain degree, and those hamlets showed it, making them toothsome targets for all their small size, made worse by the fact that the Zigûr-khaz, unlike any other House, specialized in archery and crossbowmen, matching it to their skill with glass. One of the hamlets Thorin had seen even had the wrecked remains of a catapult in its central square.

Many of the scouts who had joined Thorin's army had their own spyglass. Moreover, they could set it into their crossbow mounting, along with something they called a rangefinder, which allowed them to fire at distances far more accurately than any of his own folk could.

No, any mountain hold or fastness of the dwarves would make any army bleed to take them, so long as they were properly manned.

*Annie's words on that score about the last war and what had happened to her hold was enough to turn copper green when we spoke about it, Thorin reflected now, trying hard to keep a smile off his face at the thought of his wife. Mistakes, needless to say, were made back then. Thankfully, all of the Zigûr-khaz kings seem to have learned from their mistakes.*

"The host came together to deal with several large bands of Easterlings, but eventually they were faced with a larger host than they had prepared for and were forced to retreat. We estimate this host to have been joined by still others since, and when I left it counted as many as twelve thousand, possibly as many as fifteen thousand. Foldorin says to report that he will be retreating straight west with that host within eyesight of the river that the locals call..." The dwarf hesitated, eyes flicking to Saruman, before going on, translating the name to common. "Shallow River of Death?"

While not an exact translation, Thorin nodded and pulled out one of the maps that the Zigûr-khaz plan had supplied him. It was magnificent that map, a match to the ones Thorin had commissioned for his own territory, and complete, whereas that project was still ongoing, more than a decade after it had begun.

He quickly found the river Azunbarâl sâl akhâl (Shallow River of Deadly Water), gesturing the youth over to look over his shoulder at it to make sure, then asked some questions about specific areas of the terrain to the Zigûr-khaz there, setting the map on the ground to look at. Like the battle here, that territory was made up of scattered, small hills of grass with strange outcroppings of rock poking up in places, mostly quartz or quartz derivatives. There were a few scattered copses of trees, but mainly around the rivers.

There weren't any small hamlets for a while along the river, which was indeed shallow. Furthermore, the water there was tainted by some kind of algae or other substance that made it dangerous to drink, grainy and ill-tasting, to the point of causing vomiting and worse if more than a few sips passed the lips of the unwary. The river wound from the east into the west, and then downwards south, where it probably eventually merged with larger rivers well out of Zigûr-khaz territory.

Going the other way, eastward towards its source, the river came close to Red Rock, merging with a few others there, but did not feed into the large lake that was the site of Ani's home. Thorin had seen that lake in the past, and perhaps even this river, when he had visited Red Rock as part of their courtship. But Red Rock was still at least another five days more march in the future. That was a sign of how deeply into Zigûr-khaz territory the small and Thorin hesitated to use those terms for such, had gone.

Quickly, Thorin thought up a plan, then, taking another glance at the map, nodded. "You will be able to find Foldorin's corps again?"

It was almost a statement, but he wanted to be certain. The young dwarf nodded firmly, then gestured over to Agni. "So long as one of the locals comes with me and I can replace my pony?"

"Do it. I will write orders to Foldorin, but I'll spell out what I want now to you as well. He is to be no further westward than here within two days," Thorin ordered, gesturing down to a position on the map. It was another position between two hills, but set closer together, and judging by the key on the map, both hills were a little larger than the ones here. More importantly, though, to their northeast was another larger hill, and when his fingers brushed on that point, he smiled thinly. "Foldorin is to dig in there as if he is willing to do battle against the host chasing him. The rest of our army will join him and set up here. I think he will know what that means."

Young dwarf stared at the map, his own fingers moving across it, before his eyes closed as he memorized the terrain, then nodded sharply. "Yes, my king."

"Go." With that, the youngster was off like a shot, twisting around and leaping away as quick as a dwarf could move. One of the Zigûr-khaz scouts raced after him, Agni and the others

having their own quick conversation to determine who would go. Now, the rest looked at Thorin.

“Once the dead are seen, our army will march,” he said simply. “Hold all plans to make camp, to break out food or go through the dead Easterlings’ equipment. We will eat on the march and push on into the night. Mik, the men you dispatched will need guides to rejoin the rest of the host on the march. See to it.”

There were some grumbles, but not a lot. Normally, after a battle like this, the dwarves would do their best to police the battlefield and deal with their wounded while also burying their dead and making certain that the bodies of the dead Easterlings were burned. While also, yes, taking anything made of metal or of worth from them. The Easterlings' weapons were never that well-made, but they could be smelted down to produce something better. However, time was of the essence. Instead of the whole host, a large majority of the four hundred plus scouts of the Zigûr-khaz that had joined Thorin’s forces would stay behind to see to that work with one of Noli’s men.

Within the hour, the army was on the march once more, with the only complaints coming from the archers of Dale. But even the Men could keep up with this pace, thanks to all of them having brought along two horses each. That had cost Thorin’s treasury a good deal, even more than bringing along the archers themselves, but Thorin was certain it would seem cheap for the price.

Not two days later, Thorin and his command party reached the top of the hill that had so intrigued him on the map. Behind him, a makeshift camp was hastily set up. The boars and horses would rest for a while, while the dwarves were already getting to work on creating a defensive structure here.

Meanwhile, Thorin examined the area, while a middle-aged dwarf named Geb stood at attention next to him. Around them, the eight scorpions of Foldorin’s corps already sat, while elsewhere along the hill, markers were set out to indicate where more such scorpions could be emplaced. “Excellent job, Geb,” he said, shaking his head as he stared out over the distance.

Pulling out his spyglass, he surveyed the area further, smirking evilly. Already, there, he could see the Easterling host coming into view. It was a larger one: two of their cutting-out-type armies merged into one, perhaps? Regardless of the why of it, the force was at least twenty thousand strong, judging by Nori’s report, possibly as many as twenty-five. That was an army fit to crash over Foldorin and the Zigûr-khaz forces despite how well they had fortified up.

However, Foldorin had prepared as best he could for them. They had made heavy, hardened walls, far taller than the makeshift berm that Thorin’s own host had made a few days

ago, made of stone, wood from a nearby forest and earth instead of just earth. On both hills stood hamlets, which anchored his line.

That wall wasn't anything like a permanent fixture, but it would be a huge numbers multiplier. All in all, it looked like the dwarves were indeed willing to give battle here and had chosen a dangerous position to do so.

*Only, it's far more dangerous than the enemy realizes,* Thorin thought, still surveying the area.

"Once the ponies are all unloaded, assign some rider to herd them back and around to come in behind Foldorin's force by several leagues," he ordered. "With them will come an order to use those ponies as the Blacklocks with him sees fit. Hopefully, if this all works according to plan, those troops will be able to shut the door behind this army or pursue them when they break."

"You have such faith in your siege equipment to make up the difference in numbers? Even against dwarves as well armored and armed as your men are, something like twenty thousand or more against less than eight thousand is a steep hill to climb," Saruman observed.

"So is this," Thorin snorted, pointing downwards along the top of the hill towards the enemy. That was not a rolling hill here. No, it was steep, jagged with outcroppings of rock here and there, quartz, sharp and painful. Pointing this out, he went on with a smirk. "My folk will make it more so. Caltrops, tripwires and so forth. And as for our scorpions, aye, I do indeed believe they can do a lot of damage."

He nodded over Agni, who had attached himself to Thorin as a go-between. "For which again we thank our Blacklock allies."

That worthy nodded, his eyes gleaming, as Thorin went on directing his hands down into the area ahead of them. "This is just like on your maps, which are worth a mountain of jewels themselves. With them and the additions your folk and mine have contrived between them to our scorpions, we will smash this entire invasion, and what few survivors we let go back eastward will tell tales of the horrors we inflict upon them."

That won a low growl of agreement from the other dwarves. The Army had passed by several more smashed hamlets, and their scouts had been involved in several small, yet incredibly vicious battles over the past few days to keep the enemy scouts from discovering the movement of the host. Vengeance and ruin were on every dwarf's mind now.

Quickly and efficiently, the dwarves brought up large bits of equipment from where they had been pulled off the backs of ponies. Within minutes, the parts of the first scorpion had been gathered. Within an hour, a defensive berm had been formed and was being enlarged.

Within two hours, three scorpions had been completed, and the archers from Dale were muttering about markers, sending forth their own people along with Zigûr-khaz scouts down into the terrain ahead and all around the position.

Durok came up to Thorin then, pointing with his own forces would be going. “We’ll lead them back here, smash them just at the same time as the ballista start landing.”

“Good. Keep the Easterlings from thinking too much. That is part of the battle: get them too mad to worry about our strength. Yet speaking of other parts of the battle...” Thorin looked over to Nori and Agni. “How have your scouts been doing?”

“I’ve lost seven dead in the last day, but we’ve taken at least a hundred of their own scouts in return. I can’t say that their army is blind, but they don’t know we’re here yet, that much I can guarantee,” Nori answered with a shrug. “Anything more than that is up to Mahal’s favor.”

“Good enough. Noli, make sure every man gets a warm meal in them.” That would go through the last of their supplies, but they had found another cache earlier that day, ready to be used after this battle. “I want the men well fed and rested. I also want work to continue on the scorpions as long as possible.”

“Thorin!” Dwalin suddenly growled. He had taken Thorin’s spyglass and now pointed ahead of them, where he had been peering at the fortifications and the enemy host. “The Easterlings aren’t stopping.”

Thorin frowned at that, moving over to his companion, grabbing his spyglass. A second later, he understood. The Easterlings had indeed barely bothered to stop and dress their lines before advancing to battle. They weren’t going to rest their army prior, nor even scout around the dwarven position.

“Praise Mahal that we arrived so quickly. Else we wouldn’t have been able to set up even as many scorpions as we did,” he mused, before raising his voice into a bellow. “All scorpion crews, start your preparations to fire! Mik, make certain work on the ditches to our flanks is going as speedily as possible, then get back here.”

Looking at Tholi and his other officers, Thorin explained his hastily changed plan. “We won’t fire right away, we’ll wait. Let them smash themselves against the defenses of Foldorin and his Blacklocks allies for a little while. But we can’t let them continue that assault unimpeded for too long. Durok, get back to your riders. You’ll go in first, not during the scorpion assault. Khounuk, pull as many people off creating the berm as we can to help put the final few scorpions together. Matias, get your people to start helping. Nori, Agni, you too. Pull your men back in and get them to work.”

The pace around the prepped area expanded dramatically at that point, and the warriors of Erebor set to with a will on all of their tasks, breaking off slowly in groups of fifty to get a small, cold meal instead of the hearty warm one Thorin had wanted. Work on the defensive berm at the front of the top of the hill, facing towards the enemy, slowed, and work on preparing caltrops and other measures ceased. However, work on the scorpions intensified, and soon, another four were completed.

Meanwhile, Durok and the boar riders set out on a curving loop around the hill and into the distance.

Meanwhile, the enemy started its assault on Foldorin's position. Hundreds of short ladders had been prepared, along with grappling hooks. The scattered Easterling archers fired, while the crossbowmen and archers of the defenders aimed at the front ranks of the enemy horde. Soon, the tumult of battle rose as the first of the Easterlings tried to scale up the wall of their enemy, while other forces started to try and flank them, only to run into more defenses on the lower hills bracketing the central line.

As another scorpion was hastily put together and checked over, a series of horns sounded, tinny with distance, and suddenly, the flank of the enemy army facing them had shifted. Not ten minutes later, Thorin watched as his boar riders crashed into the enemy host. The enemy had prepared for them with long spears and cavalry, only to be smashed aside. The fiery nature of the boars and the greater range of the lances that the boar riders used in their initial charge allowed them to plow through lighter cavalry units or the enemy spears. Lances were dropped at that point, and long-shafted war hammers, maces or axes swung, smashing heads as the boars, their jutting tusks tipped with steel, gored anyone they hit, or crunched down on arms with their powerful jaws.

Still, the boar riders alone wouldn't be able to break a host of that size. The Easterling army simply started to absorb the assault, with more forces being pushed out and around the boar riders by another series of horn calls. So much so that soon, Thorin found himself thumping one fist against his thigh rhythmically, a sight of jitters that he would normally never allow himself. "Come on, come on, Durok, get out of there, don't get bogged down! If you and the rest of the boar riders die, Dain's going to have my head."

Thankfully, as pugnacious as he was, Durok also understood, as the humans would put it, when to fold them. A dwarven horn sounded, and Durok bellowed commands. The boar riders began to pull away, having a hard time of it, with several needing to fight their beasts as well as the enemy to force them to obey, but eventually, the host of boar riders had pulled out and away. They left several of their dead behind them or on the ground still fighting, but the enemy

cavalry had been decimated by their initial charge, and hadn't been able to completely close the lid on their escape.

The enemy commander was no fool. He quickly reformed his host, then sent several columns out towards where the boar riders were already starting to disappear around the hill where the rest of the army was situated. He kept a significant portion of his host, at least half, as a reserve, continuing the fight against Foldorin and the Zigûr-khaz forces lining the distant wall, uncertain whether the boar riders were a real threat to his host, but unwilling to be diverted.

However, that played right into Thorin's hands because that clump of reserve troops was still within scorpion range.

Turning, Thorin examined the scorpion nearest him again, smiling grimly at what he saw there. By this point, another two of them had been set up during Durok's charge, and Thorin knew they were out of time. *Eighteen scorpions might not be even half of our full siege train, that's all we're going to get.* And all of their handlers were turned in his direction, with Geb going so far as to salute, smacking his chain mail-clad chest with a fist. "King Oakenshield, we are ranged and ready!"

"Launch!" Thorin barked, and for the first time in this war, field artillery sang its song of death.

It was a far cry from whatever a modern Earth-type army would call artillery, of course. The range was, but a pittance in comparison and the devastation was even more so. However, on a medieval battlefield like this, they could still have a significant impact. Especially when they were not just firing bolts of steel and wood into the distance. No, the Zigûr-khaz working with the Sigin-tarâg over the years had produced several... well, calling them wonders was a bit off, considering what they were made to do, but it still worked for the moment. Several wonders to load into the hollows of those arrows.

As Thorin watched, the scorpion bolts slammed into the enemy army, releasing their deadly payloads, which came in several varieties. One of them hit a man, skewering him and two others like bugs on a needle before slamming into the ground. Doing so shattered the tiny glass capsule, releasing a gas that instantly made everyone around ill to their stomachs. The gas also lingered for some reason, not dissipating as more men fell to its influence and Thorin's gaze moved on.

The next scorpion he watched hit was not as effective. While it only tore off the arm of one man and killed none, the instant it struck the ground, the large glass container set on top of the scorpion bolt exploded, spreading droplets of acid everywhere. It wasn't the best delivery system, but it still hit several men in the close-packed Easterling force. From here, a quarter of a mile distant, Thorin couldn't make out any screaming over the sounds of the scorpions and

simple distance, but body language still told the tale as the droplets began to burn through armor and skin alike.

Several other scorpion bolts crashed in, and these carried a far deadlier cargo. Inside those bolts was the famous Zigûr-khaz oil. It was black as tar, incredibly flammable, and burned both hot and for a long time once lit. In this case, lit by dwarven runes set into the metal, set to ignite fire like in the famous dwarven lights. The flame thus spread quickly.

Again, Thorin felt the delivery system needed work, but he couldn't argue with the result.

"Yes!" Bellowed one of the Zigûr-khaz scouts nearby. "Burn, burn!"

That was precisely what more than a hundred Easterlings were currently doing. Some of the fires had been put out by wind, impact, and other vagaries, while other glass containers had not shattered as they should have, instead cracking and letting oil leak out rather than bursting. But the majority of the scorpion bolts worked as advertised, with the fires spreading quickly.

"Gog, aim further away," Thorin ordered, having started to treat Foldorin's siege artillery officer as the leader of the scorpion teams. "Give the oil-laden bolts more time for the runes to activate." Those ruins activated in the sunlight, a trick the dwarven runemasters had come up with, but which could only work for arrays based on the dwarven school of runes. "In the future, we need to come up with a better way to spread the flammable oil and so forth."

As it was, looking at the totality of the damage the scorpions were doing to the distant army, the gas seemed to be the one doing the most overall damage. Yes, it wasn't killing anyone, but it was incapacitating more Easterlings than the other varieties were killing.

"Fascinating," Saruman murmured, watching as the scorpion bolts fired and again and again. The crews were highly trained and could insert new bolts into position even as the first bolt was still in the air. They couldn't do it quite as quickly as an archer, of course, and the winching system was somewhat slow in comparison to those found on handheld crossbows, but the scorpions, for all that they were each the size of a cart from front to back, were each master-crafted items, and it showed how well the disparate gears and levers worked. "What is that strange gas? It seems to linger quite heavily over the battlefield down there."

"For that, you would have to ask one of the Blacklocks to work with it," Thorin answered absentmindedly, still staring through his spyglass at the distant battle. "Gog, do you think maybe you could bounce some of your acid-loaded shots off the ground, make the scorpion bolts skip through their army? The first impact should break the glass, and the rest of the journey will spread the acid."

“Like a stone skipping over water?” Gog murmured. “I can have some of the crews try, my Lord.”

“Do so.”

A few of the scorpions replied, but the ground out there was a little too soft for the bouncing series of impacts that Thorin had hoped for. The scorpions barely bounced once before losing much of their momentum. Mind you, they still had enough momentum to go through any Easterling unlucky enough to be in their path, but he had hoped for more. The acid, though, did spread out more in that manner. “I think in the future, some means of releasing the acid in a cloud before the scorpion actually hits would be better.”

“That’s what we do with our ballistae,” a nearby Zigûr-khaz agreed. “We launch tied together groups of small bulbs that shattered and break against one another midair, spreading the acid or smog out. Burning pitch is just the same as here, of course.”

The scorpions continued to fire, and Saruman went over to several of the scorpion bolts, tapping them with the end of his staff as he whispered a few words of power. As he did, he spoke with the Zigûr-khaz in the area, asking them questions about the oil they were using and the gaseous substance.

Letting the Istari to his own devices, Thorin watched the enemy army, frowning pensively. Once more, the organization and training of the Easterlings were evident in their quick response. Already, he could see that the large formations of Easterlings waiting to charge forwards to engage Foldorin’s force were splitting up into smaller targets. The areas on fire and with the strange gas hovering over the battlefield were quickly avoided, and several dozen of the enemies were pushed out towards where the scorpions were coming from.

From here, he couldn’t make out enough details to see what they were doing, but as he watched, several of the scorpions were launched towards the Easterling host. By the time one of them hit, the target formation had already shifted and raced away from its impact point. Others hadn’t been so lucky, but it was now clear what the Easterlings were up to. “Spotters then, smart.”

The next second, Thorin blinked as several of the scorpion bolts Saruman had touched hit. Two of them smashed into the ground with greater force, instantly erupting into fire and spreading the oil over a far wider area than before. Several of the other bolts, the ones loaded with acid, exploded in midair, spreading the acid and bits of bolt like shrapnel raining down on the enemy army.

“Adding force to an object is somewhat easy, although I have never used it on so many objects at once before,” Saruman grunted, rejoining Thorin for a moment, looking as if he had exerted himself in some fashion. “I do hope I contributed somewhat, however.”

“You definitely did that, but...” Thorin continued to watch the spyglass, then held it out so that Saruman could take a turn. “The enemy commander is far too smart for my liking.”

Already, the Easterling army's impetus had changed. Instead of charging forward towards Foldorin's force, the enemy kept several of its units, the ones already in action, to remain where they were, attacking the defensive position of the dwarves there. The rest had spread out, and the majority of the enemy host was now charging towards the hill where the scorpions were firing.

Several of those units soon reached the foot of the hill and began their ascent.

“Matias, archers to the front. Infantry to your positions,” Thorin bellowed, while Saruman looked through his spyglass at the enemy army.

“The Easterlings are spreading out as well, Thorin, they might be coming at our flanks and rear soon,” Saruman warned, knowing full well that Thorin had already seen that, even as he was unable to tear his eyes away from the where the scorpion bolts were still ravaging the enemy army. It was too large for them all to shift position quickly, and the large bolts were still doing a lot of damage. *Yes indeed, I must talk to the Blacklocks further. My research into Harry Potter's runes might have been stymied along with my investigation of the dwarven equivalent, yet still, there is much to be learned here. That gas in particular, that could be a deadly weapon, if it could be enhanced further...*

While Saruman was contemplating that, Thorin had already cut orders to his Nâlbarâk Râdûn, who were each in command of a portion of the defensive line, which had been designed was almost like a curve around the back and sides of the hill. They hadn't had much time to build ditches or berms before needing to attack the enemy host, but Thorin's dwarves had been busy despite that. He wasn't worried about the enemy's attempts to encircle his host.

*So long as they keep on trying to attack straight up the hill with the majority of their numbers anyway,* Thorin acknowledged. *Which they won't if the commander over there is as smart as he appears to be. Still, breaking our line will not be easy.*

The portion of the hill facing the enemy was steeper than the 'back' of it. It was also rockier, with crystal and rock formations here and there. Better, Nori's troops had laid down tripwires and other traps, which further hindered the attempts of the Easterlings to get up the hill quickly. Matias is archers were also having a field day, firing straight down into the slowly moving Easterling host beneath them.

“Dwalin, share my spyglass with Saruman. I want the pair of you to be watching out for any sign that their cavalry is reforming. They don’t have many of those horses, at least not from what I saw at first. But if they do reform, I’ll need to know where they’re going to hit us.”

His honor guard commander grunted, shifting over to Saruman for a moment while Thorin continued to study the battle going on directly in front of them. Soon, though, he saw that the lack of preparation-time had hindered the ability of the dwarves to hold the enemy host at the bottom of the hill. Despite the ongoing casualties the archers were dealing, they were now past the traps and were charging upward faster.

“Gog, divert to store scorpions to fire directly down the hill,” Thorin ordered. “Matias, keep up your fire, but prepare to pull back off the fighting step on my command. Dwarves forward!”

That simple order had the majority of his own corps moving out from where they had been standing in line waiting behind the scorpions. Several of them moved over to help shift the scorpions further forward. The team removed some hocks and used another winch set on the side of the scorpion to depress their aim, allowing the scorpions to point down the hill. The rest of the infantry formed up into a line waiting to take the position at the berm where the archers were still firing down at their enemies.

The scorpions fired again, and again, firing into the distance at any single large formation the various teams could see. The enemy spotters were doing an okay job of calling out incoming shots, yet the enemy was still bleeding out from those strikes. Now, the two that had been pushed forward to fire down the hill also fired, smashing into the Easterlings even as they tried to keep moving upwards. Burning oil and acid exploded everywhere, causing shrieks and howls of agony from the Easterlings. As injured to pain as they were, this was altogether different from their rituals or the pain of normal combat.

The sound of the injured and dying rose, drowning out the rest of the battle, which, heretofore, had not been altogether loud to Thorin’s ears, given the distance to where the main enemy host had been originally. Yet he did not grimace, did not show any kind of guilt or hesitation. These Easterlings had come into dwarven lands and had despoiled, burned and destroyed anything they could, slain men and women alike. That last in particular was something no dwarf would ever forgive. There would be no mercy in the heart of any dwarf for such people, only a desire to kill them in as efficient and inexpensive a manner as possible.

On the other hand, Matias and his archers paused for a few seconds, staring down at the destruction the two scorpion shots had wrought before Matias bellowed at them to keep firing. They did so and were soon back to launching arrows at their usual speed.

After launching five more arrows, Matias looked over to Thorin. "They're almost at the top of the hill."

"Pull your men back and work with Saruman. If you see the enemy cavalry reforming, move to wherever they're going to strike our host." Thorin grabbed his helmet from the ground, slamming it onto his head and marching forward with Dwalin, Dori and the rest of his honor guard moving with him. "Dwarves to the fore. Come now, my warriors, it is our time to wet our blades!"

Thorin's words evoked a roar from the dwarves around him as they shifted forward, moving around the tall folk who had proven themselves in two battles now to be worth their price. Back slaps and nods were exchanged between the two forces, and then the dwarves of Erebor were stepping up onto the fighting step while the archers shifted to put themselves behind the line of scorpions. From there, they lobbed arrows over the heads of the dwarves and into the upcoming host of Easterlings, their fire now coordinated into volleys rather than aimed. Not that this slowed their rate of fire any, and soon they were all onto their third quiver of the battle.

For his part, Thorin hoped that Saruman or one of the scorpion teams would still keep an eye on the enemy cavalry force, which he was still concerned about. But a second after he reached the fighting step, Thorin lost any ability to respond. The first of the Easterlings reached the line, dying instantly to Dwalin's axe, which embedded itself in the man's chest even as he tried to bring up his sword, losing that hand to a strike from another dwarf. The next died when two dwarven hammers crushed his chest.

At first, the enemy only came up in dribs and drabs thanks to the still-firing scorpions. But eventually, there were too many of them in front of the dwarven line, and the two scorpions were pulled back and away from the berm, replaced by more dwarves to complete the defensive formation. At that point, the enemy organized, possibly under the command of some young officer near the front, held back until they could press forward as one, slamming into the dwarven line.

Thorin had to nod at that even as the enemy hit his own portion of the line. That had been a good move on someone's part, and Thorin could respect initiative like that even in an enemy.

The next second, his first strike slammed into and through a blood hands armor, practically cutting him in half, as the Arkenstone began to glow unseen by any, giving Thorin energy and power. "Zâramâkh ai-mên Khazâd ai-Durin. Zirak khazâd rukhâz (We are the descendents of Durin. The axes of the dwarves stand strong)!"

A roar went up, answered by a roar from the Easterlings, one which only Saruman could follow. “//Death to the stumpy’s! For the true Lord beyond and his servant here on Middle Earth!//”

As Saruman reflected on how faith in Morgoth had twisted the Easterlings, elsewhere, the enemy had indeed begun to encircle the hill where the scorpions were. By this point, their main host had entirely shifted away from Foldorin’s position. They still retained a large screening force there, engaging the dwarves of Foldorin’s forces, yet the rest had streamed out.

Slowly over the course of several hours, they created a thick crescent shape around the hill, pressing in despite the best efforts of Durok and his boar riders.

Durok had sent his force into that host several times after the first charge. Each time, they caused some carnage but were forced to retreat and break off when the enemy simply absorbed their charges, trying to bog them down in place and overwhelm them with numbers.

*And even there, the Easterlings are not having very much luck, Saruman reflected ruefully. Whoever among the dwarves thought of making boars into cavalry has created quite a devastating force. Made worse by whoever then decided to give them barding.*

Saruman had seen such before with the men of Rohan. If faced with particularly sharp, nasty battles, the men of Rohan would put armor on their horses, although that was only done in dire circumstances, as the men of Rohan very much preferred to act the part of light and medium cavalry rather than heavy, preferring speed and quickness over any other consideration. Their personal armor also reflected this.

The boar riders, on the other hand, were a hammer and knew it. Both boar and rider wore similar armor to the dwarven infantry among the Sigin-tarâg, showing once more that, somehow, in a fashion that Saruman decided he might need to emulate, Erebor could produce good-quality steel in tremendous quantity. *Which reminds me, I still do not know where their barding and armor go when not in use. Blast the dwarves and their secrecy and disturbing resistance.*

As Saruman watched, the boar riders pulled backwards, shifting further westward rather than joining their fellows. The front of the hill facing towards the enemy’s former position was being pressed and hard by this point, but the dwarves there were in a good position. The fighting step, the berm and the slope of the hill gave them all the advantages on top of their armor.

However, about an hour after the first scorpions had struck, the Easterlings pressed in from the back of the hill and the sides.

Here, they were by ditches in places and the defensive berms set there as well, manned by the dwarves of the other three corps with Thorin's. At the same time, under Gog's bellowing commands, several of the scorpions also shifted so that they were firing all around, slamming home well away from the front of the battle, doing more to disrupt the enemy formations in places.

The dwarven line held, and the killing began all around the hill, with the defenders being pressed hard. Yet once more, the chain mail and plate of the Sigin-tarâg, coupled with the fighting step and the sheer strength of the dwarves, held the Easterlings in place even as they began to pile up behind the lines.

However, Saruman saw something else. The enemy cavalry was starting to reform from the shock of the boar rider's initial charge. And there were far more of them now. *They must've been out of sight on the other side of their formation, or perhaps held back on purpose from the initial assault? Against a wall like that which Foldorin was able to cobble together, cavalry wouldn't be of much use.*

Saruman kept his spyglass trained on the cavalry as they shifted out and around the battlefield. A small portion of it broke off, seemingly to act as a screening force in case the boar riders came back from where they had retreated westward out of sight. However, the rest came in from directly behind, forming a wedge that was fifty wide at its widest.

Saruman thought about shouting an order, or a warning perhaps. But he didn't need to.

Matias, while unable to make as much detail as Saruman with the spyglass, saw this charge coming. He shifted his archers from where they had begun to spread out along the interior of the defense, and soon they were all together, facing the enemy cavalry. Arrows sliced forwards over the heads of the dwarves to slam into the cavalry even as the Easterling army there shifted away, creating an opening for their cavalry to come forward.

Men and horses fell to be trampled underneath, causing more confusion among the Easterlings, more horses and men going down. However, the rest kept coming, reforming as they did, and slammed up and into the defensive berm of the dwarves with so much force that the dwarves couldn't stop them. Dozens of dwarves went down, simply bowled over, and the Easterlings were inside the defenses, only to be met by crossbow bolts and the reserve under Tholil, who charged forwards, hacking and slashing, cutting down horses and men alike.

Judging from the curses he could hear from the dwarves who had been smashed off the berm, few of them had actually died in that strike. Now, several of them pushed themselves to their feet.

Saruman watched this for a few seconds, then charged forwards, decision made. His staff flickered, and with him came a roar of sound that crashed into the Easterlings, further disrupting their cavalry, causing their horses to rear. Even specially trained warhorses could be made to panic, and the sound that Saruman had just released emulated the growl of a grizzly bear directly into their ears.

He hated to admit it, but it was a trick he had learned from Radagast the Brown. That least member of their fellowship had a way with animals and sounds which none of the others could match, but they could emulate.

The next second, Saruman's staff crashed into the side of a horseman, releasing a burst of energy that sent him flying into the air as if he had been struck by a troll. "To me, dwarves, rally and press them back!"

The enemy infantry pressed in through the gap, but the dwarves had been able to recover thanks to Tholi, Matias and Saruman's response, and now still more of the Easterlings fell. No group of three or even four Easterlings was a match for the Sigin-tarâg dwarves, and this they proved now, bloodily pressing in, containing the breach while their fellow on the berm held their positions doggedly. Soon, they had forced the enemy cavalry back, reclaiming the ground one step at a time until, finally, they were pressing back up and into the berm again, holding there with Saruman's help.

Elsewhere, Thorin was fighting at the front line at the top of the hill when he heard Saruman's voice. Cursing, he shook his head, cutting down Easterling, then stabbing one through his gorgeous. The heavy infantrymen's eyes were wide behind the vile helmet all Easterlings wore, stark surprise shining there as his armor did literally nothing to stop the elvish blade's tip driven home with dwarven strength.

"Remind me in the future, I need to not be so ready to charge forward like this. I need to remember to keep an overall eye on the entire battle rather than get myself lost in the front," the king grumbled.

"Bah, you know you'd miss it! Besides, what dwarf would follow a king who decided to stay back when there was fighting to be done like a poncy elf?" Dwalin bellowed from one side, his face a rictus grin as he cut into the Easterlings again and again.

They weren't his preferred enemy of orcs and goblins. They were stronger than goblins, weaker than orcs, with better equipment than either, but not enough to match Erebor quality. Nor did killing them give Dwalin the general feeling he was making the world a better place with each Easterling slain. Still, they would do in a pinch.

“Dori, spot me,” Thorin ordered, and on his other side, Dori obliged, shifting sideways for a second. Another dwarf swiftly took Thorin’s place from his honor guard, and he pulled back.

Free of the tumult at the front, Thorin clambered up one of the scorpions, waving off the crew there and staring all around him. The Easterling host had used its numerical superiority to best advantage by this point. They were pressing hard, and he could see fighting still going on within the defensive cordon. But the berm had been retaken, and the enemy cavalry had retreated in disarray. There had been a good deal more of that cavalry than he was happy to see, but they now lacked the numbers to make much trouble.

Elsewhere, Foldorin’s force was also holding his wall just as firmly, and in the distance, moving around that position, Thorin thought he saw something move, some dust or something. “I need a spyglass.”

One of the Zigûr-khaz scouts who was doubling as a crossbowman nearby grunted, reaching up to his weapon and pulling the spyglass out of its small holder there, moving over to hand it up to Thorin. He peered through it, then nodded. “Your fellows are coming in at the back of the enemy down there.”

The Zigûr-khaz dwarf grinned, and Thorin continued to watch for a few moments. As he did, the image in the distance resolved itself. Dozens, then hundreds of Zigûr-khaz dwarves on donkeys moved in to attack the Easterling forces still around the bottom of the hill and out towards Foldorin’s forces. They left the donkeys, then moved forward.

Soon, Thorin could see Easterlings beginning to fall to their arrow fire. Yet the enemy host responded again, shifting forces away from the bottom of the hill, which had heretofore been serving it as its reserve to engage the Zigûr-khaz. They were charging them along a wide front, and soon were curling inward. The donkeys and a few handlers bolted, but the majority of the Zigûr-khaz were too slow to retreat for once.

*Dammit! The Zigûr-khaz won’t be able to get away,* Thorin thought, then looked at the front line where his troops were fighting. Decision quickly made, he rushed forwards, reaching the frontline swiftly. “Push boys! Push! Push them off the hill and down! Break them!”

After more than a few hours of fighting, any human host would’ve been unable to do so without their frontline troops being rotated out. However, the dwarves had endurance to spare, and Thorin hadn’t lost that many men just yet. The break-in had caused at least a dozen or more deaths, but here on the front line at the top of the hill, Thorin hadn’t lost more than three or four men so far.

Now, with a roar, the dwarves began to push forward, pushing the Easterlings back instead of simply killing them, putting them on the back foot as the corps’ reserve charged

forwards, adding impetus to the line in places. The Easterlings fell back, then fell back again, and behind Thorin, Matias also heard that shout.

Acting swiftly, he gathered his archers again. Soon, arrows once more started to sleet through the Easterlings, trying to force their way upwards to engage the dwarves.

Something happened then. Whether it was the surprise shift to offense, the added impetus from the falling arrows causing still more dead, or perhaps a single arrow taking out the local commander who had organized the Easterlings when they crested up the hill, Thorin didn't know. Whatever it was, a portion of the enemy organization suddenly faltered. Here and there along the line, Easterlings were no longer sent forward, and suddenly, the dwarves had numerical superiority across this portion of the battle.

More Easterlings fell, and then the rest were slowly pulling back and away, then faster, as the dwarves shifted over the berm and into the attack. A few dwarves died at that point, burdened as they were by armor and weapons that wasn't an easy move. However, that was few and far between, and the dwarves pressed on hard, forcing the Easterlings back down the steep slope, where their footing was even worse.

"Press them, boys! Press them! Down the hill!" Thorin bellowed.

Elsewhere, Foldorin had also seen what was going on. The Zigûr-khazs had been forced to engage the Easterlings in hand-to-hand-combat where they had been supposed to simply stay at bow range and retreat quickly when pressed. And just like Thorin, Foldorin could not simply stand by and watch as fellow dwarves were slain.

Already across Foldorin's front, men had pulled back and away from his makeshift wall, units forced to pull back and engage the Zigûr-khazs instead. This had weakened the enemy, though not to the point where Foldorin could simply charge forward.

Instead, he started to pull his men back and off the wall. The Easterlings quickly pressed in after his men, but were instantly hit by his crossbowmen, allowing his infantry to pull back and off the wall for a moment, losing only four dwarves to a very awkward tactic. Soon, though, the Easterlings were pressing too hard, too many of them on the wall itself for the crossbows to deal with.

However, Foldorin then used his own little trick. "NOW, heave!"

Ropes connecting to various bits of the hastily created wall had been picked up by a good dozen dwarves each. With a roar, they pulled, and several logs were tugged out from various portions of the wall. Which instantly began to come apart under the Easterlings.

It was only a one-story construction. People could survive a fall from that height. They couldn't survive being part of the debris of that wall, and many of the Easterlings died, while others were sent tumbling away.

As the dust and debris settled, a mound was left where the wall had been, and Foldorin's forces charged forward, up into the disorganized Easterlings who had survived the experience and had been close on the other side of the wall a moment ago. Most of those had fallen back and retreated, only to pay for it now as the dwarves, with momentum behind them, crested that mound and charged into the scattered formations.

With them came the boar riders of Durok. As per Thorin's orders prior to the battle beginning, when his boars had been too tired to continue to fight, he had shifted them out and around and along the loop away from the battlefield, away from Easterling eyes, to a position directly behind Foldorin's forces. There he'd rested for a few hours.

Now, Durok joined Foldorin's charge, coming out around the former defensive position in a column to the right flank of Foldorin, crashing into the battle going on around the Zigûr-khazs, doing what they could to help their fellows. Soon, every boar there was like a small island around which the Zigûr-khazs could gather, forming up their own defensive formations against the Easterling host.

And now, the scorpions began to talk again as well. Other than an idol shot from them, the Easterlings had basically been pressing into hard and had thinned out their formations for the scorpions to do much. But now, being pressed down off the hill from Thorin's forces, then inward from Foldorin's to one side, the Easterling formations had condensed enough to make it more worthwhile. There was no more fire or strange smoke added to their impact, though, simply large scorpion bolts crashing into and through the enemy lines in places.

Once more, Thorin noticed something give in the enemy organization. It wasn't a numbers thing; there was suddenly a lack of impetus. Perhaps the overall army commander had died? Regardless, there were no more bellows of the horns that the Easterlings used to pass commands, no more firm retorts of that same horn to demand compliance.

Thorin bellowed a laugh. "We've got them boys! We've got them now! Press them, press them hard," he shouted even as Orcrist cut through one man's arm, then stabbed deep into another man's chest, once more penetrating the lamellar armor the Easterlings favored with ease.

The central portion of the Easterling host slowly crumbled under the combined assaults, struck from every angle. They didn't retreat, and they didn't give up or flee. The Easterlings stood and fought where they were, without any organization. Meanwhile, the rest of their army

out on the flanks continued to press along the dwarven line elsewhere rather than trying to retreat and aid their fellows.

Soon, Thorin's force and Foldorin's met up, creating a sort of hinge, with the boar riders under Durok reforming again into a single column on the other side. With the Zigûr-khazs and the boar riders, they were able to close a triangle on the enemy force, further cutting off the rest of the Easterling host, where they were surrounding the hill.

Stabbing an Easterling, Thorin pulled Orcrist out, letting the body fall before he looked around for a moment, seeing several other Easterlings falling, but no others in sight. He also saw Foldorin nearby, raised Orcrist, and pointed. "Foldorin, reform your men, shift them around to our left! I'll go right."

Looking around, he spotted several of the Zigûr-khazs scouts who had been with them for a while and pointed at them. They'd come down with his army and had acted as a second line of infantry or crossbowmen several times. "Gather up your fellows. Split them in half and make sure that they understand they need to stay behind our line. We're going to roll up the enemy flanks."

It really was that simple. Without an overall commander, the Easterlings lacked the vision to understand what was happening. Smaller units did, and the remnants of the enemy cavalry broke off, trying to get away. However, they had left it too late. Durok's boar riders charged into them and held them in position long enough for the Zigûr-khazs to come up with crossbows. Not a one of them was able to get out of crossbow range and break contact.

As for the infantry, Thorin and Foldorin's forces were able to hit them in their flanks and behind, pressing them against the dwarven lines. Those dwarves also began to go on the attack under Khounuk Mik and Tholi's orders, pushing through their own defenses to close with the enemy all the harder. It was bloody, exhausting work, and it took them the better part of the rest of the afternoon, as once more, the Easterlings proved that they were not the kind to run. They had to be slain where they stood, still glaring defiance in honor of their God.

Or perhaps simply bloody-mindedness. Thorin wasn't certain which.

When it was all over, and the last of the Easterlings reported slain, Thorin went in search of Foldorin.

He found him, still growling out orders to several of his troops, his beard, front, and one arm liberally covered in blood. Despite that, he greeted his King with a firm nod. "King Oakenshield. An excellent battle all around, even if the speed of the enemy's assault on us took me by surprise. Those siege weapons of ours are a magnificent little tool."

“Indeed, they are, although I think our speed and ability to maneuver count for even more. And well done for your own part. That wall you created was magnificent, and I didn’t anticipate you being able to go on the attack so effectively.”

Foldorin simply shrugged nonchalantly. He was an older dwarf of around Balin’s age, with a missing eye covered by a black felt eyepatch, a long, still brown beard coupled with a head of hair that had gone white more than a decade ago. His voice was scratchy from a lifetime spent bellowing, and he was far and away the most experienced in terms of both personal combat and command of Thorin’s officers.

He explained what he had done to the wall, then shook his head, staring out into the distance in the direction where the initial battle had begun. “Unfortunately, I think that while our forces might have come through this relatively well, the Blacklock force I was working with won’t have. They were mostly farmer folk built around a core of soldiers, only a four hundred strong or so, and they lacked both the experience and our steel.”

There, Foldorin could use the common term for steel as in metal rather than willpower, and Thorin grimaced a little, nodding. “I agree. My own losses have been tallied among my corps already, and we barely lost more than forty men. We’ve got wounded aplenty, but no crippled. I imagine that the other corps have done similarly well, although they might have more dead from a break in through our lines that the Easterling cavalry created.”

Moving closer to Foldorin, he leaned in, clasping the other dwarf’s shoulder. “You did well. Exceedingly well. Thank you, and I will have a reward commensurate with your skill for you when this war is over.”

Foldorin just shrugged again. “I but did my duty.”

Thorin snorted at that, then saw several of his other officers coming towards him over the battlefield.

His earlier prediction proved correct over the next few hours. In total, the dwarves of the Lonely Mountain had lost around a hundred and sixty-five men, many of them the injured and other dwarves on crossbow duty when the cavalry broke in. Durok had lost a further twenty men, and Matias had lost seventeen. Most of those dead had come in the break-in that the enemy cavalry had contrived.

Even a dwarven army would take those losses against an army of sixteen to eighteen thousand Easterlings. However, the Zigûr-khaz host that Foldorin had been working with had been decimated.

At the start of the fight, Foldorin estimated their numbers had been around one-thousand, six-hundred or so. Most of those numbers had been composed of farm folk, young

men who had not taken up the blade or axe full-time, instead working on their family's steadings. When the Easterlings closed with them, they gave a good accounting of themselves, but being so badly outnumbered, and without the armor of the Sigin-tarâg? The Zigûr-khaz gambesons, shields and bracers, no matter how good their quality, had not been enough. Their shields had been riven, their helmets smashed, and they had died.

Overseeing a portion of his folk who were busy pulling the bodies of their fellows out and setting them aside to be counted and tallied, the Zigûr-khaz officer, Agni, shook his head. "I believe I speak for our kings when we will take payment for the food of the caches in steel for preference from now on. That steel has already begun to find a place in our armies, but it's not common yet outside Red Rock's army, which is the smallest of the hold's hosts."

"If you're kings agree, Erebor will sell our steel to Parn's Tower and Green Spike going forward at the same price we do to Red Rock," Thorin agreed formally. "You can have my word in writing to that effect if you want."

Agni blinked, then slowly nodded. "That, I, I will take that, King Oakenshield. Thank you." He looked over to where the bodies of his fellows were being placed, then shook his head. "Now, if you'll excuse me..."

Without waiting for a reply, the dwarf walked off, leaving Thorin with his officers for a moment. Soon, a dirge went up from the Zigûr-khazs in Khuzdul. It was sonorous, musical, but deep with sorry and grief, and for a moment even the Sigin-tarâg paused their work, bowing their heads in reverence for the dead.

As the dirge and the work continued, Thorin broke the moment, taking his officers up to the top of the hill once more. There, they spoke about how the battle had gone, the places where it might've turned against them, and where they could've done better.

Thorin emphasized the fact that in this fight, they'd been able to take the enemy by surprise, and attack their flanks of the scorpions, which were currently being taken apart and stored away, ready to be carried on the donkeys that held Potter-Surehand Special Arrays on their saddles. "Moreover, I think we got lucky at several points during the actual battle when their command structure started to fail. Going forward, we **cannot** make that assumption. This was a good set-piece battle. In the future, we won't get so lucky."

"We can't afford to be complacent about how well our scouts are doing. Nori and the Blacklocks have been doing magnificently, but eventually, sheer numbers are going to mean the enemy will know what to expect," Foldorin agreed. "I think also we need to be aware of how much cavalry or a solid archery unit could have hampered our victory here."

The officers all frowned thoughtfully at that, and Thorin turned to Saruman. The Istari had joined them but had not spoken up as yet. "Saruman, do you have anything to add?"

Saruman blinked, turning to look at Thorin for a moment, then shrugged his shoulders. There had been... something going on in the distance, something dark and vile, to the north, but it wasn't connected to Sauron or his Ringwraiths. No, it had the feel of Harry Potter's magic to it, that loud clangor that only the youngest Istari could create, and Saruman wondered what in the world that young wizard was up to that all of Arda rejected so much.

Shaking that confusion off, Saruman said, "I would say that we still must start taking prisoners. Prisoners that we can question and learn more about our enemies from. I realize that simple torture will not get us anywhere with these Easterlings. They sneer at pain. However, I was able to get at least the two prisoners we took before this to talk to me already. We must find a high-ranking officer at some point and capture him to learn anything significant, though."

The dwarves all grumbled at that but agreed with the necessity. Saruman then looked over the battlefield thoughtfully. "I think at this point we also need to realize that the Easterlings are playing this war at a **far** larger scale than we all can match. We need to get a handle on their total numbers."

*I knew that the land to the east was vast, but I thought it was also sparsely settled. Yet to field armies like this one, so well-equipped and not have it as a primary army, is not something that any nomadic people would be able to do, Saruman reflected ruefully. And the amount of... call it social engineering... that has gone into the Easterlings is phenomenal. I had long thought they were simply the weaker cousins of the Haradrim, that those southerners would be far more dangerous.*

How much of that came from his own run-in with them when he had been pursuing Sauron for a given value, Saruman wasn't certain, but he had made that assumption. Now, he not only knew that was not the case, but that his assumptions on the scale the Easterlings could operate on were vastly understating things. *As was my estimate of how dangerous the dwarves were at war*, he admitted. *I will need to keep a close eye on Erebor and its growing power.*

Seeing that the wizard had fallen silent, Thorin nodded at him, then turned back to his fellows, going over some logistics questions for a few moments, while around them, the work to take apart the various scorpions continued. However, their conversation was interrupted at that point by a guard calling in. "My Lords, Nori is returning from further south and east."

With the battle over, Nori had pressed his scouts out in every direction, not giving them a moment's rest, wanting to make certain that none of the Easterlings escaped and the battle hadn't been observed by any representing other forces. However, Nori had found something

else, which he reported in person now. "We found their camp a few leagues to the south and east of here."

Thorin blinked, staring at Nori. "A full camp? We've not seen one of those before this."

Nori grimaced, looking away for a moment. "Yes, well, I'm grateful for such mercy. You, you need to see this."

What Thorin and his officers found was largely in keeping with what Harry and the dwarves of Varni's Folly had found in the camp outside the valley hold: signs of an exceedingly good logistics system with food, communal tents, and so forth.

This included the darker aspects as well. This army had forty women with it for some reason that the dwarves did not want to speculate on, but all of them had slit their throats, the daggers they had done it still clad in their hands when the officers arrived. Whether the womenfolk or the few guards that had been posted here and then gotten away, none of them knew, but someone had also set fire to a few of the tents, and a lot of parchment had been burned in several of the fires around the camp.

The rest of the camp soon joined that parchment after Saruman had been called in to examine some of the things that felt wrong to the dwarves. He could not call upon Arien to destroy these objects of foulness like Harry could, but as a Maia of Aulë, Saruman could add his willpower to fires, making them hotter, stronger.

That was enough to turn the ritual daggers and the majority of the unguents found within dozens of wineskins into so much ash and gassy vapor. He did, however, pocket two of the wineskins. He was uncertain what kind of chemical concoction was within, but much like what he had learned already from interacting with the Zigûr-khaz, he was very eager to learn more.

"I think we have discovered here something more serious than just more evidence that the Easterlings are religious fanatics," Saruman said gravely, keeping his eyes on the fire and some of his will making certain the fire stayed hot enough to melt the sacrificial daggers. "Those daggers were inherently foul, imbued with a dark magic the likes of which I have rarely seen before, and most of the time before this in the hands of the Nazgûl."

"... Blood magic?" Thorin guessed. "Harry has occasionally told me of some of the dark curses and even darker rituals that his own folk back on his original world could use. And I'm a student of history enough to know that such things have occurred here on Middle-earth occasionally."

"Oh, of the darkest sort of blood magic," Saruman agreed. "I'm not even sure that the Easterlings themselves understand it, but those Blood Hand marks, the scars? If they are made

with such a dagger, then... I think... I am uncertain what kind of effect it would have on the person's mental abilities, but there would certainly be some. Worse, I think we can assume now that it is not just the army of the Easterlings that is so fanatical. Rather, it is their entire society. What that could mean in the future, now that Sauron has undoubtedly reached out his hand here, is a question."

He finally turned from the fire, shaking his head as he looked at Thorin and Agni. "But I think, I think that this entire war is but a campaign of a greater war. You might need to prepare with that idea in mind going forward. That the Easterlings will keep on coming, from one decade to the next."

The Zigûr-khaz dwarves all stared at Saruman, while Thorin nodded thoughtfully, looking all around them at the camp. "Numbers. We've only been concerned about the Easterlings' numbers in terms of the enemy hosts we've faced. We have forgotten the one thing that humans always have had an advantage over every other true race: they can breed like rabbits."

His crude words brought many laughs from the dwarves around them, but Thorin was dead serious. With Saruman's thoughts leading the way, Thorin had suddenly understood the nature of the overall plan for the Easterlings in Sauron's eyes, even if he had not truly grasped the sheer size of the current war. "Break an army of our size, and you break the ability of a hold or house to field a truly appreciable military force for a few generations. Devastate an enemy army like we did hear among the humans, and they will be back in a generation."

While eventually the Sigin-tarâg would be able to put larger armies into the field, at the moment, the Sigin-tarâg House could only call on two holds. The mountain hold of Erebor, and the hill hold of the Iron Hills could both supply upwards of twelve thousand warriors for a time, but most would be men pulled from other crafts. The other Houses could call on far more people, although not that many more in terms of trained, lifelong warriors.

"Indeed. That is what I am most concerned about. These women, I examined them. They all have those Blood Hand marks on their stomachs. The Implications there are horrific." *And intriguing, Saruman added mentally, his lips twisting into a smirk unseen in the night. A breeding program, perhaps? It would have to be tightly controlled so it does not essentially eat itself, but that is not a hindrance here. And it is something I might be able to emulate in the future. Not with the Hillman, not directly. But... Perhaps there are other ways to use that same idea, although nowhere near this scale.*

Unaware of Saruman's suddenly dark thoughts, Thorin looked over at Agni, ordering him to pick out groups of ten of their dwarves to head to Red Rock and Green Spike with news of what they had discovered about the Easterlings and what they surmised about their overall

goals. "I am afraid that the time of you allowing your folk to live in hamlets away from your holds is over, regardless of the outcome of this specific war. And you will need to conduct your overall strategies going forward with an eye for ongoing large-scale conflict with the Easterlings. Conflict that can flare up at any time."

Even as the Zigûr-khaz turned away, Thorin turned to his own officers, saying that this didn't really matter to them. "But I will want a donkey heading westward with a small escort of our most wounded and two volunteers. We'll write up everything we've discovered about the Easterlings, and send samples of their equipment, their metals and everything else with them. There is something off about these weapons they use, the metal of their helmets and their weapons."

He shook his head, looking down at a mace he'd picked up while on the way to the Easterling camp. "There is something else added into the mixture. Not something to give it more strength either. It isn't something I've ever run into before. But I will want to do some experiments there. For now, though, all we can do is keep fighting and do what we can to at least hand the Easterlings a defeat in this war."

OOOOOOO

Even as the dwarves left the burning remains of the Easterling camp, above them, raven and crow eyes watched. They watched, understood, and flitted away to bring word. Erebor had put forth its strength. Now they needed to be pulled further east, the further the better, so that the trap might gobble them whole.

OOOOOOO

Thirteen days after the last pitched battle, Thorin surveyed the wreckage of another, far smaller one. This force of Easterlings had been only around four thousand, and actually bringing them to battle had taken more than the battle itself for his army, as it consisted of skirmishers and light infantry. *More archers than we've seen before, but Easterling arrows can't penetrate our chain mail, let alone plate.*

After the last major battle, Thorin had split his army once more into disparate corps, ordering them to fan out as they marched further northeast. He had given his own crossbows out to the other corps, keeping Matias and the boar riders with him.

This had allowed them to seem like weak targets individually, which brought in a few unwary Easterling units, and to move fast enough to catch and wipe out several dozen smaller enemy forces. The largest such before this battle Thorin's corps had seen had been a mere nine hundred, but they had just wiped out a larger than average hamlet, where the dwarves had

remained to guard their homesteads. The Zigûr-khaz there had fought hard and had cost the Easterlings more men than had remained when Thorin's army caught up to them.

This time, the large force of light infantry, a bit over three thousand, had been led by a very wary commander. Thinking about it now, Thorin had to wonder if survivors from their previous battles had spread the word about his host by this point.

Even after successfully pinning the Easterlings against a river and having Khounuk and Foldorin's corps come in from the sides into the small copse of trees to either side so they could not escape, the Easterlings had nearly escaped the trap by charging into the woods on their right flank without even trying to hold their ground before Khounuk could get into position. If not for Durok's troops, they would have, yet even then, the few cavalry with the army did escape.

The fighting from then on had taken a while. The trees made it difficult to corral the Easterlings within, and their archers had been frustrating to deal with.

"I'm afraid we must admit Durok that while our boar riders can fight in a melee better, they are not nearly as fleet of foot as horsemen are," he said, regretfully shaking his head. "Beyond that, this change of strategy is concerning. The Easterlings not willing to fight to the last is a new wrinkle which must be addressed."

Durok grumbled a bit, but nodded, his arms crossed over his chest as he glared belligerently at nothing for a moment. "You're right. I don't like it, but you're right. We barely caught their infantry before they could simply stream out of the trees, and their cavalry was past us before we knew it." He frowned, then continued on. "Worse, their horses have far more endurance than our boars. With how hard we had to push them, our boars were gassed before the battle began."

He smirked, looking over to where the boars were all stomach down on the ground, being fed some slop from the supplies. "Mind you, once the fighting started, our boars were ecstatic to have people to take their tempers out on. But still..."

Durok's smirk fell off his face. "If they had come back and attacked us, they might well have caused significant losses. Those lances of theirs can be deadly once we no longer have our own and they've built up enough momentum. Our barding and chain mail is good, but there's a limit to what even dwarven steel can protect us from."

"It's good that you are honest enough to understand that," Thorin acknowledged, then looked over at a guard. "Yes?"

"My lord, a runner is coming in. Our watchers say that he's from Mik's command."

Mik had led his force too far north to join this battle, and Thorin hadn't even tried to get him involved. "Hmm... Inform Foldorin and Khounuk to hold off on any plans to split up. Let's see what Mik has to tell us."

Soon, the young runner, another one whose age and build reminded Thorin painfully of Ori, stood in front of his king. He slammed a fist into his chest, then spoke, "King Oakenshield! We received word from our forwardmost scouts of another Easterling army several days distant. Already, our scouts are skirmishing with theirs. Our men were able to break through and see the army. It's a large force, at least nine thousand, and is marching to engage us."

"Bring out a map," Thorin ordered. Foldorin, Tholi, and Khounuk soon joined him, and the group studied the map as the runner provided more details about the enemy force and the terrain where Mik's unit was currently operating.

"Judging by the last reports Mik's scouts passed on to ours, they should be at least a hundred leagues to the northeast of us by this point, right?" Noli mused.

"That's about right," the runner agreed, leaning over to point out where they were on the map before a hail from the side had Thorin and his officers looking up.

"Sirs, another runner is coming in. A local."

"Direct him to us for now."

Moments later, another dwarf was ushered toward them by some of the guards. This time, it was a Zigûr-khaz officer. Thorin didn't recognize him, but Agni's second, Colori, did and whispered, "That Solor, he's from Parn's Tower, like me. He's one of our better scouts and messengers, but... he should still be there. And he looks injured..."

The Zigûr-khaz dwarves all looked at one another, a chill going down their spines. A moment later, just as the new dwarf reached them, they were joined by Saruman, who examined the new dwarf with wary interest. Thorin too looked at Solor closely, noticing now the wounds that they had noticed before were not recent ones. Rather, they looked at least two, maybe more days old. They had been seen to, but not very well, and the wound on his upper arm looked like it had soaked through the bandages there.

"Khazâdûl Zirakzazn (King Oakenshield)," he began in Khuzdul, before noticing Saruman, and hastily switching to common, looking at the wizard warily. "I, I bring news of disaster."

Thorin grimaced as the Zigûr-khaz all groaned. "Disaster, how? And where do you hail from? Gog here tells me you also hail from Parn's Tower, Solor. You're one of their dedicated messengers. Is that true?"

“Aye, it is and, and it is from the Army of Parn’s Tower that I hail from,” Solor said, before straightening his shoulders, and staring directly at the most senior Zigûr-khaz there, Agni, then around at the other Zigûr-khaz. “King Straightblade led us out against the invaders. We broke the siege on our tower, then moved southwest. We had hoped to link up with you eventually. That, that was an error, and our army has been... has been annihilated.”

That caused the built-up tension to burst into shouts of consternation and anger, with Colori going so far as to move to a nearby rock, kicking it hard with steel-toed boots until it cracked the quartz.

“How could this happen?” Agni growled, his hands moving like he wanted to grab the other dwarf and shake answers out of him. “Your king, like my own and that of Green Spike, agreed that keeping our armies intact was a necessity. That is why Straightblade never sent troops to join the forces already in the field helping our people flee!”

Solor struggled to speak for a moment, and Thorin sighed, gesturing him away. “See that Solor has food and water, then bring him to my tent. We will reconvene there in an hour, gentlemen. Foldorin and Nori question this youngster to determine the position of the host that Mik has spotted. Khounuk, make sure that the troops are rotating in and out of working on collecting the Easterlings' dead, rather than any one unit being forced to do all the work.”

An hour later, Thorin and his officers sat on small, well-made folding stools, listening intently as Solor explained. He looked much less ragged now, and his wounds had been cleaned and redressed. Even so, his eyes were still glazed over in grief, and even as he sat on a spare stool, his legs trembled a bit, showing an exhaustion that few dwarves would ever allow themselves to show.

“We, our officers that is, they had noticed for weeks that the army around the Tower had been slowly pared away. Units were being sent off in different directions. They started with what we estimated was twenty-five thousand men.”

The Zigûr-khaz dwarf showed no dismay or even care at that number, nor did any of the officers around Thorin. By this point, all of them had gotten used to the sheer numbers of human armies.

“But eventually, the force was, well, we thought it was down to something like ten thousand. King Straightblade decided that they had been drawn down enough for us to attempt an assault. We’d kept the true range of our ballistae and catapults a secret, and were able to smash the headquarters of the besieging army with artillery before charging out. The Easterlings had gotten complacent. That and attacking at night allowed us every advantage.”

Dwarves could see very well in the dark, especially compared to humans, though nowhere near as well as orcs and goblins. That was an advantage that Thorin hadn't used yet in this war, and he idly made a note of it now as he continued to listen.

"We lost a bare dozen men in that assault, and wiped out the enemy army, full on four thousand still, which was far less than we had thought they had. They had simply been acting the parts of a larger host."

"You mean smaller units but in larger camps, going through the motions of having a larger army in an attempt to trick you?" Khounuk questioned, blinking. "That's bizarre and yet also helpful information at the same time. It might mean that the Easterlings' manpower isn't bottomless if they were forced to cut down the size of that army and add those troops to other armies."

"In comparison to us and might as well be," Foldorin grunted from where he sat in pride of place to Thorin's right side.

Thorin agreed. "I'll admit that it was good that Parn's Tower was able to free itself, but then to take the field and go searching for more enemies to fight? That was foolish."

"Ahahahh, eh, in hindsight, I agree," Sonor said, shaking his head, running a hand through his beard, then up through his hair. "Our King, he thought to catch some of the units that have been split off from that army, and at first, it worked. We were able to attack a group of three hundred infantry and another group of five hundred the next day. However, that was when our good fortune failed."

He shook his head, pulling his hair hands away from his hair and letting them fall limply into his lap. "One morning, a day after that last battle, some of our scouts had yet to report in. King Straightblade was the cautious sort and had already begun to fall back to the Tower at that point. When we did, we found the ford we were going to use to go over the River Swiftrun held against us."

That name wasn't what the Zigûr-khaz really called it, but since Saruman was there, it had to be translated into Common.

"At first, we thought it was a small force, and we were making strong headway against them. But then..." Solor shuddered, looking as if he was about to tug his beard out. "The Easterlings attacked us from behind. Most of our scouts were slain without getting any warning out, and A host of cavalry came behind us. We were pinned there, with no room to try and escape."

*And against the Zigûr-khaz, the Easterlings would have all the advantages in the world in that kind of scenario,* Thorin thought, while his officers remained silent, shaking their heads.

Eventually, Thorin asked, "I take it that your king quickly realized what was going on and got some of his men out, or else you would not be here."

Solor shook his head. "No, my Lord. I was with a group of ten scouts trying to find out where our other scouts had gone, but the Easterling scouts, all mounted, cut us off before we could report back. We fought our way clear and broke contact, hiding at the top of a small bluff from a host of several thousand as they passed us by."

The young dwarf started to tug at his beard, looking away with shame. "By that point, we could also see signs of the battle in the distance. We, we watched as it ended, as our king died and, and then decided to flee west. We split into groups of three at that point, but my band was still found by Easterlings. My companions both died, and I was wounded in one of the skirmishes. Indeed, the enemy probably thought me dead, but my spyglass in my bag took much of the brunt of the hit to my back. I rolled into a crevice underneath several rocks and remained there until the Easterlings moved on."

Solor shuddered, but went on doggedly. "Worse, my, my lord, other than the Blood Hands symbol, we saw several other banners, but not one of them was in both the army by the ford and the army that attacked us from the rear," Solor said, shaking his head.

"Blast. If the disparate Easterling forces are now in communication range with one another, we'll need to be aware of our flanks and backs at all times," Thorin scowled.

They already had a cloud of scouts around them at all times, but Nori and the others would need to keep a firmer hand on them and their reporting structure going forward to ensure there was no hole in their perimeter. "And you say this army that attacked you out of nowhere was mostly cavalry?"

"Entirely cavalry, they charged into battle with us without a single one of them leaving the saddle. They, they just came straight over the army, wiped our whole host out as if it was, was nothing!" Solor practically shouted, finally cracking after days of stress and grief. "I saw, I saw my friends, they were, they were cut down as they were trying to flee and—"

"Get a hold of yourself," Foldorin growled, reaching over to smack the younger dwarf on the side of the head hard enough to send him stumbling. He then turned to Thorin, frowning angrily. "This could change everything."

"Agreed. I could wish for more detail on this new army, but if this battle was three days ago..."

Solor held up his hand, and Thorin looked at him. "My, my lord it, it was three days ago. But we, the group I was with, we stayed hidden on the crag for a time. We saw and, and counted as the rest of the enemy host arrived."

“The rest?” Foldorin asked, frowning.

“Um, y, yes. They, it was... the total force was at least thirty-thousand strong by the time they started to make camp near the battle. At that point, we decided to escape.”

A chill went through Thorin’s mind at those numbers, and his worries of a moment ago suddenly crystallized. “Nori, have any of our scouts not reported in today?”

“Not from the morning or afternoon rotation,” Nori answered instantly, frowning. “Although I had two reports that some of them saw cavalry scouts. In fact, we’ve only seen cavalry scouts the entire day.”

Thorin frowned for several minutes, poring over the map that had been set on a camp table between them while Solor had been talking. “They’re coming for us,” he said, scowling angrily. “They might not know we don’t have our whole army here, but we’re the target of this new cavalry force.”

Foldorin and the others frowned, but eventually, Foldorin nodded. “We’ve not seen more than a handful of cavalry scouts before this. If that’s all we’re seeing now, aye, it could be a sign of this enemy force. Cavalry could move fast enough to catch us soon if we’re not careful. And...” he looked at the map, then shook his head. “There aren’t any places near here we could fort up. Not even that last hamlet we saw, it’s too small and damaged.”

“Get a runner out to Mic. He’s to retreat south and west. We will do the same at an angle, hopefully meeting up with him. He is to not engage the enemy in any pitched battle unless forced to,” Thorin decided. “We can’t let Mic be caught out away from the rest of the army.” He thought further, then shook his head, and pointed at the runner who had just come up to take that message. “Tell Mic that by my order, he is to destroy his field artillery if he thinks doing so will let him move faster. However he can, Mik must move **quickly!**”

“Yes, my Lord,” the runner said, blinking in surprise at that order. Destroying the three scorpions would destroy several months’ worth of work back in Erebor, to say nothing of the monetary investment. However, it would free up more ponies. With the runic arrays hidden in their saddles, each pony would be able to carry three dwarves, as many as could fit on a pony’s back, for a full day without much effort.

With that, he would be able to have a portion of his army resting in the saddle of the ponies at all times, helping them travel faster.

“Is there **anywhere** nearby that is defensible at all?” Thorin asked, looking over at Agni, trying and succeeding in keeping any panic from his voice. “Somewhere south and east of here, for preference.”

“There’s a hill the side of which recently collapsed in a storm, and a small escarpment,” Agni reported, frowning as he mentally went through his mind as to the terrain in that area. “There’s also an empty riverbed that’s actually in sight of that hill, but I’m afraid those are the only ones I can think of. The area around the hill is heavily wooded.”

“How far is the escarpment. What does it look like? What does it look like?” Thorin asked quickly.

With the speed your army has moved since we joined it, perhaps as far away as three days? As for what it looks like, it’s a rocky ridge, about two stories tall, and a quarter mile long, curved to look almost like a crescent.”

“Too far in terms of how fast we’re going, then. If we’re already seeing scouts, they might be able to hit us in a day or less,” Thorin grumbled, before shaking his head. “Foldorin, you’ll take command of your siege train and mine. Take half of the other ponies from Tholi and Khounuk’s corps and get ahead of us to that hill as quickly as possible. Build up **serious** fortifications, understand?”

Foldorin grumbled a little, but nodded, understanding what his king wanted, and Thorin turned to the senior Zigûr-khaz commanders. “You and your men will march out with him. You’ll be taking all of our ponies with you, along with the rest of our siege train.”

“Khounuk, Tholi, get orders out to destroy your scorpions. Better to destroy them than to allow them to fall into enemy hands.” Both of his other Nâlbarâk Râdûn made to protest, but Thorin glared at them, and they subsided. “Durok, I will want you well out on our southern flank as we start to move. You won’t come as a surprise by this point, but you can provide a hammer when I need it.”

“Your forces can use our horses as well, Agni,” Matias said, speaking up for the first time in this impromptu meeting. “My archers will remain with the army from under the mountain.”

“Thank you, Matias. Nori, I’ll want the majority of our scouts to the north and northeast, but keep a firm ring around us at all times,” Thorin concluded, nodding in the human’s direction. “Understand me, gentlemen, if this enemy host is so large, we **cannot** face it in the open for long, even with preparation. Until we’re in a defensive position, Nori, our lives depend on your scouts getting a warning to us before they come over the horizon.”

His officers all understood the concern on that point, while the Zigûr-khaz grumbled. They didn’t like the fact that Thorin had basically set it up so that a significant portion of his army would be used as a shield for their own folk. But given that they’d just gotten a report that one of their own armies had been completely wiped out by this new Easterling host, and that without using its full force, there was nothing they could do to argue about it.

“Will you march through the night, or rest?” Foldorin asked. “With the amount of horses and ponies I’ll have with me, I’ll be able to push on through the night easily enough, but...”

“But we won’t. And we will take a rest. That will allow your force and the Blacklocks to shift further ahead of us,” Thorin said.

“And Foldorin, just to make it clear, when Mik meets up with you, he’ll be under your command,” Thorin added, making the words formal. “You will be in overall command of that position, both Longbeards and Blacklocks troops. I’ll write up an order to that effect.” His eyes skated to the Zigûr-khaz officers, but all of them, despite looking as if they wanted to grumble again, just nodded.

With all the orders given, Thorin clapped his hands loudly, and the group dispersed. Within an hour, fires were burning to one side as the designated scorpions were burned, and Foldorin and his forces headed out only a little while later.

The Zigûr-khaz quickly followed them, leaving only a few hundred of their own scouts, and the remaining under four thousand or so dwarves under Thorin. Those scouts began reporting that evening that they were encountering more and more mounted scouts.

The cavalry was quick to engage them, and losses among the scouts began to mount. Even with many of them having spy glasses, the cavalry could close fast enough to engage in close combat, taking losses to kill the dwarves in turn.

Soon it became clear that an entire screening force lay ahead of this incoming host, and by the next afternoon, Nori was shaking his head as he pointed northward. “We can’t stop them from getting close for much longer,” he said gravely. “I’ve lost more than half of my own scouts since last night, and even some of the Blacklocks aren’t reporting in.”

“Pull your men back to within two leagues,” Thorin said, shaking his head. “Any sign from our forwardmost scouts of the Blacklocks still ahead of us?”

“No. They broke contact with us early this morning. They pushed on hard last night as you ordered,” Nora reported. “I also found that first gully in the terrain that they told us about, it’s about five leagues distant, but it’s not deep enough or long enough to matter.”

Thorin nodded. Thankfully, without any humans around, both of the other units would be able to use Baraz-felakuz (Sharing of Will) to march all the faster. *And if there are food caches nearby, their bodies won’t pay too high a cost for it.*

When Nori reported next, it was without a helmet, and his face looked as if it had been hit by something heavy, with his jaw swollen to one side. “A few of us were able to get past the

Easterlings and see if we could find her army. It's moving slowly now, but I'd estimate if they wanted to push their horses to exhaustion, they'd catch up with us in a few hours."

"Which they won't do. Whoever's in command over there is entirely too smart for that," Thorin said, shaking his head. "How many more scouts have you lost?"

"Eighteen since I last reported. I think at least another twenty of the Zigûr-khaz were able to simply break contact and go to ground in places. But I know at least eighteen were caught by the enemy. There just aren't enough places to hide around here," Nori said, shaking his head. "What I wouldn't give for some of those elven cloaks!"

Snorting at that, Thorin nodded, reflecting that Nori was putting it delicately. Beyond outcroppings of quartz crystals here and there, the odd ditch, and two more burned-out hamlets that Thorin could see from where he was standing currently to one side of the column, there was literally no other kind of hiding place. There were no more trees either, not a single one in sight.

"Choose five of your men to keep an eye on the enemy scouts, then bring in the rest of your scouts as best you can. I realize, as hard as they're being pressed, that's not going to be easy."

Nori nodded at that, then raced away, heading out into the distance to the north of the column.

The rest of that day passed uneventfully as they trudged on, hurrying as quickly as they could, resting only once to have a quick meal of hardtack and a strange spicy concoction of the Zigûr-khaz that had quickly become a hit with Thorin's troops. Soon after that break, Nori was back, along with two dozen of his scouts who rejoined the column as Nori reported to Thorin.

This time, instead of falling out of his own position in the line, Thorin simply gestured for Nori to join him, and the two of them marched on, with Nori breathing heavily, a sign of his exertions of the day, even as his body fell into the easy rhythm of the dwarven march. "I lost four more of my scouts in an attempt to punch through the enemy screen. It worked, but Solor was right," Nori said between gasps. "The enemy host is larger than any army I've seen before. Judging by the size of it, I'd estimate is at least thirty thousand."

Hearing that, Thorin cursed. He would hold up his Sigin-tarâg against any comparable host, even one that outnumbered them five-to-one. With any kind of terrain advantage, that number would go up by at least a factor of two. However, against mounted cavalry, out in the open? All the advantages turned to the cavalry side. *Well, except our equipment.* "Is the enemy host pushing any harder?"

"No. But without us trying to stop them, the Easterling scouts will be in sight of this army before evening," Nori warned.

"Dwalin, signal a change in the march. Break out the weapons and helmets." The dwarves were, naturally, still marching in their full armor, but helmets kept in sweat and heat, and as it was a nice, very sunny day at present, that had been a factor despite how cold it was out. "Have Matias also string his bows. Split the archers up throughout our host."

As the sun began to fall in the distance, a cry could be heard from the scouts now paralleling the rest of the column to the north and back of the formation. Twisting in that direction, Thorin hopped out of his place in formation, pulling out his spyglass. Near the back and north of their column, a dozen Horsemen had appeared. Thorin watched as they were joined by still more and then charged the column.

As they came, however, so too did they come within bow range, and the fifty archers from Dale at the back of the column fired easily and efficiently, putting a hundred arrows into the air before the first one had a chance to land. The arrows scythed through that cavalry column, and the survivors wheeled away. Not, Thorin was certain, in panic. Rather, they had wheeled away to report what they had just discovered.

He kept watching them and saw two of them pulled down by scouts who had somehow hidden themselves even as the Easterling cavalry rushed over their positions. Thorin made a note to ask Nori who those scouts were so we could reward them for this.

Only one horseman got away cleanly, or would have, if not for a bolt of searing white fire that flashed out from the dwarven army, incinerating the man.

Thorin looked over to where Saruman stood nearby, having also pulled out of the column at the cry from behind them. His raised staff lowered, and the two of them exchanged a nod before resuming the march.

As he had hoped, the enemy did not close with them that day, nor the morning of the next. His troops were able to get a good night's rest along with some food and marched out that morning in good formation, until suddenly, to the north near midday, more enemy scouts appeared. These did not try to close, but wheeled away the instant they spotted the column, and Thorin cursed. "They're going to come at us soon, Dwalin. Spread the word to prepare for orders, and the archers and crossbowmen to be ready."

"How can you tell?" Saruman asked. He had started the march beside Thorin once more, his longer legs shifting like those of a much younger man to keep up with the pace of the march just as well as the archers of Dale.

“The Easterlings are cavalier with their men, and indeed, even their men are cavalier with their own lives; we’ve seen that time and time again. If those men had been ordered to slow us down, they would’ve charged in regardless of the odds, forcing us to expand arrows on them at the very least. Instead, they wheeled away. Their orders were to find us again after losing contact with us last night. And the only reason that would be the case would be if they were close enough to strike at us.”

Saruman nodded thoughtfully at that, and Thorin bellowed an order to his foot troops to get moving faster.

Thorin was at the front of the column soon after. Ahead of them, he could see the small gully which the scouts had told him about. He was thinking of how best to use that as a defensive position when Nori’s voice interrupted him.

He had broken off from the column a moment ago and had, somewhat amusingly, asked several men of Dale to lift him up onto their shoulders so he could use a spyglass to peer all around them. His report, though, wiped any grins the oddity of his action might have evoked. “More cavalry coming in from behind and east! They’re circling us!”

His instincts blaring at him, Thorin bellowed, “Column halt! Dwalin, find Khounuk and Tholi. We’re about to be hit, and we cannot let them come at us on the march.” For a moment, Thorin thought about sending a runner to Durok, but he knew the messenger wouldn’t get through if Nori was already reporting cavalry to their south.

*I’ll just have to hope he’s far enough away that he’s avoided the cavalry.* Thorin hoped to use Durok’s men to help plow the road ahead of them if he got a chance to break contact. *Or better, he mused, hold them in reserve until night falls. But how to get a message out to him if we are encircled is the question... I think it might be time to avail myself of having a wizard with us.*

With that in mind, he went in search of Saruman. The two of them had split up when Thorin had moved to the front of the column, and now found the Istari standing on a small bump in the land, not enough of one to be called even a mound.

Still, it gave them a little bit of added height to look all around them while Tholi and Khounuk started to settle the army into a defensive circle. The archers also prepared quickly and efficiently, working in teams of twelve, around the area.

Posing his question to Saruman, Thorin was unsurprised to see the wizard nodding thoughtfully. “I can call a bird to me, and it will be able to convey a message of emotion and intent to Durok for you, although whether it will be enough to get him moving is a question in

and of itself. He won't know what to expect, after all. I do not believe I can find a large enough bird around here to carry a physical message."

In couching his answer in this way, Saruman hedged his bets. *If Thorin looks able to break his army out of the incoming assault and the surrounding forces, then the boar riders will probably play a significant role, and my part in getting them moving will earn me more good favor with the dwarves.* If not, however, if Thorin looks to be failing, Saruman could break out on his own and link up with the boar riders, where it would fall on Durok's 'inability to understand the message' to blame for the loss of the army rather than any action on Saruman's part. *Although, even if the boar riders can get away, is a question. Still, I hope they can at least get me to the other host.*

"Truly? I am no bird expert, but I would think there would be falcons or other larger birds around here," Thorin responded, frowning in confusion.

"You would think so, but no. I haven't seen a single large bird in five days or more. There are a few smaller birds, swallows and sparrows, but that is all. I have, however, seen hundreds of crows on the wing," Saruman stated grimly. "And such birds have long been the servants of the Great Enemy. I cannot influence them."

Actually, Saruman could influence such avians, a trick he'd learned from conversing with Sauron. It wasn't easy just yet, and if Sauron's influence, less his Nazgûl's, was on them, it became far harder. Closeness, though, could give him the edge.

"Could the enemy be using those birds somehow?" Thorin demanded in sudden concern.

"I fear that might be the case on a strategic level. But such birds would not be able to speak to the Easterling commanders, if that is what you fear. No... my concerns on that score are whose mind might be driving this campaign. I had warned you when we met that the Great Enemy's touch was in this war. Now, I am certain that touch is a far heavier one than I feared back then."

"Damn..." Thorin growled, then, after a moment, he shrugged, dwarfish stoicism settling over him like a visible weight. "Well, nothing we can do about it now. We've got more immediate problems to concern ourselves with."

Moments later, several lookouts armed with Zigûr-khaz spyglasses shouted warnings. More Easterling had appeared in the distance all around them. And this time, these weren't more scouts, scattered across the area. Rather, it was a dense line of cavalry. For a few moments, those lines were simply interspersed around the area, but soon, they linked up,

stretching from one side of the horizon to the other, all around the dwarves in an unbroken circle.

Thorin examined the enemy for a time through his own spyglass, seeing a mix of light and heavy cavalry. *They are all mixed together, which is odd, but I suppose they will reorganize themselves once they realize they can't just run over us like they would the Zigûr-khaz. And there's more heavy cavalry out there than light, worse luck.*

He couldn't make out any sign of mounted infantry just yet. The armor of the infantry the Easterlings used was different enough that Thorin could spot it even at range. Thankfully, there also didn't seem to be all that many archers among them either. At least not in the first few rows that he could see from here. He wasn't about to get complacent on that score, but felt his own archers and crossbowmen would give him a decided advantage at range. *Not enough to break a charge from so many angles, though.*

"Matias, fire when you're ready," Thorin ordered. "This isn't the time to hold anything back."

With that, Thorin reached to his side where he had laid his own helmet, pulling it on his head. The only mark that he was the king was the gold edge worked into his gorget. He then pulled up Orcist, noting once more that it wasn't glowing as it would in the face of orcs or goblins, even as he picked up his shield as well. He then turned to Tholi and Khounuk. "You know what to do. To your places."

With that, Thorin marched to the lines of dwarves around them. He and his honor guard pushed their way through the line, which tightened further all around them as dwarves slapped shoulders or thumped backs, murmuring, "Erebor, Erebor, Oakenshield," as they went.

Soon, they were on the front line facing the northernmost area of the circling cavalry. All around him, Thorin's honor guard took up positions as well, with Dwalin and his twin axes to his right, and Dori to his left, wielding a larger-than-normal shield and a massive metal cudgel. Dori was still the only dwarf to come close to matching Thorin's Arkenstone-enhanced strength, and that made him a perfect bodyguard.

Thorin smiled at his two closest companions for a moment, then turned his head forward, watching as the enemy cavalry came. "Dwarves! First man to kill fifteen Easterlings gets a hundred good Ereboran gold coins or a master-crafted weapon of their choice on me! Second will get fifty and a dagger!"

Another king might have meant they would pay for such a weapon. Thorin was a Mastersmith, and every dwarf there knew their king had just told them he would personally craft a weapon of their choice. Some of the dwarves might think the gold was a better idea,

those thinking about courting or setting up their own business, those who were not devoted to the path of the warrior. But a weapon like that was a prize to be treasured, something Dwalin and Dori could tell them as they already had such weapons, and the dwarves all roared in reply. “EREBOR! Baruk Khazâd! Khazâd ai-mênu!”

The shout did nothing to slow the Easterlings. Slowly, their lines closed in all around the thick circle of dwarves. At first, they simply rode their horses, perhaps trying to both psych out the dwarves and keep their horses. However, soon the Easterlings began to lose men to the arrows from the men of Dale. Those longbows could punch through even well-made lamellar armor at range, and only the heavy cavalry troopers had even that. At that point, the walk became a canter, and lances and spears, the difference very apparent, came up held in a double-handed grip to one side of the horses.

The men wielding them pushed their upper bodies forward, their legs tightening around the horses underneath them. In that, at least, they seemed much like the boar riders. *Although those sabers and maces I see are not nearly as good in terms of secondary weapons*, Thorin reflected even as men and horses continued to die.

Seeing one dead horse trip another and send both riders into the ground, Thorin barked out the first actual order of the day. “Remember, boys, you don’t have to hit the riders, just put them on the ground. Horses first, then, when they’re in easier range, the riders.”

That earned him some dark chuckles from around the dwarven host as other officers told their men the same thing along the entire circle. That circle was as tight as the dwarves could make it without getting in the way of their archers or trampling on their supplies. Everywhere, it was three men deep, each line controlled by Thorin or his Nâlbarâk Râdûn at a different point around the circle. As the cavalry started to come closer, hands started to push against Thorin’s back, strong and solid, waiting for the charge, as the vast majority of front-line troops raised shields.

Here again, Thorin’s prior planning showed. The shields would help stymie the initial shock of the lances and spears in the charge, braced as the dwarves using them were by the lines behind them. Then, as the horses reeled away, would come the killing. *I hope. There is a limit to what mere flesh and weight can do. It just remains to be seen if the Easterlings’ momentum and weight overcome us.*

More of the Easterlings fell, but there were far too many of the Easterlings for the archers to put anything like a real dent in their advance. That advance kept on coming slowly and steadily until it reached a point where a horn sounded, and the first line of horsemen, then the next and then two more charged forwards from every direction.

As they came, a loud cry in their own language rose from the Easterling host. “//For The True Lord Beyond and the Eye who Rules in his Stead!//”

Whatever it meant, every voice there had taken it up, a bellow of sound and noise that shook the world, a slightly less harsh accompaniment to the sudden tremor in the earth as thousands of horses charged, shaking the ground.

In response, the dwarves remained silent, waiting grimly. More crossbows held in the hands of men nursing broken ribs or missing fingers began to twang along with the arrows from the men of Dale, and more of the enemy fell, heavy and light cavalry alike.

“Brace, brace... Now!” Thorin bellowed, and as one, the dwarven shields raised just a bit, smashing aside lances that were no longer on point, spears that were no longer aimed at the right position. Some men overbalanced, trying to extend. Others were knocked out of the saddle. Most held their places on the saddle, only for the weapons of the first and second lines of dwarves to flash out.

Horses fell, screaming, crying, their neighs tortured, the sound of animals who had no idea why their world had suddenly been drowned in pain. Men’s cries soon joined them.

Nowhere along the circle of Sigin-tarâg warriors had the line been broken. The weight of the charge had been minimized thanks to the density of their defensive circle. Here and there, dwarves had gone down, but not enough to break through the tightly packed line.

The bodies of those horses and men now got in the way of their fellows, but still they came on, pushing in, hacking, slashing. Hits began to tell on dwarven armor and shields, and Thorin’s head rang from one blow, but it couldn’t get through his helmet. His blade came up, removing a leg and cutting deeply into the side of that Horseman’s horse, before flicking out into a horse’s leg, slicing it clean off at the knee. The horse and man both screamed as they came down, but the man’s screech ended abruptly as Dori’s cudgel smashed into his face, pulping skull and teeth.

Elsewhere along the circle’s innermost layer, Tholi nodded to several of the wounded, those who had broken arms. Small, hastily made slings twirled, then hurled their charge upward over the circle.

These were the small glass flasks that the Zigûr-khaz had created for their ballistae. Normally, a ballista would toss more than a dozen such flasks, each of them containing some of the substances that the army’s scorpions had used in their ammunition. Here, the effect wasn’t nearly as big, but they still crashed here and there among the Easterling host as it pressed in, then exploded, sending noxious fumes or acid everywhere.

The Easterling cavalry reeled, but still came in, pressing hard. A dwarf went down to one side of where Thorin was in the formation, then another was driven to his knees by a strike to his shoulder. However, the dwarves on either side of that fellow lashed out, cutting that heavy cavalryman down, then two more.

Soon, the debris of the first impacts on the line was doing just as much as the dwarves to slow and defend against the attacking horsemen.

Horses, no matter how well-trained, would not simply charge over the bodies of dead men and horses. Especially when loud, flaming substances were hitting the ground or their fellows nearby. They slowed, they tried to pull at the hawsers, they tried to rear back, get away. And thus the horses opened themselves up to being struck by a crossbow bolt or arrow.

The density of the dwarven formation was now completely stymying the enemy's assault, and the Easterling commander could see it from wherever he was. Even as Thorin killed another Easterling, then slit the throat of a squealing horse almost absentmindedly, he heard the same horn cries that he had heard in that first battle against the Easterlings over the tumult all around him. A strange sound, almost tinny, like a bugle, but not quite, deeper and yet truncating quickly.

Instantly, the fighting began to ebb away as the Easterlings pulled back. "Hold! Do not pursue!"

That order went over poorly with many of Thorin's dwarves, but enough kept their heads to hold the hotheads back, not allowing the formation to break. And as it did, Thorin shifted back and through the two lines behind him along with his honor guard, the second line taking the place of the first all along the front, even to the point of exchanging weapons where needed to keep shields on the front line.

Among dwarves, that was not an easy thing. Weapons were personal items; some were even family heirlooms. More than one dwarf grumbled about the necessity, and hundreds of growled curses and oaths were muttered in those few moments, but Thorin's orders were absolute, and by this point, there was no dwarf in the army who would argue with him.

Taking a spyglass and moving to a small mound of dirt the dwarves had made prior to the battle, Thorin was able to peer over their lines and into the distance. Everywhere he looked was a sea of horsemen, slowly pulling back and away from his host in every direction.

His officers soon joined him, and he pointed at Khounuk. "Khounuk, stay to our southeast. If we have an opportunity, we're going to break out in that direction. Tholi, grab a few hundred men and start pushing the dead bodies away, give us some breathing space."

At these orders, men from the third line who had yet to truly engage the enemy shifted forward through the front two lines. There, they did what they could to push and heave the bodies of dead horses and men aside. This created a small area of mobility around the dwarven circle.

“What do you think the Easterlings will do now?” Oliver asked.

“One of three things. Either probing attacks to see if they can wear us down via constant, small-scale pressure, or keeping us in place here. They could move up archers or bring in mounted infantry, if they even have any, to break our lines. They will also reorganize their own lines. Their light infantry did nothing here. Their heavy infantry might have the weight of armor enough to start pushing at our lines, but all the light cavalry can do is die when our defensive circle is so thick.”

*And low to the ground, Thorin thought in some amusement. The Easterlings need to lean over and down too much to be able to bring their full weight to bear on our center of mass.*

“That’s only two things, Thorin, if you’re counting bringing in archers and infantry as the same tactic. Are you, and if so, what is their third option?” Saruman asked. He hadn’t taken part in the battle beyond stabbing his staff forward a time or two to smash the heads of an Easterling who tried to jump from his saddle bodily onto the dwarves, and was now watching everything with almost clinical interest.

Something in the Istari’s tone or body language rang false to Thorin, but the thought didn’t stay in his mind as he addressed Saruman’s question. “I do indeed count that as a single tactic. As for the third, they made a mistake trying to come in at us from all sides. A better idea would have been to come at us from a single direction, with more weight and at a faster speed. If they hit us hard enough to break our braced line, the battle would turn in their favor. It’s not very likely, but enough weight and speed could overcome us. That’s why I had us form a three-rowed defense.”

“I see. I had wondered how effective charges like that would be, but I had not realized how much of their momentum and strength would be lost in charges like that because of how they have to control their horses while using both hands on their lances,” Saruman mused.

*I wonder why there’s such a big difference between a charge from these Easterlings and a charge of the men of Rohan? I have seen such charges a few times over the decades, and not once did one break like that, no matter how tough the target. Is it the size of the dwarves forcing more of their weight off the center of mass, the wizard mused, his thoughts mirroring Thorin’s, or, or could they be missing something that makes the men of Rohan simply better on the charge?*

With the wizard falling silent, Thorin turned his attention back to the enemy host. The forces that had closed with his army had indeed pulled back out of arrow range and begun encircling them, a loop of constant motion, the tramp of hooves a psychological weapon. Worse, Thorin couldn't see past those first few lines of moving cavalry to what could be going on behind it.

When that moving line of cavalry parted at a horn call, Thorin quickly saw that he had been correct. Four columns of now dismounted men, all clad in heavy lamellar armor and wielding maces and shields, charged forwards. Many of them, indeed, the majority, had the mark of the Blood Hand on their armor.

They spread out as they came, replacing the original circling horsemen. There were a lot of them, thousands at least, and unfortunately, Thorin realized that Nori's initial estimate of this army's size was probably correct.

*We're outnumbered at least 5 to 1 here*, he reflected, before shrugging mentally. Now wasn't the time to think of anything like that. *Now is just the time to be happy that we've got such a target-rich environment.* "I will remind you, men of Erebor, a hundred gold or a weapon made by my hand for the first man to reach fifteen kills," He shouted, too much laughter from his men.

"Is that prize available to us as well, King Under the Mountain?" Matias bellowed back from nearby. "Because I believe I am already up to eleven. And I wager a longsword made by your hand would be a prize my family will treasure for an Age."

"Bah! I'm up to thirteen!" a dwarven voice retorted.

"Twelve here!"

"Nine, and horses don't count, remember?!"

More shouts of this sort and then insulted were thrown, and Thorin grinned. *If the enemy hopes to break my army's morale, they will be sorely mistaken.*

Moments later, the infantry charged forwards, smashing into and through the barricade of their own dead, losing more to sling, bolt and arrow, before they hit the circle of dwarves. But if they expected to have any better of a day than they had on horseback, they were rudely disabused of this notion in the first few moments. Blows crashed down on chain mail, doing nothing but getting a grunt from their victims, then dwarven weapons returned those blows, smashing into or slicing through armor. Men started to die again, going down with wails of pain or cries of fury alike, as once more the besieged army of Sigin-tarâg proved they were a very different kettle of fish than the enemies this host had dealt with before.

As time passed, more and more infantry pressed in, and twice Thorin, who had joined a position in the third line, found himself at the front. He hacked and slashed, he bellowed and laughed his defiance, killing, killing and more. At one point, his honor guard held at the front while several wounded were pulled out of the line behind them, and the enemy, seeming to sense weakness, tried to push harder. The honor guard, however, held. The cudgel of Dori, the twin axes of Dwalin and Thorin's Orcrist, creating a line of death and destruction.

As the sun started to fall, they too were pulled back and replaced on the line, with cheers of Erebor and more in their ears as the dwarves continued to stand and fight.

The battle continued throughout the day as the enemy pressed in. Archers pressed forward and fired over their lines, aiming for the dwarves and the men with them, but the archers of Dale were able to suppress them, though several of them fell to return fire. The dwarven crossbowmen and slingers also started to fall as, on the front lines, weight and numbers began to tell.

Losses among the dwarves mounted even as they killed far, far more than they were dying. And at some point, just as Thorin and his honor guard were about to shift from the second line to the front line, the enemy commander finally realized it again. Another horn sounded as the sun began to set once more, and more archers pushed forward to join their fellows. Instead of the hundreds of arrows previously, thousands of arrows now flew.

Screams of pain resounded from behind Thorin, and he cursed. Few of the men from Dale had anything more than light gambesons, and the archers had pushed forward into their own range, taking losses among themselves from Dalemen enough that their arrows could punch through. As their infantry held ahead of them, the killing became a little more even now, but not by much. The dwarves still stood, their chain mail, plate, shields, helmets and such capable of taking the punishment from those arrows, but it was clear that the enemy was modifying their tactics.

Moments later, though, the infantry started to pull away from the defensive formation in a controlled retreat. The archers retreated with them, and soon they were back behind the still circling rows of cavalry.

The Easterlings had attacked Thorin's army too late in the day. As they began to regroup behind that line of cavalry, the sun finished setting. Soon, full night fell, a moonless and cloudy night. Hundreds, thousands of lights appeared all around the dwarven host as the Easterlings passed out torches or prepared fires, while the moving circle of cavalry settled into place, still facing towards the dwarves of Erebor.

As the wounded were seen to and the dead moved to one side, their accoutrements pulled off their bodies, Thorin, nodded over to Saruman. "Send a signal to Durok. If there's any chance of us breaking out of this, it will come tonight."

"A night action?" Saruman blinked. "Interesting. That is not an idea that most human commanders would approve of. The chaos of such things will work in your favor, though."

"Exactly. And Durok's boar riders will have an even bigger impact than normal. Please, send the message. We need Durok to hit the encirclement to the southeast from here," Turning from Saruman as the Istari nodded, Thorin addressed his officers. "Make certain that any of the wounded are ready to march; we're not leaving a single living dwarf behind. Khounuk, pull your men off the line and let them rest for now. They'll be the tip of the spear when we break out."

Hearing the firm, confident tone did wonders for the dwarves and Matias, all of whom had been looking a little ragged. Hardy the dwarves were against hardship and weight, but the unending assault had still gotten to many, as had losing so many men. They'd lost at least two hundred dead so far, while the men of Dale had paid a ruinous cost. They were down to barely a little over half the men they'd started the day with. Worse was the fact that they were all of them down to their last two quivers of arrows. The same went for the crossbowmen, as most of their supply had been switched to Foldorin's corps.

All of his officers nodded, then Dwalin came over holding out a piece of hardtack bread, his eyes stern. "Eat. You also need your food."

Actually, Thorin didn't really think he did. He wasn't feeling tired at all. One of the things that the Arkenstone gave him was enhanced endurance and Thorin felt as if he could continue fighting for days on end, which was something even most dwarves would've had trouble with.

Still, he took the food, and hours later, his army's morale had risen with the food, even as arrows continued to flash into them from out of the darkness randomly. The enemy had decided to pull back for the night, barring some probing attacks by light cavalry and archers. The Easterlings had fought dwarves for Ages and knew all too well that the dwarves' eyesight was better than their own in the dark. Most of the enemy host took this opportunity to bunk down, with some clans even going so far as to put up camps.

However, they hadn't discovered Durok's force. Now, as Thorin and his officers waited, to the southeast, there came a series of horn blasts followed by a series of screams, the bellowing of boars and dwarves alike in the distance.

"Khounuk, move," Thorin ordered, as the defensive line, which he remained in place up to this point, even as dwarves ate on their feet, separated. The third line of dwarves that been

pulled back halfway through the day now charged out, moving as silently as possible. With them came the crossbowmen with Nori and the scouts rounding them out.

The front line of this column pushed through the windrows of dead horses and men, shifting them all out of the way, then charged on into the darkness. A few enemy archers' eyes widened as the dwarves came out of the dark, crashing into and over them, and a small host of light cavalry tried to wheel into the side of the column, only to be met by the crossbow bolts of the dwarves at point-blank range.

Behind them came the rest of the army. The Dalemen were in the center once more, hunched low, each of them carrying dwarven shields above their heads just in case, and their bows unstrung on their backs.

The front of the host crashed into and through the small cordon left around the dwarven army during the night as more and more of their troops followed.

Before the enemy could do anything, busy as they were reacting to the boars that had suddenly erupted into the midst of their southeasternmost camps, the dwarven army also started hitting the enemy camps. Communal tents and men sleeping outside beside guttering fires had already been awake, staring towards the sounds of the battle with the boar riders, only to find the dwarves charging out of the darkness.

Men once more began to die, but bugles soon sounded. More men came out, armed and shifting into formations of their own with the light of torches to help.

If Thorin had been foolish enough to stay and fight, the fact that the enemy army had spread out and their sheer numbers would have spelled his army's defeat, despite the night giving his people yet another advantage. But he didn't. Instead, they simply punched through, with Thorin at the back, the Arkenstone underneath his clothing searing hot as he cut down Easterlings one after another as he protected this or that flank as Easterling units charged in to first attack, then tried to slow the dwarves' advance.

Soon, his only companions were those of his honor guard, and they slowly retreated, following after the rest of his army. Eventually, thanks to the nighttime conditions and their crossbows, the dwarves were able to break contact entirely and marched away through the night.

Elsewhere, the boar riders pulled back and out of the enemy position and moved to shield the rest of the column. Thanks to Saruman's continued efforts with a few sparrows, they soon found the infantry column and formed up to guard their back and sides.

"Nori, get forward. I want to know where we are in relationship to the rest of our army," Thorin ordered.

Nori, from where he had been marching alongside Dori, nodded, putting on a burst of speed to get ahead of the Army. Later, Nori was replaced on that side by the heaving, slobbering form of a large bore, and Thorin looked up into Durok's eyes. "Good work. Can your troops keep on shielding us?"

"Boars aren't made to ride quickly. We can keep up this pace for a few hours, but after that, we'll need to let them rest," Durok warned. "I also lost somewhere between fifty and seventy men tonight; we're still taking a tally."

"Understood. Keep them at the back of the column and in close for now, then. If you start to fall out of formation because your mounts are getting tired, tell us and we'll slow the pace. It's better to keep together for now," Thorin decided. "I doubt we'll be lucky enough to take them by surprise again like that, and if we get close, we might be able to use your men to punch through to Foldorin's forces."

Durok nodded and wheeled away to rejoin his fellows, the boar under him trying to fight his controls for a few moments before the dwarf overcame it.

Through the night, the dwarves marched on, trying to put as much distance between themselves and the Easterlings as they could, but always aware that the Easterlings had also put out their own feelers. The moonless, cloud-covered night helped the dwarves immensely, thankfully, and the night passed uneventfully.

However, Saruman eventually warned the dwarves that he was now certain someone was still watching them from afar. "I have seen dark wings above us more than once that were not my own little messengers. I do not know how the Easterlings are able to communicate with them. That is an ability that only the Númenóreans had ever developed since the First Age, but I cannot deny that some of those birds seem to have been moving with more purpose than they should have. Particularly this far away from the battlefield. There is also little I can do about it. Using wind does not come naturally to me, as it would my friend Gandalf, alas."

"You don't have any idea how the ravens or crows could be communicating with them?" Thorin asked, appalled. "We've not seen this before, have we?"

"We have not," Saruman answered before any of the dwarves could answer. "I think that whoever can communicate with the birds is with this particular host, or close by. I..." Saruman put on a worried expression, rather than showing the intrigue he truly felt. "Perhaps Sauron has developed magic to hand over command of ravens and crows to a Man, but if so, I do not know how to do that."

It was somewhat annoying, but that frame of mind was one that Saruman had gotten used to, much to his chagrin, when it came to the Easterlings. *Their entire society is far too good at keeping secrets. I can only hope that after this is over, I will learn further one way or another.*

A few dwarves tried to shoot the birds down, but most missed, losing their bolts into the night. At one point, one of those bolts came down on a dwarf elsewhere in the column, and Thorin had to order his men to stop, and then promised to officiate a fistfight at some point in the future between the injured dwarf and the crossbowmen who had fired the bolt.

The army kept pushing on until it was close to daylight, then kept going, hoping to link up with its fellows. Thorin hoped that doing so would let them link up with Foldorin's forces. They ate on the march, with the boars being given double helpings, wary but hopeful.

They had almost made it, the scouts reporting that they had made contact with her fellows, when the Easterlings found them again...

### **End Chapter**

I had hoped to put in the Harry portions, and might come back to this at the end of the month, but I want to let Hiryo have some time to go over the Ranma winner when I send it to him. I'm going to need to work hard to get it out to him with enough time as it is, sadly.