

WOOO!! Let's hear it for having a scene already finished and a really detailed plan for the rest! Well... that and my using Dragon Naturally Speaking being so likable to the baby while babysitting in the morning, and the fact I don't need much sleep at night. Afternoons... construction. Lots of construction, some demolition. But it is done, regardless.

I am posting it here first, and over on fanfic this coming weekend. If you spot any errors, particularly lore type errors, tell me. I won't have time tomorrow as we're pushing to finish this project. Wednesday I will close the Patron Only poll and go over Journey gone astray chapter 1, which Hiryo got back to me yesterday. Once that is done, I will start work on the POP winner.

Enjoy!

I am certainly not Tolkien, who looms above us modern writers like a titan, challenging and uplifting in one stroke. Nor am I JKR, who first sent a young child into a meat grinder designed as a school for magic.

This was not the winner of the HP poll this month. That was FILFy. However, due to RL issues cutting into my time badly the second week of the month and due to how long it's been since I wrote in that fic making work on it slow before that, I realized I couldn't finish that chapter without cutting into time meant for the other fics for September. Instead, I put the time meant to work on FILFy to Fate, as I already had segments of this written out for the last chapter, but hadn't been happy with their quality.

Chapter 28: Darkness's Depths

Aragorn tried. He tried very hard not to look over his shoulder towards Rivendell as he left the only home he'd ever known. Instead of giving in to the urge to look back at where he came from, the young man used all his willpower to keep his eyes on the path ahead of him, following Ranger Balakân, one of the men he had met several months ago.

This was to be Aragorn's first ranging. According to Dunedain tradition, it would be the first of five that he would take with another Ranger before he was allowed to travel on his own. They would all be years long, as many as two or three. Yet Aragorn knew he would still be a young man as those of Númenórean descent reckoned such things. Even today, the Dunedain had far longer lives than other Men, lives each and every one of them had dedicated to the purpose of defending others from the dark things that haunted Middle-earth.

And my blood is unique among even the men of the west, he thought, thinking about the revelations he had learned those months ago.

Yet that was scant comfort to Aragorn right now, as this was only the second time he had been out of Rivendell at all. This leaving wasn't like the time he went on a trip to the Shire with Harry and Bilbo. No, there was a permanence to this, a final river crossed from one aspect of his life to another.

When they crested up over a hill following a trail that wound back the way they had come, Aragorn couldn't stop himself. He paused there, staring over the hidden dell that contained the Last Homely House, where his mother and lord Elrond resided.

As the Dunedain reckoned things, Balakân was a middle-aged man. He was trim as all such who made it their duty to travel the world hunting the creatures of the dark were, with broader shoulders than most elves in Rivendell. His skin was tanned and weathered from decades spent in all sorts of weather, his clothing similarly weathered but well-cared for. Balakân had short-cropped hair with a long scar going over the top of his head. Another, equally new scar, went along the side of his cheek.

Combined, they had ruined what had once been a handsome, aquiline face, as well as forcing Balakân to cut his hair short lest he look more disturbing than serious. He had joked about it over the past few months as the healers in Rivendell saw to his injuries, but the loss of his hair had annoyed the man, Aragorn was certain.

Now, the older man waited a moment in silence before smacking Aragorn sharply on the back of his head, even as he kept his voice almost commiserating. "If you are already longing for home, other than this journey is off to a very unpleasant start."

Rubbing the back of his head, Aragorn nodded, his face firming. "I apologize, master Balakân. It will not happen again." *This journey is the start of the rest of my life, and I need to embrace it with as much seriousness as I have taken to any lesson from Master Elrond*, he thought, putting the sensation he'd been feeling all day into words, if only in his own mind, a firmness coming to his mind. *My time as Estel is over. I must become more than hope.*

Balakân was about to say something about Aragorn not making promises he can't keep, but when he looked into the youth's eyes, Balakân found himself nodding. There was something steady in that gaze, something **certain**.

Not eager, which was good. Eagerness for the road, for the novelty of travel, would fade quickly, and in many it would never return. This would leave the person bereft of a portion of the willpower necessary to keep traveling the old roads, the forests and mountains as a Ranger must in search of those evil things which slid between the cracks of the watch on Mordor or were among the more home-grown variety.

Even better, there was no sense of grimness to Aragorn's gaze just yet. That would come in time, but if he was already feeling grim, the youth would probably break when reality exceeded any youthful fears of what he would find.

Instead, Aragorn simply stared back at Balakân, resolute, before his lips twitched, and a flash of humor passed over his face. "Although I am not looking forward to taking my first nighttime watch, master. I might have been out of Rivendell once before, yet I am somehow certain this journey will tax me far more heavily than that one. Unless you are hiding Istari-style abilities somewhere under your cloak?"

Balakân allowed a snort to pass his lips, reflecting, *A bit of good humor, a desire to explore, and a very large desire to prove himself, to become one of us. Coupled with what I have seen of young Aragorn before, I can certainly work with that.*

Aragorn would not be the first young ranger Balakân had taught, and the Valar willing, he would not be the last. *Although he might be the greatest, with Aragorn's starting point and his drive. Although I will never tell him that! Hah, that would be most foolish. As would underestimating the mind behind those grey eyes.*

Throughout the day, Balakân advised Aragorn on how to move silently. Aragorn had already learned to do so in Rivendell; however, that was in Rivendell, a land frequented and cared for by elves. Despite the fact that elves had far better hearing and situational awareness than most Aragorn would need to fool, the lands of Elrond were well-maintained and cared for, and mostly forest or garden. Few indeed were the areas of marsh, scrub or hard stone.

The tricks that Balakân was teaching him now would be useful on any kind of terrain. Further, Aragorn had fallen into a few, admittedly understandable, bad habits about leaving behind marks, and, worse, had never been hunted by wolves or other creatures that could smell as well as the wargs of orcs. "Even some goblins and orcs have developed the ability to smell the passage of men and elves alike. And you, my young ranger, smell of soap as much as sweat. That, we will take care of when we make camp tonight."

Balakân was a hard taskmaster and of a sort that Aragorn hadn't dealt with before when it came to noncombat lessons. Whenever Aragorn made a noise in the same way twice, a small switch would come down on his shoulder or side, leaving stinging pain behind despite Aragorn's leather jerkin and cape. It was nothing to the blows of the practice swords he'd taken for more than a decade by this point, but it was humiliating.

When Aragorn objected, Balakân was unmoved. "Pain is the best teacher for things that should keep you alive in the future. Far too often, we Rangers walk these roads alone, and being discovered by our enemies **will** mean death. Better to take your lumps now, as

you would in your sword training. I've lost many a friend over the centuries who wasn't able to move silently enough or had forgotten what it was to be the hunted instead of the hunter, and I will not lose another because I was not a good teacher."

Thinking that made sense. Despite Elrond and Trevadron before him never having been the types to go into corporeal punishment, both elves had always made it very clear to Aragorn that he needed to take every spar seriously. As if it were real combat. So he agreed with the sentiment, even if he did slightly come to resent the switch for what it represented.

Not the pain. Pain was fleeting, and soon Aragorn began to not even feel the strikes for more than an instant. No, it was the failure to learn a lesson quickly enough that he resented. Which, he knew, was the point, although that made it no easier to bear.

In contrast, when they stopped that night, it was Aragorn who taught Balakân something, at least in their first spar. Like Trevadron, Lord Elrond had been an exacting master when it came to Aragorn's swordsmanship. For his first ranging, Elrond had given Aragorn an elvish blade, a longsword that curved just a bit at the tip, was light in the hand and had a thin cross guard. Aragorn could move it like it was an extension of his arm, for all that these days, he was beginning to think it was a bit lighter than he would have preferred.

Balakân's sword was heavier, with a slightly wider, shorter blade, and had a basket hilt, a personal choice that Aragorn had never seen before. Yet that did not matter as it didn't stop Aragorn from disarming the older man within a few minutes of the spar starting.

Aragorn did not allow any kind of arrogance to show on his face or pride in the deed. He simply bowed and said in Quenya, "Thank you for the lesson," as he would when sparring against Lord Elrond or one of the others.

Although more often than not against Elrond, it would've been Aragorn who had been disarmed. *When I can beat Lord Elrond in three out of five spars, that is when I will know I am becoming proficient with the blade,* Aragorn reflected with wry amusement.

For his part, Balakân took it in stride, replying in the same tongue. He was a Dunedain and had spent many years in Rivendell among the elves. That connection had allowed the Dunedain, as a society, to retain their connection to not only the culture of the Noldor and Sindar elves but also to ancient Númenor and to the nations that Elendil the Tall had built, Gondor and Arnor. That and the blood in their veins marked such men as surely as it did Aragorn.

“Well, it seems as if you learned your lessons in Rivendell quite well in terms of swordsmanship. But I knew **that** previously,” Balakân said with a chuckle. “Now, let’s see how well you do in a real battle.”

For a moment, Aragorn frowned, wondering if Balakân was somehow denigrating his training under Lord Elrond. Aragorn had many a memory of being sent to bed bruised and battered, so if he meant to say that there was some kind of secret lesson to be learned when facing live blades rather than dulled, Aragorn wasn’t certain he would believe it.

However, he stayed silent and thus quickly learned what Balakân meant when they crossed blades again. After exchanging a few blows, Balakân feinted, and then, instead of following through from the feint as Aragorn had predicted with a strike at Aragorn’s chest, lashed out with a kick at Aragorn’s lower leg. It wasn’t a heavy kick, but it was still enough to send Aragorn stumbling, and that was enough for Balakân’s sword to pass over Aragorn’s hasty guard, the tip tickling his throat a moment later.

“Lord Elrond is a master swordsman, the like of whom I could never match. Nor could any man. However, I rather doubt he has ever taught you any of what most would consider dirty tricks.” Balakân chuckled dryly. “Elrond is not a man who has ever enjoyed small-scale battles or quick skirmishes. His sons could have possibly taught you better, but they, well...”

“Elrohir and Elladan are even faster with the blade than Lord Elrond, and while I would count them as acquaintances, they don’t have the temperament to teach for very long,” Aragorn acknowledged. He had met both of Elrond’s sons several times in his life, and it was only the last time they had been in Rivendell that they had begun to treat him as an equal, someone they were willing to take time to train. *And they’ve been gone for nearly three years now. I imagine they will be happy to see how much I have grown, but I cannot say for certain.*

“Exactly. Yet those of us who bear the duty of hunting down the dark things of this world know that there is no such thing as a ‘dirty trick’ so long as it works, and you are the one to continue your travels,” Balakân said, chuckling in good humor at the diplomatic way Aragorn spoke of Elrond’s sons. Like the rest of Rivendell, Elladan and Elrohir worked closely with the Rangers, and none of the Dunedain did not know the pair. Yet the fact was, they did not have much patience for teaching.

Aragorn frowned, then his face firmed, and he nodded. “I understand.”

Balakân gazed at him for a few seconds, then nodded, internally thinking, *You do, don’t you? Those eyes and the mind behind them certainly see more than most youths would, even among the Dunedain. Yet this youngster may become the one to lead us in the*

decades to come. He must see the world the way it is and wield the strength of character to not be broken by that viewing. I had a few worries in that direction before, and I am losing what little concerns I had.

Three times they sparred that night after that, and three times Balakân used a trick or their surroundings to gain an advantage. That too was somewhat unusual, and Aragorn learned quickly that the terrain could itself be a weapon.

Despite that, only once more was Balakân able to land a killing strike on Aragorn. The boy learned fast, and after standing back for the last time, Balakân sent him to gather wood for the fire with a light heart. *This is going quite well*, he reflected.

A thought that faded quickly, considering how much noise Aragorn made as he came back with his arms laden down. It then disappeared entirely from his mind when he had to walk the youth through how to create a fire that wouldn't send up enough smoke to be seen for miles.

Still, it wasn't anything that he hadn't done before with young Rangers. Balakân had been carefully chosen among the twenty most senior Dunedain still active in the field away from their few scattered villages to see to Aragorn's education. As long as Aragorn kept learning, Balakân would teach him to the best of his ability.

Worse for Aragorn was how Balakân told him to get rid of the smell of soap. "Wait, you just want me to wallow in the mud and wet leaves?"

"Unless you'd rather I go out and find something more pungent for us to use? Bird droppings, the pellets of a deer?" Balakân asked. "We of the road do not have the luxury of smelling of soap, Aragorn. Now, strip. Your clothing blends into the surroundings without further effort on our part."

What followed was somewhat humiliating for Aragorn as Balakân flung mud on him, then helped wash it away several times until the older man could no longer smell anything but mud from the younger man. "Good. Rub some mud into your hair in the morning, and we should be good."

"Yes, Master," Aragorn muttered, setting aside any thoughts of ever being truly clean again.

For two days, the pair headed straight north, or what most would call straight north anyway, away from Rivendell. Balakân explained the ranging was set to eventually reach the feet of the Misty Mountains after following a river called the Hoarwell, called the Trollshaws. On the map that Aragorn could bring to mind, the Trollshaws were a patch of woods through which the Hoarwell ran to the north and west of Rivendell.

They actually were a little further away than Aragorn had thought they were from the map, but that was more because elvish and human mapmakers among the Rangers often argued about where the Trollshaws should actually start. The rangers believed the Trollshaws were part of the greater Ettenmoors and ended at one point, but the elves believed it was a separate, far smaller territory that only began at that same point.

It was a difference based on time and changing geography. “At one point, the forest of the Trollshaw was part of a greater forest that dominated this segment of Rhudaur, a source of good wood for both Rhudaur and Arnor before it. The elves still remember it as the shadow of that greater wood, rather than seeing it as it is now, simply the southernmost outskirts of the eternally problematic Ettenmoors. I have lost track of the number of elves who become dismayed when they travel to the Hoarwell and discover how far the trees were cut back in the wars against Angmar and did not return. Far too many elves, Sindar and Noldor alike, do not understand how the lands of Eriador have not recovered from the Witch King’s depredations.”

The Ettenmoors was the name for what had once been the segment of Rhudaur that directly abutted the Misty Mountains. Whatever it had been once, it was now a nearly empty land with the bones of ancient days scattered like dust motes over it. Worse, the closeness to the northernmost mountains of the Misty Mountains meant that fell things, trolls, and orcs meant that the Ettenmoors saw a large number of that sort. Either passing through, or worse, settling down and then raiding further south. Not often, but enough to be dangerous.

“We’ve begun to patrol this area more often after reports of three trolls were reported to us along the great East-West Road to the Shire and beyond to the Havens,” Balakân explained as they peered through the trees toward the band of blue and green that was the River Hoarwell. From here, they would be following the river further north. “Trolls are incredibly dangerous, and even one of them traveling into the peaceable lands of Bree or further south can cause tremendous trouble.

Balakân turned to Aragorn, pushing up and over the river to the north-northwest. “There are also a few outposts of the Dunedain in the Ettenmoors, and further to the northwest that we would prefer to not be troubled by such.”

“I actually know that story quite well, the bit about three trolls being near the East-West Road, I mean,” Aragorn said with a chuckle, as Balakân began moving once more. Both of their voices were low, so that even if someone had passed by within a yard of the pair, they would not have been able to hear them, while the two men could hear one another quite well. This was another little trick that Balakân had taught the younger man

over the past two days. “I’ve actually seen those three trolls, or rather their statues, and learned about the battle from two who were there.”

Balakân stopped again, and after a moment examining the area around them, looked over at the younger man. “Tell me.”

From there, Aragorn filled him in on Harry Potter, Bilbo Baggins and the fact that Aragorn had snuck out of Rivendell at one point to journey with the two of them to the Shire and back with Harry. When asked, he went into greater detail about his last adventure with Harry, traveling through the Old Forest and the battle with the barrow-wights. Balakân listened, asking only a few questions as he led the way forward.

“I honestly am not certain what to think about Harry Potter and his odd abilities. I know of Tom Bombadil. Several of our brethren have passed through the Old Forest over the centuries when need pressed to watch the borders of the Shire, and those who did, called upon Tom Bombadil when we do so.” Balakân chuckled. “From your description, oldest and deathless is still an appropriate name for that odd one. Still, he is proof against any other power within his woods, and the strength of Old Man Willow’s song is taxing on even Dunedain to deal with or slip past.”

He paused then, holding up a hand and gesturing. Aragorn slid down to his stomach, and the pair crawled forward into an opening, where they could peer along the river to either side. Here, the Hoarwell was deep and flowing strong, and the forest of the Troollshaw abutted it closely. Peering through the trees, Aragorn saw no movement, but pushing into the open would have made it easy to spot the pair in turn, something Balakân explained before turning the conversation back to Aragorn’s tale.

“The Barrows... I cannot remember a single time when one of us Rangers ventured into them willingly. Fel things died there, fel men, with oaths that bound them beyond death to the Great Enemy through his most powerful Lieutenant, the Witch King. Your mother was not exaggerating to say they were death on anyone with the blood of Númenor.”

Aragorn nodded grimly, knowing that all too well, having learned such from the lessons of Lord Elrond.

The Barrow-downs or Tyrn Gorthad, as the Sindar elves named it, was an ancient place. The first barrows, the massive slabs of whose remnants Aragorn had barely even noticed at the time, had stood there since the First Age. When Arnor had been created in the Second Age 3320, the Númenóreans revered it for that reason, as those barrows had been created by other Edain, men of the Houses who had met and revered the elves in the First Age.

When Arnor broke up in T.A (Third Age) 861, Tyrn Gorthad became part of Cardolan, the nation given to King Eärendur's second son when he broke up the kingdom of Arnor. Cardolan was attacked nearly six hundred years later by forces out of Rhudaur and Angmar under its Witch King. The Dunedain of Cardolan was nearly wiped out, but those who retreated into the Barrows fought a guerrilla war for months before retreating into the Old Forest and from there into Arthedain. Eventually, that army of Angmar was defeated, its forces shattered, even as the Witch King retreated.

The forces of Lindon, Rivendell, Lothlorien and Arthedain's inability to finish the Witch King and Angmar off, however, reared its head then as it had when Rhudaur fell first. Two hundred years later, the Witch King released a Great Plague into Cardolan, wiping out the rebuilding Cardolan, weakening Lindon and separating that elven realm from direct communication with the hidden dale of Rivendell. At the same time, he sent fell spirits into Tyrn Gorthad, claiming the ancient burial area, despoiling it, shattering the old stones and replacing them with their own foulness. Right up until Harry and Aragorn wandered into the area out of the Old Forest.

"We of the Dunedain knew what had happened there. Several of us could feel the difference even from Bree. But we had not heard the full tale. Hearing it from you was fascinating, Aragorn. Thank you." That 'thank you' covered a great deal of meaning, and Aragorn knew it. But he simply nodded, watching as Balakân seemed to peer into the past, seeing some shred of shared memory of the Dunedain rather than the forest around them.

Moved by that look, Aragorn pulled out the dagger that he had found within the Barrow down, flipping it to hand it to the older man hilt first. "This was my prize for that day's excitement, for all I don't think I did anything, really. I also took a sword, but at the time it was too long for me to practice with, and even if it had been, it felt wrong to dull it down. Yet for some reason, when I began to add size and length to my arms, I never went back for it. Instead, I felt moved to bury it in a grave in Rivendell. I still don't know why."

"Weapons of the Men of the West could have been carried by the same man for centuries. Like the barrow-wights, they too would have a touch of spirit to them. Perhaps you sensed such in the sword and not the dagger. Nor would I downplay your own courage on the day. It takes a special sort of man to stand unbowed against creatures you have no way of harming, to say nothing of helping Harry find the creations to which the wights were bound."

The older man took Aragorn's dagger, examining it quickly, then murmured a few words in the tongue of Númenor, which Aragorn followed along, his head bowing briefly.

“May your ancient owner have found his rightful place at the side of Eru Ilúvatar beyond Arda, to journey with him for all days.”

“In carrying this dagger, I honor you, who fell in the long war against the dark, and vow to continue to stand against the Great Enemy you were forged to fight,” Aragorn added in the same language.

It took Balakân a few seconds to come back to the here-and-now, but he handed the dagger back quickly to Aragorn, gesturing him to keep moving. “Well, that is all well and good, but we, as you have mentioned a time or two, do not have Harry Potter and his magic with us.”

“I’ve noticed. Standing watch was not fun, even if I did so while lying out the past two nights,” Aragorn interjected, doing his part to move past the serious moment.

“Hah! Get used to it, lad, or better, learn how to sleep lightly as I do. Any noise or variation in the forest around can wake me up. You’ll also need to go from such sleep to full wakefulness,” Balakân warned.

Aragorn nodded, seeing that as yet another thing he would need to learn on this journey, then blinked. “Wait, if you remain so aware of our surroundings, does that mean I didn’t need to stay awake and on guard?”

“No, it just means that you have much to learn,” Balakân answered virtuously, a twinkle in his eye that caused Aragorn to snort before he went on more seriously. “We may run into places like the barrows in the Ettenmoors, do not doubt it. There are other places of fell intent out there than the Barrow Downs. Does that bother you?”

“Only in the fact that such places exist, Master Balakân,” Aragorn said stoically. “I was able to detect their influence eventually, and am no longer the child eager to charge forward into adventure as I once was.”

Balakân smiled at that, and the pair slowly moved through the open area, heading down the slight incline to their right and back into the forest. Once under the eaves of the trees, Balakân turned the discussion to what they might run into in the Ettenmoors beyond the cursed sights of ancient battles.

“Trolls are a real concern the further we push towards the Misty Mountains. Even a band of elves would have trouble with trolls if they were not properly prepared for them. Yet even so, there are places on a troll which are susceptible to wounds.”

“I’ve heard that the most important thing is to always try to get behind them. They are slow to turn, and so long as you keep low to the ground, any such turn can be dodged in time,” Aragorn answered.

“Yes and no. It’s a good tactic, it is one the trolls themselves know about. I am more talking about places to aim your blade than overall tactics,” Balakân explained. “Their toes are almost always impervious to harm, but the same cannot be said for the area between them, where their thick callouses fade and they have no nail to act as a small shield over the meat beneath. The back of the knee is also a good place to strike, but again is a weakness that most trolls know about, and will almost automatically defend against the moment you make to flank them.

Reaching up, he gently ran a finger over the top of the bow that stuck up over his shoulder, tied around him with a simple, thin rope. That wasn’t the bow’s actual string. Such were precious on the road, and unless trouble was on the offering, Balakân explained that most kept their bows unstrung like this, the silken cord safely inside a pouch.

“The eyes are a tempting target for any bowman, but they’re small and protected by heavy ridges. Even the slightest twitch can make your arrow miss, and then you will be in trouble unless you have shot from afar. Their skulls can take many an arrow before they are more than inconvenienced. Mountain trolls in particular have...”

From there, Aragorn got a crash course in how to fight a troll. That night, Balakân actually mimed out the part of the troll in camp (such as it was) rather than continuing to spar with him. The switch reminded Aragorn of its humiliating existence more than once when Aragorn made a mistake in his recounting of the weaknesses or a mistake in his approach to the fight. Even so, Aragorn was still learning quite a bit, and he rarely made the same mistake more than twice.

Beyond that, Balakân admitted to himself that it was probably a lack of visual aid, so to speak. Even the most serious of men would be hard-pressed to take a human acting the part of a troll seriously.

And it isn’t as if there is much difference in our size to make it even slightly believable, Balakân reflected. While Aragorn was only in his mid-twenties and thus quite young as the blood of Númenor reckoned such things, he was close to achieving his full growth in terms of height if not width of shoulder, and he was reckoned to be a tall man even among the Dunedain. *Although it’s doubtful he will ever match his ancestor. Isildur, who was a true giant among our folk.*

Two weeks later found the pair pushing through the end of the Trollshaws and into the true Ettenmores. The Trollshaws were more a lowland area of tiny scattered ponds and

rivulets among densely packed trees. This territory wasn't nearly as heavily forested, but the trees were older, bigger. There weren't so many rocks or hidden alcoves, but more in the way of standing water. There were even some remnants of roads, cobblestones sticking out of the ground, a pole of metal and even scattered castles, all pointing to how this territory had once been truly inhabited, and that possibly even densely.

Well, Balakân called them castles. The first two ruins they passed by were not any kind of castle as Aragorn understood the term. These were more squat towers, watchtowers perhaps. Most of their tops were missing, destroyed in the ancient wars against the Witch King.

The Ettenmoors were part of the territory that had once been claimed by the nation of Rhudaur. Rhudaur had eventually fallen under the sway of the Hill Folk during a time of famine. A mighty chieftain among them had made a secret alliance with the witch king and eventually seized power throughout the nation with his aide. Thus, Argeleb, king of Arthedain, was forced to fortify the Weather Hills, which became the border between Rhudaur and Arthedain, a hotly contested area as the sole remaining Palantir in the north remained where Elendil had placed it on the tower of Amon Sûl, ancient watchtower of Arnor at the height of its power.

Unlike that shattered, ruined relic of the Second Age, the castles in the Ettenmoors had been built by the people of Rhudaur to defend against their fellow humans. When the pair of rangers stopped to inspect them, Aragorn studied the buildings closely, wondering if he could somehow discern some hint of the history he and those distant builders shared.

He came away from the exercise in some annoyance, not having discerned anything special about them at all. He said this aloud to Balakân, who chuckled dryly.

"The blood of Númenor was badly weakened in those days in Rhudaur due to plague, and the efforts of what we only later discerned were the hidden actions of the Witch King. These ruins were not designed by the men of Númenor, lad. That being said, even at the height of Arthedain's power, its folk never truly built anything in comparison to old Arnor. To discover something from that era, you would have to journey to Whethertop or Annúminas. The tower of Amon Sûl was smashed asunder, but there are still bones of its remaining, and they are stronger than anything made in the north since save perhaps the ancient ruins of Annúminas, the capital that was."

Annúminas had been the capital of Arnor, founded by Elendil following the destruction of Númenor. The capital was slowly abandoned after the losses taken among the Númenóreans during the War of the Last Alliance and the Disaster of the Gladden Fields, with most of the population moving to the smaller, inland city of Fornost. Never

again did the northern kingdoms build up the population necessary to move back to Annúminas, although during the various wars against the Witch King, it had become a battlefield several times.

Balakân shook his head, peering down at the ground, then towards a nearby copse of trees. “That journey is for another day. Keep your eyes open, I’m seeing... unusual signs here. Signs of other Men passing where there should not be.”

Aragorn blinked, and Balakân began yet another lesson. It was not enough, after all, that you could move silently, you had to know what to look out for when hunting for orcs, goblins or other kinds of dark creatures. Or in this case, humans who had bent their minds to dark things.

Not a turn of the glass later, Balakân was certain that was what they were tracking. “Horses heading northeast, sixteen to eighteen of them at the least, with two of them far more heavily laden than the others. I think this is a bandit patrol of some kind, returning either to a situated village or a simple camp.”

“If it’s a village, then are they really bandits? A village implies they have families and homes,” Aragorn inquired, frowning. “I would assume then that the Hill Folk are simply spreading again through this area. Despite their past allegiances, wouldn’t that be a good thing?”

“A bandit is a description of their actions rather than their home lives, lad. If a community is trying to set itself up here in the Ettenmoors, well, that would be rather foolish. I have mentioned trolls many a time, haven’t I? The Trollshaws might see them once every dozen years or so. Further south even less, for all their impact when they appear.”

Balakân shook his head, pushing himself up from where he’d been crouching to examine the tracks of the horses. “We Dunedain know that the Ettenmoors see troll packs every other year at minimum. And there are doubtlessly far more trolls out there that then wander back up into the Misty Mountains who leave no one left alive to carry tales.”

Aragorn’s eyes widened at that, but he nodded, and the two of them continued on as Balakân explained. “Many of the men who made their home in these lands in ancient times have long been allied with the orcs and goblins of the mountains. Not out of necessity, but because they are survivors of Rhudaur and even Angmar, which still cling to life here. They sometimes send warring bands further westward, or down south, such as the one we’re tracking now.”

Dusting his hands, Balakân twitched his head to get Aragorn moving. “I will be able to tell you more when I see them. Although after the War of the Lonely Mountain... what has it been, fifteen years?”

Aragorn blinked, working it on his head for a moment, then said thoughtfully, “Twelve or thirteen, I think.”

“Hmm... perhaps that’s long enough for goblins to have rebuilt their numbers a bit, although it would be faster than normal, even with Moria’s depths as yet in shadow. Regardless, the dwarves did such a good job of pulling the Orcish strength out of the Hithaeglr then and further back in the War of the Dwarves and Orcs that such men would probably have been left on their own. Yet if they still have contacts with some orc or goblin band within the Hithaeglr, I will be able to tell. There are certain markings, certain items that such men wear that can tell me if they are simply bandits or tied into the orcs and goblins of the mountains, serving some greater purpose.”

Not a day later found Aragorn up in a tree, his ranger cloak about him as he peered over the walls of a dilapidated keep at a somewhat sizable warband of humans. The original keep had been a large, squat construction, at least the size of several normal houses in Bree, larger than any of the other ruins the two rangers had seen so far on this journey. At one point, it might well have dominated the lands all around it, but the second and third floors had mostly been removed in some ancient conflict, and the outer wall had been smashed in at various points. Indeed, most of what was left was barely formed rubble, although one wall remained standing as tall as the day it had been built.

Balakân sat on a nearby tree branch, staring at the band of Men who had taken up residence within thoughtfully, whispering things to look out for lest someone within spot them in turn. Neither of them had spy glasses, but like their other senses, the men who had the blood of Númenor within them had better eyesight than most other Men, yet they could still be spotted if they were careless.

What Aragorn saw was a band of men, far larger than the group of eight or nine horsemen the rangers had been trailing before this. There were seventy or more men scattered around the ruins of the keep. They all looked almost primitive in comparison to the men of Bree he had seen in the past, let alone the sophisticated elves of Rivendell. Instead of good cotton shifts and coats, they wore heavy fur clothing over what looked like cheap ring mail and dirty jerkins. Almost all had heavily armored bracers, with axes, swords and spears aplenty. Their camp gear, such as it was, spread out throughout the ruined keep, with several places marked out as latrines and with a group of nine horses tied down in one corner.

Aragorn couldn't see much of their primary weapons, not from this angle or so far away, but the spears being used by the pair of guards on the sole remaining wall of the motte looked barely adequate in his opinion. There were a few larger pikes laid out together deeper in, but that was all. *Possibly to ward off trolls?*

Aragorn wondered how that would work, but beyond that and their barely passable armor, these men had heavy beards, and more than one of them had bones worked into those beards, and they looked generally unkempt, dirty and almost but not quite slovenly, perhaps? Hard, yes, and they held their weapons and seemed to spar with a certain amount of experience. But still dirty and mean in a way that the Dunedain and the men of Bree were not.

They did have several interesting items upon their person. One of them had a heavy helmet with multiple horns of some kind of animal sticking out of it. Another had a large kite shield of somewhat good make in Aragorn's opinion, the piece looking almost Noldor to Aragorn.

Balakân saw other things and pointed them out to Aragorn, who did not need to be told to commit these lessons to memory, as he had all the other lessons Balakân had imparted to him since leaving Rivendell. "You see that one man with the helmet, he has a tiny ring on one hand. The helmet probably means he's the leader of this band. Those horns are from a Mist goat, a very savage creature for all that it subsists on plants."

"I see it. Something is flashing silver on it, but not the whole ring," Aragorn answered back.

"Correct. The ring will be made of bone or wood to look like a lizard or spider, but one of those fangs will be silver. That is a mark of one of the tribes who worked with Angmar in the ages past, although I doubt any alive among them still remember the reasoning behind it."

Balakân scowled. "More importantly, there are also a few of those men down there who have sashes with what look like faces on them wrapped around their arms. Orc faces, I would dare say, used as pennants to signal allegiance."

That took Aragorn a bit to notice, but when he saw one man pull the sash off his arm and use it to wipe his face, Aragorn nodded, able to see some of the details on the sash. "I can see it, although I would say that it isn't exactly an artistic rendering. And why that is one of those eyes looking as if it's been smashed?"

"That is a specific band of orcs that the Dunedain dealt with less than a year ago, further westward. Although perhaps we only dealt with one war band of many? That might

be a bad sign if the orcs have been able to rebuild their numbers in the Misty Mountains...” Balakân mused, then shook his head. “Before you ask, the symbol comes from the fact that orcs from that particular band seemed to enjoy punching one another in the eye.”

That nearly caused Aragorn to laugh, but he didn’t, simply nodding, asking about the importance of the ring. The ring was a sign of the ancient hill folk who had first spent the need to Angmar. “This camp isn’t a big one, but I dare say at least that individual can trace his lineage all the way back to that time.”

“It isn’t a big one? I count at least eighty men down there,” Aragorn protested.

“You’re right, they have the numbers, but they don’t have anything else,” Balakân said promptly, before gesturing Aragorn to start climbing down, warning him to watch out for rustling the leaves or rattling the branches. Because of that, it took the pair several minutes to get down to the ground.

When they were on the ground, Balakân continued, leading the way away from the inhabited fortress, asking some questions of the younger man. “What did it look like to you that they were doing?”

Aragorn frowned for a moment, his mind replaying what he had seen in the camp. “Cooking? Tending to a fire, tending to some of the horses, sparring. Some, including the man in the helmet, were looking through what I have to assume was some manner of loot that the group we trailed here brought with them. I’m afraid I don’t know what you’re asking.”

“No more should you. There wasn’t anything else to see, and that’s the point. That keep isn’t exactly the most defensible around here, but it is a decent position. If those men were thinking of staying here for a long period of time, they would probably try to rebuild it. They’re not. They don’t have the tools for certain, and I would wager they don’t have any knowledge or ability in that direction either.”

Balakân shrugged, and the pair began to move further away from the keep, staying low and keeping to the shadows under the trees. It being evening, that was easier than it would have been during the day, but the watchers on the one, fully intact wall still meant they had to be careful.

“This is some kind of bandit band, certainly, one on hard times now that the orcs with whom they had an agreement with our no longer in the picture. But they still have a lot of kindling gathered there, and I’d wager they’ve been hunting. They intend to stay here, even if they don’t mean to rebuild that motte,” Balakân mused, replaying what he had seen in his mind. *And no women either, although that’s no surprise.*

“What should we do?” Aragorn asked.

“What do you think we should do?” Balakân rejoined. “There are but two of us.”

When Aragorn did not answer, Balakân continued. “Perhaps if we could kill the horses or steal them away, we might be able to keep our distance from the group, whittle down their numbers somewhat with ambush and arrow. But once the first ten or so died, the others would give up the ghost and fort up back in that tower or flee, heading away into the Ettenmoors, forcing us to chase them. We do need to get rid of them, but other than heading out to find more rangers to bring back, I’m not certain how.”

Actually, if he were alone, Balakân would do just that: sneak in at night, spook or steal the horses. Then attempt to kill the leader in the confusion. If successful, such a move would panic the rest, and he would then start picking them off over a matter of weeks. Eventually, he could have them all. But with Aragorn here? While he had been trained to an incredible degree in combat, he lacked experience in terms of stalking an enemy. Balakân also felt his temperament had yet to be watered down enough to deal with such a long, subtle and above all deadly campaign. *Particularly against our fellow Men, no matter that these are certainly Hill Folk rather than of any house of the Edain.*

Aragorn frowned for a few moments, thinking things through. The idea of waiting, or leaving and heading out to find help if they even could, did not sit well with him. Who knew what would happen here while he and Balakân were off hunting down other rangers? Perhaps more of these people would come together here? Or perhaps Balakân was wrong, and they would move on soon or fortify the position more. Any of those three outcomes was bad in Aragorn’s opinion, given how much trouble such a group could make in more settled lands.

Then an idea occurred to him. “Do you remember saying you saw troll sign earlier while we were trailing the horses?” When Balakân nodded, Aragorn gestured towards the keep, which was no longer visible at the moment thanks to the intervening trees. “What if we lead that troll and its companions, if it has any, to these men?”

The older ranger’s eyes widened, and then he hummed thoughtfully. *Now, that is far more ruthless than I expected to hear. I wonder if he has enough imagination and learning ot understand what will happen if we do that. Still, it’s worth a try.* “It could work, although how will we get the trolls here? What will they be chasing?”

Hearing the challenge in Balakân’s tone, Aragorn’s back straightened, and his face firmed into what Balakân had begun to call internally his command expression. At the moment, it wasn’t a very good one, but the seed was there. “Us.”

There wasn't one troll; there were instead five of them nearby. Or nearby, as rangers reckoned things, considering how they were able to discover the trolls just after the moon started to descend once more.

This was alright by Balakân. By his reckoning, the trolls wouldn't take more than two turns of the glass to reach the bandit camp. If they could be led to it in the first place, anyway. Five is going to be tricky. But after that, they won't have much time to attack the bandits before they need to worry about the rising of Anar.

Three of the trolls looked similar to the statues that Aragorn had seen a decade or more ago: two-story tall creatures with fat, bloated bellies, misshapen creatures without a hair on their heads, wielding large clubs, with bulbous noses they would put any dwarf to shame and eyes that were so deep set it was a wonder they had any peripheral vision at all. Two of the trolls looked younger, if such a term could be used for trolls. They also didn't seem to hunch as much, although Aragorn could admit that was just his imagination.

"Grah, fish again, blast it all. Fish! We've damn near emptied da river of 'em!" One of the younger seeming trolls grumbled.

"Tell us somethin' we don't know, you knob," one of the older trolls retorted. "Pickings're scarce here. We's need ta follow der river south. And be doin it soon."

"Tsk, the elk and moose be too quick for us to capture round 'ere," a third troll grumbled in agreement. "Give me a nice Man village, that'd fill all our bellies."

"Feh, we'd be needing to go much further from da mountains than we 'ave 'ere for dat," a fourth stated. "You thinkin' we should?"

As the five monstrous creatures conversed, Aragorn took in more of their camp. The five of them were situated around a fire built to scale. Nearby was a vast alcove, hidden underneath a large rock, which looked about as wide as seven houses sat side to side. Aragorn estimated all five could fit there if they were lying down. It wouldn't be comfortable if the trolls were anything like humans, yet it would keep their bodies hidden from the light of the sun, which was the most important thing.

So these trolls are rogues rather than working for the Great Enemy. If they did, these five might have access to the paste and body covers that allowed Azog to bring them into the Battle of the Lonely Mountain, the young man mused. He had been told about that battle by both Harry and Bilbo, and had learned about the paste then. The other concept, that the orcs had provided cages with covered tarps or something similar, was a simple supposition.

One of the Hoarwell's many tributaries sat nearby, one that was quite deep, given the look Aragorn had earlier. About twenty fish were frying on the bone by the fire, with large piles of bones nearby of all sorts of animals. One of which looked like a human skull.

"Having second thoughts?" Balakân asked, his voice barely a whisper even to Aragorn as he spoke directly into Aragorn's ear.

"No. Just hoping that these trolls also die. Did you—"

"I saw the human skull, Aragorn. Never fear. If we time this right, the light of Adar will clean up things for us," Balakân muttered. He, too, loathed the fact that these beasts had slain and eaten humans. Yet alone, the two of them would need to be immensely lucky to deal with five trolls in any kind of battle. "Go."

Aragorn nodded and moved off through the woods. Balakân followed before breaking off, putting himself further away from the firelight-blinded trolls until he came to a point where he could step out of the brush and then race away towards the bandit camp. Aragorn was further along that same route.

When he was situated, he released several chirrups, sounding like a grasshopper. The important thing was the sequence, rather than the noise, the two groups of four chirrups telling Aragorn he was in position and about to fire. Luckily, such signals had long been a part of Aragorn's training in Rivendell thanks to how closely Elrond worked with the Dunedain, and within seconds an arrow flashed out of the darkness from Balakân's bow.

The arrow lodged itself into the ear of one of the trolls sitting down, and he yelped, bringing a hand up to his ear in much the same pain as a man stung by a mosquito. "'Ere, what was that!?" As the others looked on, he pulled his hand away, staring at the remains of a Man-sized arrow on his palm. "Whaa..."

Another arrow flew from Balakân's bow, followed by one from Aragorn. Both hit, but bounced off the faces of the trolls, their armor proof against the arrows. Still, it served to get their attention, and the group sitting down surged to their feet. "Them's arrows. There's a Long Ears or a Man 'round 'ere!"

The two young-looking trolls began to charge in different directions out into the woods until a third grabbed them by the scruff of their necks, holding them back. "None of that now! If there be someone out there, we be sharing the meat."

Two more arrows from Aragorn and Balakân smacked into the trolls, doing little but annoying them, but they started to look in the right direction at last. When they did, Balakân stepped out of hiding, another arrow flying from his bow.

“A Man! If there be only one of ‘em, its first-come, first first-served,” one of the trolls shouted, ignoring the words of his fellow a moment ago.

As soon as they started to rumble towards Balakân, he bolted, while Aragorn loosed two more arrows before the trolls had reached Balakân’s former position. As for Balakân himself, he bolted past Aragorn, and Aragorn fell in with him a second later.

Instead of losing the trolls as the two of them, armed with good cloaks that could blend into the dark with ease, could have, the pair raced away, actually shouting in mock panic, with Aragorn hoping the trolls really were stupid enough to not understand tone, as Balakân’s acting left much to be desired.

“Oh no, they’re on to us, and our arrows do nothing,” Balakân drawled, his voice loud but seeming without any inflection. “Whatever shall we do?”

He ruins his image as a stoic ranger the longer I interact with him, Aragorn mused, before shouting in what he thought was a far better approximation of terrified horror. “Back, back to the camp, we need to get the others, we can’t fight them on our own!”

The next second, Balakân slowed a little, twisting around to fire behind them for a second, then turned and raced again away, a move that must’ve been practiced a dozen times to let him do it properly. The next instant, when Aragorn tried to do the same thing, his arrow went wide as his feet stumbled, but he recovered quickly enough, and he and Balakân continued to race away through the dark of the woods.

As Balakân pulled back and away from him to keep on leading the trolls, Aragorn raced ahead, back towards the motte which had been taken over by the bandits. There, he discovered that only one of them was still up and about. That was grossly stupid in Aragorn’s opinion, especially here in the Ettenmoors, but he wasn’t about to complain. There might’ve been others behind the walls, but none were where they could spot the incoming trolls.

Aragorn quickly hid himself, letting loose a loud hooting cry, and moments later, as the trolls spotted the collapsed keep, the guard on the single intact wall spotted them in turn from his makeshift perch. “Trolls!” the man shouted, a scream of panic, almost shrill with shock and fear. “Trolls, incoming!”

With that cry, Aragorn knew that Balakân had made himself scarce, which must not have been easy with the trolls in rumbling pursuit. *Still, that man would’ve mentioned seeing another human out there.*

The trolls stumbled to a halt in a scattered line, with one of them almost certainly racing past Balakân to the point where Aragorn could make out the troll’s features in the

moonlight. The creature looked around in confusion, still looking for its initial quarry, then it spotted the movement of the guard and possibly even heard the shouts of consternation within the ruins. “OY!! There be more Men in that thing dere!”

With that, the troll rumbled forward, while behind him his fellows picked up speed towards the dilapidated motte, shouting in delight at one another. Not one of them bothered searching for the two humans who had led them here.

The bandits might have drunk themselves into a stupor or been otherwise indisposed, because they were ridiculously slow off the mark, in Aragorn’s opinion. Even the horses were faster, whinnying in fear as the wind brought them the smell of a troll. Two of them were able to pull free from the ropes tying them in place, but the others weren’t before the first troll arrived, charging through one of the gaping openings within one portion of the outer wall.

This put the troll right in among several of the bandits, who screamed and began to attack desperately. The next second, several of them were dashed to the ground, the troll laughing at their efforts. “Hahaha! Gots ta tenderize the meat first!”

Even as more of the men got up and armed and a few started to fire at the troll from point-blank range, two more smashed into the already shattered wall separating them from their prey, smashing the rubble still further apart with their heavy clubs. This brought them right into the majority of the men, and many of them were sent flying, although more of them were able to fight back now.

One of the other trolls with a better sense of smell than his fellows shifted around the motte until he was in front of the entrance, then entered, ducking his head beneath the sill, an almost polite “excuse me!” coming from the troll, before it grabbed up one of the horses. A quick shake broke the horse’s neck, and then the troll was biting into it, a gleeful smile on his face right before he did.

The sound of the horses screaming in raw terror threw Aragorn for a moment, before he shook his head and moved around the keep to the side where there was still the one intact wall. As he did, the last trolled, gasping and groaning, joined its fellows, an arrow from Balakân still sticking out of its lips and its breathing coming out raggedly. “Yous all best leave some fer me!”

For a few moments, Aragorn couldn’t see what was going on beyond that wall. Then Balakân tapped him lightly on the shoulder, causing Aragorn to start and whirl, only to see the older ranger crouching behind him. “I’ve got the rope. Come. We need to make certain this works, and maybe slow things up if the trolls look to be winning too quickly. We can’t let them get back to their hiding place.”

“Are you sure they’re smart enough to find it again after the run we led them on?” Aragorn questioned, even as they moved to the wall. The twang of Dererk’s bow was the only answer, and he heard a grunt from above. Looking up, he saw that the guard there who had been shouting a warning when the trolls appeared had slumped, his body stuck between two crenellations.

Soon, a rope tied into a lasso was hurled up, latching around one of those same crenellations. To the backdrop of shrieking, shouting and the bellows of the trolls, the two Rangers quickly made their way upward.

Once they reached the top of the outer wall, the pair found that the humans were still fighting desperately. Thanks to the size of the ruins, the humans had spread out a lot, which allowed only that first troll to really get the drop on a large group of them all at once. Now, pikes and makeshift spears were out, stabbing at the trolls, but none of the bandits seemed to know the weaknesses that Balakân had told Aragorn about.

Despite that, one got lucky just as Aragorn pulled himself up onto the battlements. The bandit stabbed one of the trolls through the eye with a pike, causing it to scream in agony even as the man paid for it with his life when the troll’s club came down, smashing him into so much offal.

“ARGGH, me eye! You little, grahh!!” Half blind, the troll lashed out, hitting one of its fellows hard enough to shatter his oak club over its head, and the second troll bellowed in fury even as it stumbled to one knee.

That seemed to galvanize the bandits, and one of them started to shout, getting them organized, with more arrows hammering into the trolls from point-blank range while the men spread out and then quickly came together, stabbing with their long spears and pikes. They sank deeper than the arrows that the Rangers had hit them with previously, but not by much, and one of the trolls hurled its club at a group of the archers, slaying four of them outright, and crippling another who had only been clipped in the shoulder by the throne club rather than pinned to the ground by it.

However, the axes and swords of the bandits were doing some damage to the attacking trolls. Many of them were hacking at feet, legs, ankles, as well as wrists and hands when they got close, rather than at the body, which seemed to be working somewhat well. Most of the trolls were now wounded on their appendages, although none severely, and they were still wreaking havoc among the humans.

Worse, there was no escape for the bandits. The trolls had almost accidentally blocked out the exits, save for racing up onto the one remaining wall via the rickety stairwell that was still intact and going over the side, where Aragorn and Balakân were. Even as their

fellows kept fighting, a few bandits seemed to realize that, and turned in the direction of the steps leading up to the still intact wall.

Balakân killed two of them with arrows, the arrows puncturing through their skulls and into their brains, silencing them forever before they could let out a warning of the rangers' presence. Aragorn fired a second later, almost automatically following his seniors' motions. It was only when his arrow stabbed deep into the eye of a third man that Aragorn's own eyes widened in shock as he realized what he'd just done.

I just, I just killed that man! Not an orc, not a goblin, a Man! Aragorn thought, freezing in place, almost going into shock until Balakân reached over and thumped him hard on the shoulder.

"None of that now, lad! You're the one who thought of using the trolls. Best you watch and see what we wrought, instead of going into your own mind at what you just did personally. There'll be time enough for that later," Balakân ordered, his voice far colder than Aragorn had heard from him.

The night's events suddenly hitting home in a way they hadn't before, Aragorn gulped. But he watched, his eyes taking in everything, as his mind tried hard not to replay the moment where he had seen the life go out of that man's eyes in the campfire light when Aragorn's arrowhead pierced his eye. He watched as more of the men died, and then, he shook himself. The death he had already caused faded in the background, and a wellspring of determination filled him. "No."

"What?" Balakân asked, looking at him in confusion. Using the trolls like this was nasty business, to be sure, but it was either that or just keep going, not doing anything about either the trolls or the bandits. This was better.

"No Man should simply be left to be slaughtered by such creatures," Aragorn answered, before bellowing, "Aim for the back of their knees! Bring them down closer to the earth! Aim for their eyes and necks! Their noses, their mouths! Don't just randomly slash at them! Don't work alone, work in groups of three!"

None of the bandits realized who had done the shouting, but their leader had already been wiped out of existence, his upper body basically turned into a fine paste against one wall. Without him to argue the point, the bandits responded, instead doing what Aragorn had shouted.

Instead of working alone, they began to work together, one person going further forefoot, the other dodging a strike from the trolls, while arrows began to once more to fly from various positions.

Balakân looked at Aragorn thoughtfully, then shrugged his shoulders, hopped out of cover, aimed and loosed all in one motion. His arrow sank into the jugular of the nearest troll, one that was barely five yards away, up to the quillions. This caused blood to spurt out from around the arrow, although the troll didn't seem to notice the damage was so serious for a moment. When it did, the troll raised his hand to his neck reflexively, but couldn't remove the arrow, as there was so little of it out of the wound, its fingers couldn't grab it.

Another arrow from Balakân found a second troll in the eye just at the right time when it had turned in their direction, and a second arrow flew a moment later, blinding it completely from Aragorn's bow. That troll began to smash out wildly all around itself, hitting two of its fellows, doing just as much damage to the pair of them as to the surrounding humans. After being struck a few times, though, one of them smashed the blinded troll over the head with a club that shattered its skull, sending it down to lie alongside another one that had already been crippled.

This left three trolls facing around forty or so bandits, and Aragorn and Balakân continued to snipe at the trolls, doing what damage they could. Aragorn's arrows were not nearly as accurate as Balakân's were, and he didn't get a shot at their eyes again as the trolls had all turned their attention entirely away from the wall, not seeing where the arrows that filled their companion had come from. Aragorn also continued to shout words of encouragement and orders, directing the bandits, but still more men continued to fall to the trolls.

Five, then seven, then nine more of the bandits fell before any more damage could be dealt to the trolls beyond pinpricks to their feet and legs, with one of the bandits having the ill luck of being kicked so hard he felt literally flew up and over the wall above their heads to crash into a tree on the other side, impaling himself on several of the branches. One of the trolls had already lost its club, though, and all of the trolls' hands and forearms were bleeding profusely from numerous cuts. Their feet were also bleeding badly, with a few swords and even an axe sticking up from between their toes, left there by bandits.

They kept fighting, though, as those cuts were what a pinprick would've been to a human. Debilitating to be sure, and extremely painful in many cases, but not life-threatening.

The next moment, however, another one of the bandits got lucky, although at first, the man probably had not thought he was so. The man had missed an attack on one of the feet of the trolls as it stomped to one side, causing him to fall over, given his horrid stance a moment ago. The troll missed him in turn, busy slaying several of his fellows, and so the

man pushed himself to his feet only to find himself right between the troll's legs. What the man thought at that moment, Aragorn decided very firmly he didn't want to know, but whatever he did, he decided to act.

He thrust upwards, and Aragorn watched as the troll's eyes seemed to cross for a moment. "AOOOGGGHHHHH!!!"

From what he knew of them, trolls didn't have any kind of reproduction system, but they did have a way to expel waste. Their ass, in other words, did for both water and solid matter, and the man had just literally stabbed his sword where the sun would never shine. The troll squealed, backing away, falling forward and crushing the man and several of his fellows, as both of its hands went to its rear, a shout of "Get it out, get it out!" coming from the troll.

This allowed several of the other men to hack and stab at its neck and shoulders, eventually doing enough damage to draw the troll's attention away from its nether portions. But by then, the damage was done. That troll was too badly wounded and couldn't even defend itself when one of the men stabbed it through the mouth and up into its brain plate.

Most of the attackers of that troll paid for it when the other two turned on them, and not a minute later, it was over.

Eighty men had been wiped out by the five trolls, taking three of them down in turn, with none of the men doing more than groaning and moaning, the ruins having been turned into an abattoir. Blood, limbs, and crushed remains of bodies were flung everywhere, only for more to be added as the two remaining trolls moved around, methodically smashing their fists down on any human still breathing. Or rather, one such hand, as the other quickly began to grab up scattered humans, raising the crushed remains up to their open maws.

However, the battle and the chase through the woods had taken them too long. Just as Balakân had planned for after Aragorn had come up with this crazy idea, dawn broke in the distance, hidden by the trolls for a moment.

But soon, as Aragorn and the watching Balakân watched, they paused, turning in the direction of the sun. Some instinct or other had begun to blare a warning in their tiny brains, and there was no place within the ruined keep that would protect them. After a second, they dropped their meals and, roaring in panic, burst out once more from one of the already ruined walls, racing away.

"After them!" Balakân said, smacking Aragorn on the shoulder. "We need to make a clean sweep, or those two will cause trouble somewhere else soon enough!"

The two of them nearly leaped down the wall and raced after the trolls, following their pell-mell race through the woods, until the light of the sun began to play through the trees. The trolls lumbered on, but the two rangers' arrows meant nothing against the panic of the dawn to come.

Seeing that they would get back to their hiding place, Aragorn felt anger bubble up within him. Anger, and a good deal of guilt. As vile as the men back at that outpost might have been, he could not stand the idea of these trolls getting away with killing his fellow man, not after he was the one to bring the trolls down on them as he had. Ignoring a hissing injunction from Balakân, Aragorn tossed his bow aside and raced ahead of the pair of trolls.

Pulling out his sword as he raced past them, Aragorn slashed at one of their knees, ducking under a strike from the troll that would have turned him into paste. He rolled forward, then dodged to one side behind a tree.

The tree disintegrated under a blow from the troll, and Aragorn lunged to his feet, cutting at the troll's arm as it continued its roundhouse blow. His elven blade, far sharper than any of the weapons of the bandits, cut deep into the troll's wrist.

Bellowing, the troll tried to kick out, and Aragorn desperately brought his blade back to stab. But this time, his blade was just off center. The kick landed, shattering Aragorn's sword in passing and slamming into him, hurling him away. Thankfully, the troll hadn't been able to put much power behind the kick, or Aragorn might well have had broken ribs at least.

The troll stumbled back, and before it could regain its footing, Aragorn rolled into a small ditch between two tree roots, practically disappearing as he nursed bruised limbs. The troll snarled and began to look everywhere around him, shouting out imprecations as its fellow barreled past him.

Aragorn's efforts had not been in vain, nor the efforts of the bandits. The trolls' feet and legs were too cut up to let them run. They tried, even the one whom Aragorn had attacked, remembering belatedly that he needed to get under cover. But they were still far away from any cover when Arien and her charge came over the horizon. Anar's cleansing light hit the trolls, turning them back to the stone they came from. One was caught mid-step, and the statue fell, breaking as it hit the ground, while the other was simply turned into one of Middle-earth's ugliest statues.

"You're a damn fool, Aragorn, son of Arathorn," Balakân said coolly as he walked over to where Aragorn lay. While the trolls might have been unable to see him, Balakân had never lost sight of the younger man for a second. "But I suppose that foolishness can sometimes bring unexpected outcomes. Even positive ones, occasionally."

He grabbed Aragorn by the shoulders, staring into his eyes for a moment, then nodded. "Now come, we need to bury the bodies. There are wolves and far worse things around here that should not be allowed such a feast."

After having a talk with Aragorn about how some men were no more than orcs and goblins in how they acted, Balakân and Aragorn reached the ruins. There, they began to bury or burn the bodies. First, they dug out a long ditch, finishing the work for the ditch by midday before they began to dump the bodies within it. Those bodies that were mostly intact, anyway.

Not that his helped Aragorn's stomach, which divested itself of its contents several times during this process. Or his guilt, which the talk with Balakân did nothing to relieve. It had been Aragorn's plan to turn the trolls on these humans, in what he thought at the time was a simple matter of using one evil to destroy another. A thought that had faded quickly as the battle began, and now was gone entirely. As he helped to bury the bodies, all Aragorn saw were the dead bodies of Men, killed by creatures of the Greater Darkness. Regardless of how these men had made a living preying on others, in Aragorn's mind, they did not deserve this kind of death, and he vowed internally to learn from this going forward.

All of this would have been made far worse if the troll's bodies had also been stinking up the abattoir. Thankfully, the bodies of the slain trolls had already turned into stone by the time the two rangers returned to the ruins.

The body parts were simply burned in the scattered fires the bandits had been using prior to the arrival of the trolls.

All in all, it was a horrendous experience for the young Aragorn, yet having developed the dark humor of most Dunedain, Balakân had to stop himself from snickering at the one troll who had a sword still stuck in its rear multiple times as work continued throughout the day. It looked very much like someone had stuck a sword into the stone there at a most inappropriate angle, and it was worth a smirk every time Balakân looked up from their work and saw it.

As they sifted through the bandit's bodies and equipment, Balakân found other signs that this group had worked with goblins and orcs in the past, small totems that he pulled out and handed over to Aragorn to study, and perhaps to make him feel a little better about things. *After all, we wouldn't have been able to deal with the trolls at all without the bandit's 'aid' as its' very doubtful we could trick them all to straying from cover before dawn.*

"Memorize them, lad. Things like this or similar are signs that men have had interactions with orcs and goblins. Peaceful ones. Or as near as can be peaceful with those folk."

Balakân could have pointed out that there weren't any women among these bandits either, but he had already made mention that this group was a band of bandits rather than villagers, and that seemed superfluous to him. And even Balakân, as well-traveled a Ranger as lived right now, had never met a group of fellow men, even men like this, who might well have been Sauron worshipers to a man judging from a few other things he'd found, who would be willing to hand over women to orcs or goblins. Such things were too horrifying, even for such as they.

However, these men were not above doing something almost as bad in his opinion, and at one point as they started to deal with the bodies, Balakân fell into cursing luridly as he pulled out the blade of the leader of the band from under his body, staring at it in shock.

The blade was unlike any other that Aragorn had seen, and he blinked as he looked at it. "That looks, it's make almost reminds me of my dagger."

The blade was a wide beast which tapered to a wicked, if dull at present, point, with a fuller cut along its length to lessen the weight. The edge looked ragged, but that was from a lack of care, and the quality still shone through. The cross guard was thin showing some of the same markings as on Aragorn's dagger, but still intact, going out more than three inches to either side of the wide blade, the pommel a large but simple circle of metal with the same image of a thin, circular tower on a hill, if larger than on the tiny pommel of his dagger. Even the hilt was thicker than the elvish blade Aragorn had been using.

When Balakân tested the balance, he found it impeccable, and whistled. "They are of a similar age, Aragorn. This one, this is a blade of Arthedain, possibly one from the time of Arnor and Elendil, passed from father to son. It must've been used like that dagger of yours in the last war against the Witch King and his forces. And it would have been buried with one of their warriors by the men of Gondor and the elves of Rivendell. I know well where such burials happened to the west of here. They must've dug it up when they despoiled one of our cairns looking for ancient riches."

He laid the sword out on the dirt beside one of the fires, then moved back to the leader, searching him thoroughly, coming away with nothing. However, Aragorn found another blade of similar make was found still stabbed into one of the trolls, hidden at first from the two Rangers as they returned and went about their grim business.

Both of them had seen better days, but it was clear that they were of superior quality to anything the other bandits had held. Even Aragorn, used to elven weapons, would've said that these could stand up against the normal elven warrior's blade, despite the unusual shape of the blades.

Aragorn looked at the blade he'd found thoughtfully, then moved to one of the original fires the bandits had set and began to work on cleaning it as best he could.

Later, after most of the dead bodies had been buried or burned, Aragorn picked up the broken sword he had carried since leaving Rivendell and headed up to the wall, laid it there, pointing in a specific direction. The hilt had been a complete write-off, the pommel cracked, and the hilt smashed to pieces, with the tang breaking along with the rest under the troll's kick. But the majority of the blade was still intact.

"What are you up to?" Balakân questioned, coming up after him.

"That is the direction of Rivendell, isn't it?" Aragorn asked.

For all his years ranging, Balakân had to think about it for a moment. They had not exactly been taking a direct route away from Rivendell from the first, and had been turned around something fierce in the past few days tracking the bandits and then finding the trolls and so forth. "I think it is. Good eye."

Not replying to that compliment, Aragorn left the blade there, tapping the shattered blade gently. "That blade will stay here as a promise. A promise to return a better man than I am now, one who will no longer make decisions without understanding the weight of those choices. When I have learned and grown. Under your tutelage, Balakân, and the land itself."

There was something heavy in Aragorn's gaze when he looked at Balakân, something Balakân felt. He could only nod his head, finding it strangely hard not to turn that knowledge into a bottle under the weight of those eyes.

Later, as they put distance between them and the slaughterhouse that was once a fortification, Aragorn spoke up again. "We will eventually be heading for Fornost Erain, yes? What the Breelanders call Deadman's Dike?"

"Eventually, although that would normally be on your last trip with a more seasoned Ranger," Balakân said, looking at Aragorn closely.

"Good," Aragorn replied, staring up at the sun, which was already waning, his thoughts far away. "I have seen what remains of this nation. What our arrogance, ambition and strife cost this land. I would see the full toll and with it the extent of the enemy's power. But I also wish to see the heights to which we can reach. Perhaps to know how far we truly fell in full, and perhaps in turn, to dream of better things to come."

Balakân again could only nod, and the two pushed on, heading still further east towards the feet of the Misty Mountains.

OOOOOOO

“Poi and Olin tell me it doesn’t feel like snow today, despite how overcast it is,” Gimli announced as he joined Fili. The young prince was watching the last of the carts as they prepped for the day’s push through the mountains. This next aspect was going to be the most difficult on the trek to Tiaod’s Quarry, mainly because of how the Stonefoots had told them that the trail thinned noticeably.

They also hadn’t been hit yet by the goblins that should have been dogging at their heels all the while since they’d left Varni’s Folly, either. Mkoloan and the other scouts had all reported seeing goblin sign occasionally. Now they were so high into the mountains that even dwarven scouts had trouble moving off the trail, let alone traveling back and forth from the convoy.

“True, we would’ve had to fort up here for the next few days while sending out men to clear the path for the carts. As good as our defensive innovations have been, there’s no way to make donkey-pulled carts plow the road for us,” Fili murmured, staring upward higher up the mountain that rose to one side.

Beside the path, which had been made by working with a natural ledge at this point along its route, the mountain rose, becoming ever steeper as it did, with no trees or even anything approaching a surface where such could live. This portion of the trail was the highest between Varni’s Folly and Tiaod’s Quarry a sign they were around two-thirds of the way to the mountain hold.

The other side of the trail was no picnic either. But according to the Stonefoot drovers and the few warriors who had joined them, it was going to get even worse, if in the exact opposite manner. *And none of them could tell me if there were places where goblin archers could hide above us.*

“More importantly, I’m worried about overhead fire,” Fili said, shaking his head. “I wish we just had our own carts and folk to worry about, but that’s a refrain I’ve sung many times already, so I won’t bring it up again.

While Gimli allowed himself to smile at his cousin twice removed’s annoyed face, Fili kept his mind on more important things. “None of the Stonefoots here have nearly as good armor as we do.” What little armor had been traded with the Stonefoot House had gone to Stone Grip and to the army of Varni’s Folly, and even they didn’t have many sets. “I think we need to redistribute the overhead cover to their carts. Transfer them over and tell Rorlo to have some of his drovers set them up as we go.”

“Hmmm... doable, but risky. That’ll leave only two of our own carts covered,” Gimli warned. The Longbeard convoy had two more carts than the Stonefoot-made carts, which had joined the caravan in Varni’s Folly, although the quality of the carts from Erebor, even setting aside the rune-based enhancements many had, was so much better that the only real similarities were in the size of the carts, the wooden frames, and the donkeys that pulled them.

“We have better helmets and far better chain mail. The combination of that and our own shields will allow us to deal with any arrow fire from above better than our current allies,” Fili said firmly. “I don’t want the Stonefoots to think we aren’t willing to defend them as well as we do ourselves. There are already far too many of their drovers and warriors grumbling about how better equipped we are. This is, unfortunately, a diplomatic decision. Our ſh’kor will just need to be aware, and remind everyone to beware arrows, and keep their shields close.”

ſh’kor was the Khuzdul term for what a human army would call a low-ranking officer, or perhaps a noncommissioned officer, if the army in question was organized enough to have that distinction. A man of importance and duty, who did not make large-scale decisions, but was of vast importance to the overall running of the army and respected for it. Following in his uncle’s footsteps with the army of Erebor, Fili had formalized the use of the term on this leg of the journey for those men who had impressed him, building on the officer cadre he and Gimli had developed on the trip to Varni’s Folly.

Shrugging, Gimli nodded and went to give the orders.

The convoy that the two of them were leading now was almost twice as large as the convoy they’d led out from Erebor, which made it a far larger target, but Fili hadn’t argued. Nearly all of the carts that had joined them were loaded with various preserved food from the hill holds destined for the holds further into the Gray Mountains than Varni’s Folly. All of it had remained in the valley hold since the goblins had begun to legitimately interdict traffic between the holds, although some of it had spoiled in that time.

The money due to Varni’s Folly for helping to transport those goods would thus not be paid out to the individuals who should’ve assumed ownership of the food at their destination. King Tollmaster had gone even further to actually pay for the upkeep of the carts and then ordered his folk to add some of the valley hold’s own food to make up for the difference.

Admittedly, a lot of that food was in the way of meat, specifically horsemeat. But no dwarf would ever turn his nose up to meat of any kind, and horsemeat was just as good as anything else with the lands south of the Varni’s Folly denuded as it had been by the

Easterlings. And of course, the lands within Varni's Folly that could be devoted to farmland mostly went to feeding its own people.

Still, even King Tollmaster hadn't balked at the expense or the time needed to gather and prepare the horsemeat. Any kind of written contract was the next best thing to unbreakable oaths among the dwarves, regardless of house. Yet contracts dealing with food took it a step further among the Stonefoot and Longbeard Houses, with both sides keeping to them with the fervor humans would devote to holy writ. Fili didn't know if that was the case in the other houses, but he knew that both the Houses had dealt with several instances of famine over the ages.

Which makes it all the more interesting that Lady Ani has taken such a keen interest in our farms once that young farmer from the Blacklocks arrived. Some of the things she and some of the other farmers are proposing are deeply intriguing, even if I don't know any of the terms they use to explain how they are going to produce the soil necessary, Fili thought, before shaking himself.

Now wasn't the time to think of such long-term thoughts. Not when both Fili, Gimli and all of the other veterans, Stonefoot and Longbeard alike, knew that trouble was brewing somewhere ahead of them. *If the goblins don't attack today or tonight, they certainly will soon after. I just wish they would get it over with, blast them to the depths of nothingness!*

As the carts began to shift along the path, Fili heaved himself up onto the front side along with the chief drover, slapping Burgo on the back, before very theatrically holding his hands over his ears. "Get us going, loud one."

The others on the cart with him quickly did the same thing, and the booming voice of Burgo rolled out. "Caravan, we are moving! Officers and šh'kor, sound off for Lord Fili, and make it loud so his delicate ears can hear you!"

Several voices raised as one, with Fili staring behind him as he noted each of the officers shouting, ignoring the fact that most were shouting at Burgo to lower the volume. While the infantry company still operated under its officers, every two carts had a šh'kor to guide them. These officers would be in charge of making certain that when battle was joined, everyone was doing as they had been trained to do over the six days they'd spent in Varni's Folly working up with the Stonefoots on their tactics prior to setting out.

As he looked over the caravan, he noticed the sallow, angry face of Osli glaring back at him from among the infantry marching between the carts. He didn't seem to notice Fili's return glare at first, but when he did, Osli twitched his eyes over to where Mkoloan sat among some of the Stonefoot drovers on one of their carts. He was peering up as Fili had

earlier, but turned whipcord quick to glare back at the former scout, who flinched, seemed to curse into his beard and turn away.

I need to keep a better eye on that one. No dwarf will betray another dwarf to our enemies, but I must admit that our race isn't exactly immune to the idea of petty revenge on one another or even backstabbing, Fili mused.

Osli was the officer that Gimli and Fili had removed from command of one of the scout squads for laziness and basic insubordination towards the two of them near the start of this journey. Osli hadn't made any trouble since, but his attitude certainly hadn't improved. Still, he was stuck with the convoy until they returned to the Lonely Mountain. *Even such a one as him would not break his contract. That would be social suicide on a scale no dwarf would be able to live with.*

The only other issue, within the Longbeards at least, was the room scribe apprentice, Meto. He'd certainly been more willing to pull his own weight around the convoy and had done an... alright job with what he had been brought along to do. Yet now, with Harry gone, he'd seemed more and more annoyed by everything beyond time spent on his own to write in a small ledger as time went on. He had even skived off work several times, and some of the work on the carts he had done, outside of maintaining the runes, needed to be redone.

That was a **gross** insult to any dwarf. Not just the one whose work had to be replaced, but also the one who was forced to do another's fair share. Needless to say, it hadn't made Meto any friends among Fili's folk, and twice it had come to blows between Meto and the man who'd needed to redo his work.

Fili had hoped that the harshness of the journey would instill Meto with a better understanding of how good a life he had as a Rune Scribe's apprentice, and how much he needed to listen to his Master, which would hopefully allow him to earn his spot back if he wanted to return to Erebor rather than remain among the Stonefoots. Now, though, he had to wonder if Meto had enough willingness to listen to others to be anything more than he was now.

If that was the case, Master Togan would never take him back, and Meto would remain as nothing more than a middling rune scribe. If he kept on attempting things beyond his current mastery, the other rune scribes would be well within their rights to force him to stop. If that happened, Meto would be... forced to try and find another craft.

That was a harsh thing for any dwarf. If the reason for such a dismissal was because of the young dwarf's own actions, it was even worse. Not quite as socially damning as breaking a contract, but it was certainly up there.

Yet at this point, Fili had decided to wipe his hands of the other youth. *You cannot help others if they are unwilling to help themselves*, Fili reflected, turning back to gaze down the trail ahead of the caravan.

The convoy moved on, hearty donkeys in pairs of two pulling the carts up the long winding path, which began, as they had been warned it would, to narrow again, with the leftmost side of the path eventually simply falling away where the path began to follow a ledge around the outer edge of the mountain. Gone were the days of safe tunnels through the mountains, as they had seen near Varni's Folly, or well-built if not well-maintained stone aqueducts or bridges. This territory, unclaimed mountainous territory between the holds, was almost as wild now as it had been when the Stonefoots first came to the Gray Mountains, literal ages ago. So much so, no dwarf could navigate it at any speed beyond on this very trail.

As Fili turned, he spotted a flash of light on glass from halfway down the convoy. That came from one of two precious viewing glasses that Blacklock craftsmen had made and brought to sell in Erebor. Fili had bought the pair with his convoy out of his own pocket months back when he had first agreed to be part of the original convoy slated for Varni's Folly.

When this leg of the journey began, he had distributed them to Mkoloan and another of his scouts. Up this high in the mountains, there was very little that the scouts could do to move ahead or to the sides of the convoy that wouldn't take them so long, any message they could relay back to the column wouldn't matter.

It might've been different if the scouts had some method of communicating in real-time, but they didn't, not in terrain like this. Which meant that searching for trouble from afar with the viewing glasses was the best they were going to get. And dwarven scouts were almost routinely among the best in terms of eyesight, as well as moving silently and reading terrain. *Although it is somewhat worrisome how much Mkoloan likes his. I hope he remembers he will need to pay me for it if he wishes to keep it after we return to Erebor.*

Later, Fili was very much not surprised when Mkoloan was the one to surreptitiously pass the word that he had spotted some movement both below and above. When that reached Fili, he looked over at the scout on the lead cart with him, cocking an eyebrow.

That worthy, Nyli, shrugged, looking a little shamefaced as he ruefully handed the spyglass back to its owner. "I thought I might've seen something below us, but I can't see whatever Mkoloan saw above us, Lord Fili. As to what's below, some leaves on those pines moving without wind, that's all I can see."

Those pine trees were at least ten stories below their current position down a sheer rock face. No dwarf would ever be able to climb that cliff face, not even someone like Mkoloan, not without pitons and rope. *But goblins, as much as Fili hated to give those creatures any praise, were far better climbers than dwarves. Almost as good as squirrels, those soulless creatures are.*

“If you don’t trust your chief scout, who do you trust? We lose nothing by preparing. Use hand sign to signal everyone to get ready,” Fili ordered, reaching below his seat in the cart for his sword, running a hand over the hilt of it before straightening. “And for the love of Mahal, make certain that everyone knows to keep it on an even level. We want the goblins to come in fat and happy, not warned that there’s something about our column that they might not appreciate.”

The scout smirked behind his beard, but did as he was commanded, starting the hand sign with the two-fingered double-tapping gesture that meant to keep things quiet and ending the message with the same, an emphasis to make certain it was understood. Those hand gestures had been worked out by Gimli early on in the training in Varni’s Folly, an idea that Fili had kicked himself for not thinking of personally. Bugles and shouted commands had their place, but not when you are trying to basically prepare a counterambush.

Preparations began throughout the column. Slow movements, quiet commands, subtle shifting of hands towards weapons. Of course, as dwarves, all of them already wore their armor, and many had their shields nearby. Now, crossbows were slowly handed out while quivers of quarrels were slowly pulled out of where they had been stowed for the journey.

On the Stonefoot carts, a few workers went to work preparing makeshift overhead covers. Made of placing three Easterling tents on top of one another, and sewing them to four wooden poles, the makeshift defense had worked to provide cover from arcing fire during tests, and now would give the Stonefoots on those carts, none of which were as bulky or as well armored as the Longbeard ones, cover from overhead fire.

They were also somewhat of a fire hazard, but Fili felt that was a scant concern. While orcs would probably think of that kind of tactic quickly, goblins wouldn’t. And goblins were more inclined to looting than simple destruction in any case.

Beyond those preparations, a new kind of weapon was brought out on the Longbeard carts and slowly put together. These were long flails, paired with equally long spears, on the Stonefoot carts. Both had to be fitted together to give these weapons the reach Fili felt they needed. The Stonefoot drovers would wield both, while the Longbeards

would hold the line at the lip of the carts as if they were the top of the wall, as their fellows held the area between the carts thanks to another little bit of innovation made by Stonefoot hands and thought up by Longbeard minds.

Still more work went on between the carts, with the column slowing down and one or two carts looking as if they were having trouble with their donkeys, although nothing could be further from the truth. Every donkey in the column was a good, well-trained beast, as most dwarven donkeys were. Yet now those selfsame donkeys were being fitted with armor to protect their backs and heads, as well as helmets that almost looked like they were feed masks. Longbeard infantry moved closer together, splitting up into small groups to hold each segment of the column, even as the intervals between the carts shrank as much as they could.

Despite all this quiet, calm organization going on, Fili was not at all happy with the area. The goblins, while in no way being intelligent like dwarves (or humans, or even elves), did show a certain measure of low cunning in their tactics. This area of the trail was so thin that there was no chance of being able to create a circle with the carts, which would in turn allow the donkeys to be placed in the middle, and for the area between the carts to be lessened to the point they could touch.

However, he had known before setting out from Varni's Folly that might be the case, and had made all of the preparations he felt they could make. *Without Harry along to raise segments of wall between the carts anyway, he reflected internally with a chuckle now. Really, though, I'm not so concerned about the goblins realizing where we are weakest once the battle is joined. They'll have far too many other concerns at that point. No, I'm worried that they will start the fight with an avalanche. A danger too big for us to stand against, and one I can't plan for.*

There was literally nothing that he or his people could do with the goblins simply decided to wipe out their column from above at this point. Thankfully, the Stonefoots had made it clear that it was not a major concern. There was far more stone, and solid stone to boot, instead of gravel, scree, or even snow, on the mountainsides above the trail at this, the highest part of the trail.

Below was a different story, but with the trail going this high up, they had avoided the majority of that kind of worry. *We will have to worry about that on the next leg, but by that point, we will have ditched most of the Stonefoot carts, can make better time, and won't have to defend so much territory.*

Within the turn of the candle, the entire convoy was ready, waiting for the ambush to come.

Then came another signal from Mkoloan, more movement above. This was coupled with Nyli reporting far more movement below, with several of the other scouts spotting it soon after. Goblins had begun to appear from hiding places along the nearly solid wall that still abutted the trail.

Moments later, Fili saw the area ahead of them opening up slightly to the right. Here, the ledge led into a cut made into the mountainside. It had possibly been made by ancient rivers that have gone through this territory at one point or another when the mountains were younger. Regardless of how it had come to be, this cut was not one of smooth stone; instead, its sides and floor were marked by numerous small holes and fissures in the rock.

Out of this territory boiled goblins, hundreds of them pushing themselves out of the natural fissures or holes they had dug into the mountainside, dozens, then hundreds, but by the time they had started to charge, and arrows have begun to fall, Fili had slapped Burgo on the shoulder. The next second, Burgo bellowed, "Enemies, boys! Into action, Baruk Khazâd!"

"Baruk Khazâd! Khazâd ai-mênu!!" came the answering shout, as everyone went about their duties quickly and efficiently. The tarps were pulled up and over on their rickety stands on the Longbeard carts, as the Longbeards reacted like the well-trained company they were. Crossbow bolts fired, dropping dozens of goblins first on the side coming from the right, then, as Burgo relayed Fili's orders, they shifted fire down onto the goblins climbing their way up from below.

At the same time, other Longbeards and Stonefoots went to work, unlatching portions of the walls of the carts. The outer portion of the walls dropped forward to slam home over the wheels, while the infantry fell back into between the carts or underneath. Those underneath hurried to latch those walls down in position, making each cart into a miniature fortress, tied together to the other carts on either end by thick rope. The infantry then formed separated walls of steel in front of the donkeys, who, to a beast, lay down on their stomachs.

The goblins crawling up the side of the mountain on their left flank were the first to reach the wooden walls of the carts, finding no way among the cartwheels, they were forced to keep climbing upwards, and came under instant attack from the flails and held birds of the defending stone feet. When they reached the top, they found their hands cut off, as Longbeard's stood there, their officers shouting, "Chop, chop, chop, boys! A goblin cannot climb or attack if you remove its hand!"

Swords and axes came down in short, sharp blows, removing limbs, before they were ready for the next strike. "Remember, control! Any nicks on these cards are going to

come out of your pay!” Gimli shouted, to the laughter of many of the other Longbeards. Meanwhile, the Stonefoot drovers and the few warriors among them wielded their long shafted flails and spears with glee, stabbing or smashing goblins off the cliff face below the trail.

The other side of the attack had recoiled from that first barrage of crossbow bolts, but now they came on, with more archers firing from above. Those arrows slammed into the tarps that Fili ordered over the Stonefoot carts or hit among the Longbeards on his own people’s, but he only heard one or two shouts of pain, such was the quality of the Erebor-made chain mail that every Longbeard wore along with their helmets. An archer would need to fire directly into their face to get anything, and even there, many of his folk had cheek and beard guards.

Near the back of the column, the attack from the right flank began to curve around the backmost of the cart where Gimli stood, bellowing out orders as he kept an eye on the overall battle as best he could. However, one of the Longbeards stationed there fell back after a lucky stab from a goblin wielding a spear, the tip took him right where his neck and beard guard began, punching through and causing a long gash across the side of the Longbeard’s neck.

Instantly, Gimli moved forward, his axe in hand. “Pull him back and see to him!” He shouted to the other guard at the back of the cart, hacking down at one goblin, then around at the other, the pick-like point at the back of his axe taking that goblin in the head, stabbing deep into the side of its head with the crunch of breaking bone, before he pulled it out.

Gimli stood there, wielding his blade with the dexterity and ease of a born warrior to down two more goblins as they tried to climb up the side of the cart, his head shifting to the side to avoid a spear, which he grabbed with his free hand, ignoring a blow that took him in the shoulder. *Good dwarven chain mail, you just can’t beat it!*

He pulled that goblin’s spear out of its grasp, whirled it around, and stabbed the spear into its former owner before cutting down another goblin as he tried to raise his sword. The ax bit deep into the goblin’s side, nearly hacking him in half before Gimli pulled it back out. One of the goblins actually had a helmet on, a good dwarven helmet, but of Stonefoot make, and Gimli’s pick made of superior steel stabbed straight through, doing enough damage to kill the goblin instantly.

The next goblin took the axe head right between the legs, and squealed in agony, before Gimli lifted him up off the edge of the cart as if you weighed nothing, hurling him up and over the side of the trail to slam into two of the climbing goblins, sending all three of them flailing and screaming into the air. That sight had Gimli bellowing in laughter, which

soon began to spread. Then he stepped back as the wounded dwarf and his companion pushed forward to regain their position.

The infantry between the carts were being heavily pressed heavily from the right, with the goblins showing the kind of instinctive grasp of weakness that came with their race. Yet this opened them up to attacks from the Stonefoot spears while the Longbeard infantry kept their lines, stabbing or lashing out with axes and swords, cutting down the goblins.

Dozens of the goblins tried to push at this or that cart, but they were all tied together, and the groups of Longbeards that had gone under the carts had placed heavy weights along the wheels at the same time they had tied down the makeshift walls as they slammed down. It would take a tremendous number of goblins to shift those cards now, and the goblins were too busy dying to organize any such effort.

The flails and long spears were wreaking havoc in the area behind the back line. On the left, the assault was simply dissolving as the goblins reached the wooden walls of the carts, while crossbows twanged continuously.

In particular, Mkoloan led a few of his own scouts into firing against the opposing archers, while the rest of the crossbowmen kept up a steady rain on both flanks. There were still several instances where the goblins could attack the Stonefoot positions, but each of those carts had two Longbeards for close-in defense to go with the spears that the Stonefoot drovers wielded, and the lack of fire from on high meant that the defenses of those cards were even better placed than the others to defend themselves, while a few Longbeards were forced to pull back from goblin fire.

Fili cut down a goblin as it attempted to get at the donkeys at the head of the column, where seven Longbeards had created a makeshift shield wall in a crescent around the pair, smirking just a little bit as one of the donkeys reared up. The next second, the donkey lashed out with a kick at a goblin that had bodily hurled itself at an off-balance dwarven warrior. The goblin's head disintegrated under the blow, and the Longbeard pushed back to his feet with a bellow of laughter and a promise to get that donkey some carrots later.

That portion of the battle was a little fraught for a few moments, but the goblins' lack of organization meant that the goblins hadn't realized that the front and the back of the column were weak points. If they had killed those men and the donkeys they guarded, they could've then gotten onto at least the first cart. With enough bodies fed into that flank, the goblins could then start to roll up the column, just as they could the other end, regardless of Gimli's presence.

Now, though, Fili was certain that wasn't going to happen, and he smirked. *Time for the next phase, I think.* With that, he began to shout out orders.

On the Longbeard carts, every fourth warrior dropped slowly between the carts to join the battle there for a few seconds, before then crawling under the carts until they were all together at the center of the column. There, the shield wall of the Longbeard infantry remained intact, although the dwarves that made it up were battered and haggard by this point.

Now, as the enemy archers began to finally start to die away, Fili joined this group along with two more Stonefoots, each of them carrying large pouches on their backs, and flint and tinder in their pouches.

When Fili joined them, he took a few seconds to peer through the fighting dwarves at the goblins still attacking from the right, listening intently at the same time to whatever was going on on the left. That portion of the battle was already beginning to peter out, and now, with the suddenness of broken morale as the goblins realized that they weren't going to be winning this, the right flank also began to shift. Many of the goblins started to retreat, especially those at the back of the group, removing any kind of weight behind the attack still coming in at the makeshift defenses between the carts.

He nodded over to one of his men, smirking. "Ready to finish this, lads?"

This moment hadn't actually been prepared for, as Fili hadn't realized that there would be an open area to the right of the trail like this, but he wasn't about to let the goblins simply retreat back into their holes. Oh, no. *That is not what you did with rats. You don't let them back into their holes, you smoke them out,* he thought, exchanging grim nods with the two Stonefoot warriors.

As the warriors around him in the exceptionally cramped area around the two donkeys all nodded, Fili pressed a hand into the back of the dwarf in front of him. **"PUSH!"** Fili bellowed, and the dwarves pushed hard. The goblins skidded back, a few dying as they were forced on the back foot.

Several other groups between the carts did the same, and soon the goblins, who had already begun to pull back, panicked, turning to flee. The dwarves charged after them, with teams of the Stonefoot warriors pulling out flint and tinder and setting them to faggots of wood wrapped in specially prepared faggots wrapped in tightly wound herbs.

Several of the goblins attempted to play dead, hoping to attack the Longbeard warriors from behind, but the dwarves were old hats at fighting goblins and well prepared for this trick. They cut down the goblins who tried this easily, with every sixth dwarf looking

out for it in particular as they pressed forward, with more from the carts joining the charge every minute.

Fili was at the front of the pursuit, hacking, slashing, cutting, his sword a blur, and he was one of the first to reach the edge of a goblin tunnel. Instead of charging into it, though, he pulled back and bellowed, "Here! Fire here!"

While the first pair of Stonefoot drovers that had been with him had fallen back, one of their fellows was nearby and raced towards him as the front of the fight continued on after him. Lighting the faggot up, he tossed it down into the hole, and smoke soon began to billow out.

Within minutes, it was joined by smoke coming out of other tunnels, dozens of them. Then smoke began to billow out in very odd areas around the fight, both leading further upwards from the trail, and down, coming from places along the sheer rock face. More goblins were forced out by the smoke, but they found the dwarves waiting for them with grim faces and even grimmer steel.

That aspect of the fight lasted another turn of the candle, but eventually, the last of the goblins had been smoked out of their holes. With dozens of small trails of smoke appearing from within the network of interconnected tunnels, the goblins had somehow delved here, Fili was convinced they had wiped them out. At that point, he pulled back the majority of his troops to rest and recuperate.

The aftermath of the battle was almost ludicrously in favor of the dwarves. Of course, against goblins, counting numbers was a ridiculous exercise, as goblins never cared for their own losses when their blood was up and there was always more of them. But still, for literally hundreds of bodies of goblins, which were currently being dragged and then tossed over the side of the trail, the defenders had only lost two dead Stonefoots and one dead Longbeard.

Bruises there were aplenty among the Longbeards, particularly from arrow fire near the start of the battle. Yet only five were seriously wounded. The rest were just badly bruised, barring a few men who had broken fingers and arms. Once more, the good chain mail out of Erebor had proven its weight in gold.

There were still a few goblins hiding among their dead, but again, the dwarves were prepared for this. They always approached a dead body from the feet so that the goblins couldn't lunge to attack their necks or faces, and soon most of them were dealt with as well.

“I’m not so pleased about the wounds among the Stonefoots. Seven more wounded enough to be combat-capable? And a large portion of the flails came apart under the strain of battle. Still, they worked remarkably well, as did the long shafts of the spears,” Fili mused. “I have to think that this battle was a tremendous success.”

“I agree, although you deserve a smack upside the head, kinsman,” Gimli said, suiting action to word a second later, the smack landing with enough force to drive Fili’s head forward a little, and cause him to glare at his friend. But Gimli was unmoved, wagging a finger in Fili’s face. “Just be glad I didn’t think that what you did was worth tugging your beard.”

That action was one done to a younger dwarf who had done something particularly stupid, and Fili’s eyes narrowed as Gimli went on, his voice cold and firm.

“You’ve no right charging into battle as you did. I or any of the other officers could’ve done that. You’d already proven your valor dozens of times over before all of this, when you were part of Thorin’s Company. You have no need to prove yourself further, not like that. And until Lady Redring and King Thorin have a son, you are still the prince of Erebor! You cannot be risking yourself such. No matter our armor, no matter our wealth of steel, we are not invulnerable to chance.”

Those words got through to Fili, and he began to tug at his own beard thoughtfully, running his fingers through the yellow ringlets. “Even the greatest of projects can be brought low by the smallest of errors,” he murmured, a common idiom among his folk, before nodding.

“You’re right, but, similarly, we are all children of Mahal. I will not have others test their mettle without further tempering my own. I will admit that in this instance it wasn’t appropriate, but I will not refuse to challenge myself in such contests going forward if I see the need.”

Gimli frowned at that, but then nodded, a look of pride coming into his expression for a moment. While not all dwarven leaders were warriors, those who did take up the blade had to continually earn the respect of their folk. It was good to see Fili would continue to do that, even as he tempered his actions with a bit of sagacity. *And more than a bit of self-preservation, I hope.* “Just so long as you don’t go charging into any goblin holes.”

Fili laughed at that, clapping his cousin on the shoulder. “No, I won’t be doing that at any point. But come, we’re almost done disposing of the bodies, and we still have a bit of daylight left, overcast though it might remain. I would like to put quite a bit of distance between us and this battlefield before we settle down for the night.”

Moving a convoy at night through the mountains was a fool's game even for dwarves.

Gimli nodded, and not twenty minutes later, the first of the carts was moving forward, the donkeys having been unburdened of their armor. Soon, even the back of the convoy was leaving the area where the battle had been behind, smoke still rising from the tunnels behind them.

The first skirmish of this little campaign was over with, and Fili and his folk had come through it fully intact. *Something I hope can also be said for Harry and the army marching eastward towards the far greater threat there...* Fili thought, turning his gaze in that direction, wondering how many hundreds of leagues now separated him from his friend, and what kind of dangers.

OOOOOOO

While Harry and Tauriel had spent some time with Gimli's band of scouts and mapmakers during the lovers' return trip to The Lonely Mountain over a decade ago, he had never really marched with them for any amount of time, or indeed any purely dwarven force. Thorin and his company had included Harry, Bilbo, and Gandalf almost from the start, along with their donkeys. Bombur and the other organizers had planned for a long, slow march over several thousand leagues.

The army of Stonefoot House was nearly eight thousand strong, with significant segments of those numbers coming from at least two other holds. Harry wasn't certain on that point because at least one of the officers under Karo came from a third, but all of the dwarven warriors mingled easily with one another, so there really wasn't any discernable difference between the groups.

Whatever the case, that nigh-on eight thousand strong army had planned for a relatively short, sharp march. A thing of barely a thousand, maybe a thousand two hundred leagues, if Harry was calculating it right from their maps. This meant that there were no donkeys with them and certainly no carts. Instead, every dwarf within the army carried their own supplies, from spare throwing harpoons or quivers of arrows to food. Although at night, the cooks did gather food from hundreds of other dwarves to prepare a single, sometimes warm meal.

Harry knew enough about dwarves to know that such burdens wouldn't matter overmuch to them. Yet he also knew that even dwarves wouldn't be able to sustain themselves at a fast pace carrying all that. Dwarves were bodybuilders, but they couldn't cover any kind of terrain quickly.

Early in the march, however, Harry was once more reminded that despite having lived near Erebor for over a decade now, there were things about the dwarves that he didn't know about.

Harry had volunteered to push ahead of the army with the rest of its scouts before the army even left Varni's Folly. It was a role that he was uniquely suited for, thanks to his training with Tauriel and his cloaks, both the elven one from Lothlorien and his own Invisibility Cloak. It had also removed him from the army, which he felt had been somewhat necessary, given how the dwarves had been looking at him.

On the second day, however, before they started out, one of the dwarves told him to head over to speak to Karo and the other officers before heading out.

Karo looked up at him from where he had been working on some portion of his own armor for a second. It was one of the very few sets of Erebor-made chain mail within the army. Harry had already noticed that the quality of that armor was quite a bit better than most of the rest. The Stonefoot house preferred chest plates, heavy neck guards and helms, but the rest of their body was only protected by gambesons, and those gambesons were built to retain heat, not protection.

It was a simple case of supply. None of the Stonefoot House holds could produce steel in sufficient quantity for chain mail. Chest plates didn't use as much steel and were also easier to forge. But Harry felt that the quality of those chest plates was not up to the stuff of the longbeards, and the gambesons were worse.

Of course, that was but one difference between Fili's company out of Erebor and this army. *The biggest difference is that these dwarves don't know me*, Harry thought ruefully. "You called for me?" Harry asked aloud, keeping his tone respectful.

"Istari. Fili calls you a friend. King Thorin named you Dwarf Friend. Yet you are nearly unknown to me and mine. Never have we had dealings with any of the Istari, or indeed most Men." Karo raised a hand and slid it across his bald pate for a moment, looking first eastward, then back up at Harry, his eyes grim. "Still, Fili and Thunderbelly alike both say that your word is as strong as stone. I will have that now."

Thunderbelly wasn't with the army. Despite his protestations, King Tollmaster had already sent the overweight warrior back to Erebor to organize another convoy of supplies. He had been sent back southwest with more than two dozen carts of pelts, raw ores, and so forth, destined for Erebor in lieu of payment for what they had already been given and more for the next group.

“I’m presuming by that you mean you want me to make some kind of oath.” Harry hummed, then shrugged. “If it has something to do with the war, I would need you to explain it to me, though. But if it is something to do with your own race, something similar to your rune scribe’s secrets or something, then I will give that to you now.”

Karo seemed to sag in relief, while several other nearby dwarves all nodded, a tenseness going out of the group. “It does. It is something unique to our race, to the dwarves. Or at the very least, I’ve never heard it said that Man or Elf can do it. We need must push hard and **fast**, lest word of the destruction of the army that had been besieging Varni’s Folly reach our enemies first.”

That Harry could easily agree with. Both aspects. He well knew that the Great Enemy could use fell birds (although he had never really thought of ravens as all that bad before coming to this world) to carry information, and he was still certain of the opinion he’d shared a little over three days back during the meeting with Tollmaster: that the mind behind this invasion was that of a Nazgûl, with all that entailed.

The last thing this army wanted to do was to allow the two Easterling armies operating in Rolling Gates to know of their coming and be able to reposition to ambush them with overwhelming numbers. “In that case, I agree. I, Harry Potter, will not speak of what I see while working alongside the Stonefoot army to anyone else, regardless of their race. Will that suffice?”

The dwarves around Karo’s small fire all looked at one another, while a few looked as if they were pleased with how quickly Harry had responded. Others were less certain. One of those, the oldest dwarf Harry had yet seen among the Stonefoots, tugged at his long, extremely white beard, staring at Harry thoughtfully, then nodded and said a single word in Khuzdul. Whatever that meant was probably another completely dwarfish thing, yet it seemed to settle all of the others down.

“Good,” Karo said, speaking up for them all. As senior field officer, or general in human parlance, from Varni’s Folly, he was in charge of this whole army, but Harry had begun to realize over the past day that he didn’t have as much control over choosing his own officers and so forth as Fili had among the convoy. “And your own pace? How long can you sustain yourself at the pace we set today?”

Harry shrugged, a pang of annoyance and sadness going through him as that thought brought back the fact that Tauriel, his lady, wasn’t there with him. “Thanks to my training with Tauriel, and my, well, my being an Istari, to explain it simply, I can sustain this pace for weeks on end. I don’t need as much food as you dwarves do, I’m not carrying nearly as many supplies, and I can cover a lot more ground faster with less effort.”

The dwarves all nodded, then decided to turn their attention to other things for a few moments, calling over several of the other dwarves to speak to them about whatever it was. Many a glance was sent Harry's way, but he ignored them and went back to his own camp.

The next day, the dwarves were up before dawn, small horns rousing the army in the dark. None of the army had been forced to take watch thanks to Harry's wards, something that had stunned the dwarves, as none of them had realized the efficacy of Harry's runic arrays when it came to protection. After a very quick, warm meal of horsemeat stew, the dwarves were moving. By the time the sun came over the horizon, they were well away from where they had camped.

Harry was just about to ask Karo if he should range out ahead with the scouts again when the oldster from the other day banged his chest plate. Not once, as if it were a signal, but in a rhythm. Soon, the other officers scattered throughout the army had begun to do the same, and then two of them, the youngest in Harry's estimation, began to sing. Those two voices were soon joined by others, a chant rising from the whole army.

And as they did, a feeling came over the whole army, one that Harry had felt twice before. Once in the smithy in Erebor, watching teams of blacksmiths and other dwarves working together to create large numbers of simple tools and so forth. At the time, it had seemed to link all the workers together, to bind their actions to a synchronicity that no human work gang could have matched while also imbuing the objects they made with a certain amount of the dwarves' own essence.

The second time had been when Thorin had gone through the ceremony to become a Master Smith worthy of crafting his own Master's Mark. At that point, a large portion of the crowd who had come together to witness the ceremony had begun to sing along, and he had felt the magic rising in the moment. That had been a prayer to Aulë, who had then guided Thorin's hands in creating his Master's Mark.

Now, like both of those times before, the music of the dwarves seemed to be gathering magic, but it wasn't around one or two of them. Instead, it quickly spread to the entire army. A significant amount of magic, enough to make Harry's hair stand on end and his skin tingle. Seconds later, the dwarves began to pick up the pace, pushing it harder than they had the day before.

The song was in Khuzdul, and Harry, despite knowing numerous curse words and battle cries in that language, still had no understanding of the totality. Nor any desire to poke in that area where he knew for certain he was not wanted. Still, that didn't mean he couldn't pick out the odd word here and there.

“Barum, Bařadak, ai, Kĥai un, Khazĥd, Khazĥd,” the song, or perhaps chant was a better word, went, followed by another line. The only word in the second line, Harry knew was Mahal, the Khuzdul name for the smith of the Valar and their creator. That was still more than he got from the next three lines before the chant returned to the beginning sentence, the dwarves voices so deep they were practically subterranean, making it even harder to detect single words.

From what Harry was sensing, the dwarves weren’t pulling energy up out of the ground or something similar, nor were they asking Mahal for intervention or guidance. Rather, he thought they were simply thanking Aulĥ for their already existing strength. This song was also a far simpler song than the one used in prayer when Thorin as he became a Master Smith. Yet it felt more powerful in Harry’s estimation, because, as it continued, Harry felt as if all of the dwarves were taking strength from one another. As if the song was enabling their Fĥa to uplift and empower one another in turn.

It was fascinating, and Harry knew this was the secret Karo had wanted him to keep. He wondered what it would do in the long term, but for right now, it was certainly helping the dwarves along at a pace that would’ve left any army back on his old planet in the dust quickly. *Hell, they look as if they are jogging instead of marching along!*

Shaking his head, Harry shifted his course a bit to the side. *Enough of that, Potter. You’ve got a job to do.* With that, he picked up the pace himself, soon leaving the army behind despite its own surprising speed.

Six days later, as the terrain around them began to be more hilly, grassy and dotted with distant trees, standing water and even rivers, he was still surprised at how quickly the army had moved. He had long known the dwarves were immensely hearty folk, but with the song buoying them, that had been taken to an extreme. They had marched from before dawn into the night, trusting in their eyes while Harry’s runes let them all rest soundly when they made camp.

In this manner, they had made at least twenty-five leagues a day, a truly insane pace for any force of heavy infantry. Harry knew an elfish army would’ve been able to match that pace and perhaps exceed it, but such a host would never have been as heavily armored or armed as the dwarves were.

The song hadn’t helped Harry at all, of course, but that was alright by him. What bothered him a bit over that time was the fact that he was quite isolated from the army, and of course, Tauriel wasn’t there. He had known that second point would hit hard thanks to how much of their courtship paralleled that of two elves, and how separating a couple once that courtship began was never a pleasant thing. But he had at first attempted to become

friendly with Karo and some of the other officers, but found them all standoffish, even Karo, and his jokes with the cooks hadn't garnered him more than a few smiles.

Karo respected Harry, and at first, when they met, Harry had thought that perhaps Karo and he could get along as well as Harry did with Thunderbelly. But something very dwarfish had gone on between him and King Tollmaster prior to the army leaving Varni's Folly. Not something as simple as a field officer disagreeing with his king, or even personal insults being directed in either direction. No, it had been something beyond that, Harry could tell, but couldn't figure out what it was.

Whatever that argument was about, though, it had put the man in a sour mood, which had not lessened in the days since.

As for the rest of the dwarves in the army, they were respectful, but to his surprise, most of the Stonefoot warriors didn't speak a lick of Common. Harry had thought that Common was normally taught to dwarves because they wanted to keep their own language a secret, but the Stonefoot House had so few dealings with any other race that they had never really developed that practice like the Longbeards, Firebeards, and Broadbeam Houses had. Even the Stiffbeards had developed that preference, but the Stonefoots hadn't, which meant that any conversation instantly fell silent when Harry was around, even among the officers.

Harry reflected on that from a perch up a tree at the top of the hill and wondered if he was perhaps feeling a little lonely. *I know I'm feeling sorry for myself*, Harry thought, a twinge of real pain going through him for a moment. He hoped Tauriel was dealing with being separated as well as he was, but couldn't allow himself to dwell on his lady for any length of time without feeling a strong urge to turn back and try and find her wherever she was in the Ered Mithrin.

Thankfully, he had more important things to do right now, such as watching for movement in the distance. That movement resolved itself quickly under his gaze into a column of infantry. Easterling infantry, at least eighty strong, Harry estimated quickly.

That number went up a few moments later, and then up again as another column came into view from over the horizon to the left of his current position. At least three hundred of them, all making for one burned-out farm.

That wasn't the first such farm Harry had seen since the beginning of this march. It was a typical dwarfish dwelling, blocky, large, well-built out of stone and wood, but it had clearly been assaulted at some point, and was now little more than a ruin. A recent ruin, to be sure, but still, just a ruin. Even the outer wall, thick and well built as such constructions always were by dwarves, had been smashed.

Now, Harry watched in some bemusement as work began on that outer wall. It looked as if they were taking that wall and the farmhouse apart for some reason.

Slowly dropping out of the tree and moving towards the Easterlings, Harry quickly flipped to his Invisibility Cloak, as there wasn't much else in the way of covering the area at the moment, and he had no desire to attack this group at the moment. There had once been quite a large wheatfield here with a garden inside the farm's outer wall, but both had been trampled and left to rot after the attack on the farm, leaving only a few scattered clumps of wheat stalks sticking up here and there that had gone untrampled.

As he closed, Harry realized that none of these Easterlings had horses, bar two men who looked like officers. They wore the same heavy scale mail armor and the Red Hand mark on their chests as the elite of the Easterling army, the mark of the cult that apparently ruled the Easterlings as a whole, and sat their horses well away from the work going on. *The same cult that has some connection to Sauron, and had those daggers and the other cursed things we found in the Easterling camp after the battle.*

The Easterlings began loading up stones on large pallets, which many of them then began to pull through the ground as if estimating how heavy they were. It looked to be a very time-consuming and manpower dependent type of work, and Harry wondered why they needed the stone. Regardless, there were at least three hundred of them, scattered all around the farm area, working hard to take the house apart, despite none of them having brought along any tools to help the project along. It was all just muscle work and hands.

Beyond noting their numbers, though, Harry made a point to look at their equipment.

Like every Easterling he'd met before them, these Easterlings kept their faces hidden behind heavy helmets and masks, and seemed to wield the same kind of sword as well, a cutlass-style curved blade. Beyond that, the fact that they didn't have nearly as many tools for this current task as they should was a good thing, in Harry's opinion. It showed that for all of their organization, their logistics didn't seem to be quite as good as they should be.

Harry also didn't notice any more of the Red Hand among the infantry, and that their armor was mainly ring mail or leather jerkins. Far lesser in quality than the dwarven host behind him. Many of these men, though, also carried spears. Ironically, they looked similar to the throwing spears that the Stonefoots used, save that they were far thinner. Their heads were even hooks, much like the harpoon-like spears that the Stonefoot liked to use. There were also more archers among this group, which might well be an issue, as there

hadn't been all that many archers per swordsman in the Easterling army they'd wiped out outside Varni's Folly.

After watching the work for some time, Harry then moved around the area, making certain that this force didn't have scouts out around their group. Once he was certain of that, Harry backed away. With the Easterling none the wiser, they had been observed, he headed westward towards where the army should be.

On his way back, he ran into several of the scouts and informed them of what he had found. Thankfully, most of the scouts, at least, understood Common. They stayed where they were, waiting for their fellows to join them, and Harry continued on.

Soon, he crested a hill and, having already switched to his elvish cloak, pulled the hood back and waved his arm, gaining the attention of Karo where he strode at the front of the rest of the army. "Easterlings ahead. A small force, right in our way. They're all infantry except for two officers. We need to take them out before any can escape and retreat with word of our army."

Karo held up her hand and called a halt, clenching his hand into a fist. At that order, the song slowly ebbing away, the magic of the dwarves slowly fading, as more of the officers moved up to join him. "Tell me."

With a nod, Harry described in greater detail what he'd seen, and quickly, a plan was put into motion. A hundred Stonefoots raced ahead to join the scouts where Harry had met them, while the rest of the army began to split up, groups of four hundred in every direction. The plan was to encircle the farm from every angle, cutting off this group of Easterlings before they were aware of the dwarf in their presence. Then, a force of a thousand dwarves would charge in from all sides while the rest of the army skirted wide around the area.

It sounded somewhat doable to Harry, but he warned that the terrain really wasn't going to hide their presence for very long. "You'll have to get the timing of the encirclement just right," he warned. "And I'd recommend you tell all of the archers to target those two officers. I'd prefer to take them prisoner over any of the others, but they've got horses, which means they have the best chance of getting away. I'll remind you, though, we still need to learn more about our enemy."

To Harry's surprise, this group of Easterlings was complacent enough that the plan actually did work. By the time an Easterling looked up and scanned the horizon idly, the force of three hundred Easterlings have been mostly encircled by the thousand dwarves sent to deal with them.

When that happened, Harry watched from a distance with one of the groups assigned to make certain the Easterlings didn't get away as the two officers barked orders, a spell on his eyes letting him see as well as an owl could. The stone-carrying sleds were left behind, and all of the Easterlings grabbed up weapons.

They didn't form lines or anything similar. Instead, the Easterlings spread out, charging forward towards the dwarven company closest to them, arrows twanging, until they were within spear-throwing range.. The Easterling bowmen had just as much range as the dwarven archers, and there were more of them than in that first group of dwarves who had closed faster than their fellows.

At least four of the Stonefoot warriors fell to arrows through the face or their neck guards. The dwarves then had their vengeance as their harpoons flew just as the Easterlings also released their spears. Five more dwarves fell back, wounded, with only one of them dead, but the heavier harpoons wreaked havoc on the Easterlings, slaying at least fifty and wounding still more.

The Easterlings still charged forward, but by this point, the other groups of dwarves had gotten near enough to see the action. Instead of charging into and through an equal number of dwarves, they found themselves faced with almost a thousand, the rest of the groups closing like a gigantic hand closing around them. It became a pell-mell melee at that point, one which none of the Easterlings survived.

When he realized this after the fact, Harry's mood soured. *I agreed with Karo when he said they didn't need my help, and a battle like that would let his warriors get their blood up, but damn it!*

"We need more information, blast it!" he railed at Karo afterward. "I understand that you wish to avenge yourselves on the Easterlings, and I even agree with it. What they've done to the lands here, this whole invasion, it's horrific. But we **need** information. I'm never going to be so foolish as to promise a prisoner his life or anything in exchange, but we need some to question!"

Karo bristled, but Harry stared him down, his eyes flaring. It wasn't yet nighttime, so the stored light of his connection to Arien wasn't as visible in his eyes as it would have been during the night, but Harry's emerald gaze was still highly disconcerting.

Eventually, Karo looked away. "We can spend some time searching the bodies for anything interesting. But my folk needed some blood on their blades, Harry. To see more evidence of what these folk have done to our lands, to our fellows, our dams especially, that is a hard and bitter ale to swallow."

Harry nodded in understanding, fighting the urge to reach out and grasp Karo's shoulder, as he knew the dwarf would not accept such a thing, while also understanding his point. For a human nation, an invasion of this nature would be devastating to be sure, but the local population would, if they could beat back the invaders, rebuild within one or two generations. For the dwarves, as had been mentioned in the meeting with Tollmaster, it might take as long as ten or twelve generations. Every dam lost among the families of farmers like this was a wound to the honor of the Stonefoot house as a whole and to their future.

"Still, we need information," Harry repeated. "I also think I should start ranging further ahead of the army. Maybe on my own, I can come across some Easterling scouts, ambush them and bring them back to question."

I'll also be able to spot any trouble in front of us well before Karo's own scouts, but it's best not to mention that at the moment, Harry reflected. *Dwarves and their pride, hah.*

That caused Karo to grumble a little, but he wasn't so foolish as to ignore the suggestion. He nodded, and Harry asked him if the army would be stopping here before moving on. To his surprise, Karo shook his head, gesturing to the sky, saying, "We will resume the march. We're only at the start of Rolling Gates; we still have at least three more days before we reach the area truly held by Spider's Bane."

Harry nodded and then turned away, already heading out and away. Behind him, the dwarven army began to reform again. Their wounded were seen to, and the dead buried with honor within the farmhouse. The Easterlings, they left to rot.

Unfortunately for Harry, the Easterlings didn't seem to bother all that often with lone scouts. He had seen this before with Tauriel, but had thought at the time that it had been more forces designed to bring in supplies rather than scout around. Now he learned that impression was wrong.

Instead of the lone scout a dwarven or elvish army would use, the Easterlings patrolled territory that they had basically already conquered with bands of at least twenty. The men, all of them on foot, moved in tandem, always strung out but within sight of one another. As Harry got closer, he saw at least three or four of them carrying what looked like horns to signal to other bands.

Realizing the significance of that, Harry instantly pulled back and moved around the first group he'd spotted. Not a league later, his wariness was rewarded as he descended down one of the rolling hills that marked this territory and ran into a second group, well within range of such a horn.

Pushing still further on, he didn't spot any further groups. He moved well around the area, then, when he was certain there wasn't another group anywhere nearby, he circled back, ambushing the second group from behind.

Harry started the ambush as an elf would, launching arrows at one of the officers, again, another Red Hand, although this one wasn't on a horse. His arrow took the man in the shoulder, puncturing through his armor and sending him to the ground with a cry, before his next arrow took the man next to the officer. He had one of the signal horns and fell dead with the arrow through the neck.

Before the other two carrying horns could raise them, Harry had hit both with cutting spells. With that done, he continued to snipe at the group even as they started to spread out, firing arrows in every direction, trying to hit the unseen archer, making certain none of the remainder made a dash to where the horns of their signalers lay.

But while Harry's and arrow fire pointed out his position to them, his Invisibility Cloak kept him almost entirely invisible at range like this. Still, he kept moving randomly from side to side right after launching such attacks, making these attacks miss. A few times, they got close, but the invisibility cloak and his own spells allowed him to remain hidden easily.

Yet as his attacks killed the scattering skirmishers, something horrific happened. The last five turned on their fellows, killing one another even as Harry switched to Stupefy spells. At first, Harry didn't realize what was going on, only understanding when one of them rose from next to another Easterling Harry had just hit with the stunning spell, his dagger red with blood. *FUCK!*

By then, it was too late. Harry tried to hit that man with a Stupefy, only to have another Easterling pop up from behind a rock and take his fellow Easterling in the back with an arrow. Harry blew the rock that man was hiding behind up with a Bombarda, but by that point, two more had mutually stabbed one another, their daggers arching up from under their leather jerkins into their guts, a horrific way to die, and one Harry had no way of doing anything about with his limited healing skills.

Desperately, Harry scanned around, but by the time he spotted the last two and snapped off a spell, one of them had stabbed his fellow through the throat from behind. The falling body absorbing the Stupefy meant for them both. Before Harry could launch another spell, the man stabbed his sword up into his own neck, stabbing it where the armor of his helmet met the light leather armor covering the rest of his body.

From thirty yards away, Harry just stared, his eyes wide, wondering what the hell that had been about. *I know that the women in the enemy camp marked with the Blood Hand*

took their own lives in some kind of strange ritual, but I didn't see any evidence that the soldiers had done the same! Has something changed, or did I just not notice moments like that before in the heat of battle? I would have expected something like this from a group of Blood Hands, but the only one here was the officer I hit first...

Moving over to where the elite trooper had fallen, Harry was unsurprised yet dismayed to see the man had already taken his own life. *I knew we were dealing with a society that had become dominated by sadism and zealotry, but not to this extent!*

Regardless, the next time he attacked a group of enemy scouts, Harry didn't take any chances. He started with non-lethal. Wide-angle, grossly overpowered Stupefies hit segments of the spread-out group of scouts, dumping five of them to the ground before they even realized they were under attack, followed by five more.

Those still standing quickly realized what was happening and, with a series of shouts between them, spread out further so that Harry had to really overpower his stunning spell to get more than one of them in every arc. Even as he began to move around, dodging return fire, though, Harry did so, shifting around as they fired their arrows in his direction or through spears. Once more, there seemed to be more spear throwers than archers in this group than Harry had seen before, and Harry wondered idly why, like the Stonefoots, the Easterlings seemed to rely more heavily on throwing spears and arrows as long-range weapons.

One of the Easterlings shifted position, running towards the position of the first group that Harry had taken out. He slid into cover behind a rock one of them had been standing on. There, he glanced at his companion, only for his eyes to widen as he saw the man's chest still rising and falling. He shouted something in their same language, harsh and guttural.

Hearing that, Harry cursed internally even as he sent another Stupefy the man's way. *Dammit! I should've remembered to cast Rosetta Calx before starting this attack.*

Whatever the man had shouted caused the others to rush towards where their downed fellows lay, swords quickly replacing throwing spears or bows. At that sight, Harry decided he had enough prisoners. Cutting spells flashed out, Difindo being able to cover a wider area than a normal stunning spell for the same energy. This sliced several of the Easterlings in half.

Piercing spells and one Bombarda aimed at another man under cover followed, finishing off the thirty-strong group, leaving twelve prisoners still unconscious on the ground.

Harry went to each of them in turn, tying them up to one another, divesting them of weapons, and then removing their helmets. With how much of an emphasis the Easterlings had shown in not letting their features be seen by anyone, he felt that would put them severely on the back foot, even more so than being prisoners. He also looked for any with the Blood Hand on them, intent on separating any such.

Unlike the first group, this band hadn't seemed to have a Blood Hand acting as an officer before Harry attacked them, and this proved to be the case. None of these men seemed to have that mark on them.

With that done, he used the stupefy on the entire group again, renewing their unconscious state, before racing off back towards the army. *I'd question them alone, but I don't know exactly all of the questions we need to have answers for.*

Soon, several scouts from the army followed Harry back to where he'd ambushed the skirmishers.

Unfortunately, the other scouts hadn't had much luck in creating a similar ambush. Indeed, at least two of the scouts didn't report back that evening, possibly slain by the enemy skirmishers, while another pair reported that they'd had to retreat from a similar group to the two that Harry had attacked.

One of the scouts reported they had seen one such group to the south of the army's march. "I don't know if they got close enough to spot our columns, but I did see them on my way back. It's all too possible they did," that scout warned, looking shamefaced. "I'm sorry, sirs, there were just too many of them for me to deal with on my own."

Karo frowned, but waved the younger-seeming dwarf off, staring ahead of them further east. "So whatever happens, the enemy ahead of us will be aware of the army soon. Unless... Harry, do you think you can run them down?"

"If I knew where they were, maybe," Harry admitted, knowing how fast he could cover ground in the patented elvish ground-devouring lope that he'd learned from Tauriel. "But I don't. Sorry, Karo."

Karo huffed. "When the scouts I sent ahead to pick up the prisoners return, we will need to change our route. I will get with the other officers to decide what we will do then."

"Fine. But I'll warn you, I saw a few of these Easterlings kill one another once they realized that they couldn't survive the battle, and again when they realized that some of my spells were knocking their fellows out rather than killing them." Harry shook his head. "Is it normal for Easterlings to do that? I didn't see anything like that in the battle outside Varni's Folly."

“Nor I. Then again, we weren’t taking any prisoners at the time,” Karo muttered, running a hand over his bald head. “Beyond that, I would have to consult our records of past wars with them, as I don’t honestly know offhand. But you took a prisoner before, didn’t you? Fili mentioned that. He tried to escape or force you to kill him before answering any questions.”

“Exactly, force us to kill him, he didn’t try to take his own life... although that might be because he knew it was impossible. Still, it feels as if this willingness to kill themselves is something new. I wonder what sparked it,” Harry hummed, scratching at his lightning bolt scar with his maimed hand for a moment in his own version of a thoughtful gesture. “Still, it will make it hard to get them to talk.”

When the other officers arrived, it was quickly decided that the army would skirt to the north and push on throughout the night to boot. That would let them put a lot of terrain between them and where the army had been spotted. “We’ll drag the prisoners with us, but we won’t question them until we stop tomorrow afternoon.”

To Harry’s lack of surprise, Karo didn’t ask him to use a spell to lighten the weight of the prisoners. The Stonefoots had begun to accept his ward stones in terms of protection, but they disdained the idea of asking for help when their own strength could suffice.

In this, they were, of course, correct. The prisoners were passed around like parcels by the Stonefoot army as they resumed their song, not even slowing their pace throughout that day, that night and into the next morning.

Harry wasn’t with them, still moving around the army on the lookout for more bands of Easterling skirmishers. He took out one more in the evening that might have been able to spot the army and spotted two others moving away from the army’s current route.

Unfortunately, that meant Harry wasn’t with the army when his Stupefy spell wore off. This meant that the prisoners woke up. Some of them while being passed around like parcels by the dwarves.

Three of the prisoners instantly bit their tongues the moment they were revived. It happened so quickly that none of the dwarves even thought to stop them. Another tried to follow, but he had woken up as his face was towards one of the Stonefoots. With a shout, he lunged forward, grabbing the prisoner’s jaw, pulling his mouth open even as he tried to close it to bite off their tongues. “Ware! The Easterlings will bite through their tongues if they wake!”

“That’s an easy fix, then,” another dwarf grunted. Placing his shield back on his back, the man reached forward, taking another prisoner off the back of the man who was in

front of him. He then clunked the Easterling on the top of the head hard enough to nearly break his neck.

Harry remained away from the rest of the army, scouting around it through the night. Normally, he would have offered to use his sun-spell to light the way for the dwarves, but the Stonefoots hadn't asked for it, and they didn't really need it as much as the carts had needed the extra light. It also would have been impossible for any watcher to miss such a thing, and missing just one Easterling could have proven disastrous.

Twice more, he ran into groups of skirmishers, needing to take them out before they pushed past him toward the army well behind. Once was at night. Here, though, Harry made a mistake. The Easterlings had holed up for the night in a farmhouse much like the one from the other day. Harry thought to rouse them out with a Bombarda as the house seemed a good defensive position. But the house was in far less repair than he thought. The wall he struck did come down, but so did the roof, which caused an even greater chain reaction. None of the Easterlings survived.

The next day, the group he ran into was almost on top of the army, having hidden in an old riverbed the night before. Harry attacked quickly, and several scouts joined in, but they were able to take two more prisoners.

By the time he rejoined the army later that day, they had already settled down in camp. He took some time to put ward stones down, thankful that he had spent some time in Varni's Folly as the army prepared to march to make up more warding stones. The size of this army was far larger than the convoy, and he'd need to make more to cover the area the camp needed.

When he finally joined the command group, the questioning of the prisoners had already begun. That... did not make for a pleasant sight. One more prisoner had been able to bite his own tongue the moment they started questioning him, and the others were now being stopped from doing so by two Stonefoots on either side waiting to jab wooden sticks into their mouths, forcing their mouths open at intervals. It was crude, but apparently was working... well... enough to let the Easterlings scream and curse, anyway.

Because the prisoners were being tortured, a sight that caused Harry to stumble to a halt, a shiver of revulsion going through him.

Fili had used the threat of torture to get the Blood Hand officer the convoy had captured to talk, made easier by the young man's desire to rant and rave at them. But he hadn't actually done much beyond tearing a chunk of his hair out. Karo and the others, perhaps because they weren't getting any good answers, had not stopped at threats.

The sight of the Easterlings having lost fingers and toes, their wounds then having been cauterized, was horrific, made worse by how pale their bodies were.

For the first time since we parted ways, I am glad that Tauriel is not with me, Harry thought, looking a little sick. This was beyond anything he'd ever seen before, coming close to seeing someone put under the Crucio, a spell Harry had felt numerous times himself, both before and after entering the Veil. Then he became furious and continued to march forward.

Damn it, the Stonefoots should at least be aware of how pain doesn't matter to the Easterlings! Harry had seen how the Easterlings seemed to all self-mutilated to a certain extent, not just the Blood Hand, but others. Indeed, Karo had been the one to point out that all of them had scars and seemed inured to pain. *This, this is pointless and foolish as well as horrifying!*

A scream rang out, and Harry's thoughts coalesced into action as he finally reached the crowd of officers and prisoners. "ENOUGH!" he roared, a Stupefy lashing out, and sending prisoners and torturers unconscious.

Karo and a few other officers were also struck, but they were at the edges of the crescent-shaped spell. For some reason, that meant they simply stumbled, instead of being knocked out entirely. They turned furious, but Harry was not having any of it. For the first time since becoming a pseudo-Istari, Harry reached inside and pulled on that connection, finding it waiting to be called upon, a blazing energy within him.

His eyes blazed, and his presence seemed to swell, causing the dwarves around him, both the officers and others who had reacted to Harry's spellwork, to stumble back, faces going white with fright as a rumble went through the ground and an uncomfortable heat radiated out from his body. **"I SAID ENOUGH!!** We are not of the Dark, we do not torture for the sake of torture. You dishonor your ancestors going all the way back to the fathers of your race, and I will not have it!"

The dwarves, Karo and all his officers stumbled back, and Harry marched forward, kneeling beside one prisoner after another, using Episkey and his other, admittedly very limited, healing spells on the prisoners, glaring all around him. "I thought better of you, Karo. I thought better of you all. Torture of any kind will not give you the answers you truly hope to get. Fear, perhaps, but torture? Especially used on someone like these men, who we know make light of pain!? What were you thinking?!"

"We were thinking like you told us, to get answers!" Karo retorted sharply, but it was the sharpness of a man faced with the realization he had been travelling with a tiger when he thought it a housecat. "We need information, Harry! What would you have us do?"

“Think beyond torture!” Harry growled, shaking his head as he pulled his hands back from one man’s hands. All of his fingers had been amputated, with a few cauterized. Harry’s spells had closed the other stumps better, and then he had redone the work the cauterizations had done.

Sighing and mentally cursing the fact he’d never developed any skill with Legilimency, Harry sighed, his aura finally fading away and letting the dwarves around him breathe, wiping away buckets of sweat from the heat that Harry had somehow conjured up as he finished his work on the prisoners. “You’re right, I did say that. But pain isn’t the way to get these men to talk, Karo. This... you knew it. All of this was because you all wanted to make them feel pain for what they’ve done to your people.”

A few of the other officers made to protest, but Harry merely glanced their way and they all fell silent, any attempts to support their actions fading as they realized that yes. Of anyone, the Stonefoots should have known causing pain to the Easterlings was a worthless practice.

“I won’t allow more of this,” Harry stated, his voice as final as a tombstone. “We will need to try other means.” He calmed down then, the last vestige of his almost otherworldly aura of power fading as a smirk appeared on his face. “Perhaps by getting a few of these men drunk? Offering their facemasks back to them?”

“And how will we stop them from simply biting their own tongues out?” one of the older officers growled out, recovering quickly from Harry’s scathing glare. He tried to work himself up for more but couldn’t as Harry’s emerald gaze flicked to him.

“By making them too cheerful to think of it clearly,” Harry proposed, causing the dwarves to look at him in confusion.

That confusion lasted for a bit as Harry ordered the wounded prisoners be set aside. He had no way to numb the pain they were already feeling and doubted any of the four could be made to talk, regardless of any amount of alcohol or spellwork. One of them had his eye put out, for Valar’s sake. This started a new argument, as the dwarves were unwilling to keep the prisoners around if they weren’t being questioned, and they certainly weren’t going to feed them. The army had only enough food for their own men at this point for two more meals, if that.

That caused Harry to scowl a bit, but he allowed the dwarves to kill the already wounded prisoners. It pained him, but they were enemies, and it was better to let them die than be tortured. As for the remaining five prisoners, Harry proposed a means to question them that none of the dwarves would have thought of, and not just because they didn’t have his spells to work with.

“A cheering charm? It’s a descriptive enough term, I’ll grant you, but what does it mean in this instance? How can making someone cheerful help us get answers out of him?” Karo grumbled, feeling foolish just using the term.

“Well, for one thing, I think it will scare whoever I use it on something fierce. Made to laugh despite whatever you wish, laughing so much you lose control of your body and might even die due to laughter? That can hurt a man’s mind, make him weaker and hopefully open to answering some questions rather than dying in such an inglorious manner. It will also make it easier to get the prisoners drunk, which in turn will loosen their tongue,” Harry retorted.

There was a problem with this, though. As much as dwarves all enjoyed a good drink, very few among the army still had any after so many days marching. Harry certainly didn’t. Still, they found enough, and Harry had the prisoners separated. That way they would all be questioned without knowing what kind of answers Harry and the others had gotten already.

When the first man was woken out of his Stupefy stupor, he found laughing before he could get his bearings. For several minutes, he laughed so hard and so loudly that the Easterling didn’t even realize that he didn’t have his helmet on, not even a face wrapping. When he stopped laughing he was gasping in air, holding bruised ribs, his eyes wild and thoroughly frightened in a way he hadn’t been while watching his fellow Easterlings being tortured by the Stumpies. Wh, What is, what was that?!”

“That was me,” Harry drawled, squatting in front of where the man had slumped to his knees, his hands tied behind him. “A spell made to make you laugh. Laugh regardless of anything else or any thought on your part. So, how exactly would He Who is Beyond would think of a warrior who dies not in battle but due to laughing so hard he forgets to breathe?”

The man’s already frightened, horrified gaze widened, but before he could do anything, Harry hit him again with the Cheering Charm. His jaw, which had been about to clench in preparation to bite through his tongue, loosened as he let out an unwilling guffaw. Harry held the spell on the man for a time, before cancelling it. “You see how it is. Now. I have some questions for you.”

Unfortunately for Harry, it was really hard to notice when someone was going to bite their tongue out. The man had barely answered two questions about the disposition of the army around Spider’s Bane before he did so, and the next moment, he was laughing blood as he convulsed. Harry was horrified, while the dwarves, despite still feeling a little guilty over their own actions, felt somewhat justified now.

The next prisoner was questioned in a slightly different manner, the dwarves breaking out their limited ale. Harry hit the man with a cheering charm, then they dumped the booze

down his throat. And as inured to pain as the Easterlings were, drink was not something many of them had to deal with. The man became drunk far faster than Harry had thought it would take.

However, here, luck proved against the questioners. The man was apparently something of a dullard and recluse. Either that, or he was a really good actor, as he gave them even less information. The overall commander of the army around Spider's Bane was the same as the one in charge of the invasion of Stonefoot lands, Cromtuah, but that was all. He had no idea about much else, although pointed out one of the other prisoners as being more informed than the others. "H, he wants ta join the Blood Hand. N, never volunteer, nothin' meshelf..." he slurred.

Leaving that man for last should have allowed Harry and the dwarves to perfect this method of interrogation. But it didn't. One more of the slaves bit through their own tongues, one even pushing through the Cheering Charm to do so. The other did give them some information before trying to do the same, at least.

"You! you are the false one, the servant of the dishonest light!" He shouted the moment Harry cancelled his Cheering Charm. "You stand against He Who is Beyond and the Great One who is his servant!"

"Oh, were you warned about me somehow? Or warned to be on the lookout for me?" Harry asked, keeping his voice a unconcerned drawl with difficulty as he fought the urge to look up into the sky. *No, it can't be birds or anything similar. If Sauron could use crows and so forth with so much control, the enemy would already know this army was here.*

The prisoner didn't reply, and the dwarves forced his mouth open, having noticed the subtle jaw clench that would have allowed him to bite into his tongue. Forcing his mouth open, the last of their booze was poured down his throat slowly, making certain he swallowed every mouthful, and a numbing agent one of the dwarves with some medical knowledge had added to the drink.

Yet this simply made the man's words too much of a slur to understand.

Frustrated, Harry paced around the area, staring up into the evening sky. This process had taken the better part of the day, and now he could smell the cooks starting to prepare the night's stew elsewhere. The idea of eating after all of this, particularly seeing the earlier torture of the prisoners made Harry's stomach roil, but he pushed that thought to the side, glaring at the nearly unresponsive man then over to the final prisoner. "How many days before we hit Spider's Bane?"

“We’re already in the lands controlled by the Bane now. If we march as we have and make straight for it, as I am wont to do, we will see Spider’s Bane earlier tomorrow,” Karo grunted, also annoyed by how the day had gone. “I led us on a diagonal march after our scouts reported we might have been sighted, as I didn’t want to put too much distance between us and the Bane.”

He looked down at the prisoner, then gestured with a jerk of his head for Harry to follow him. The two stepped away, and Karo continued his explanation. “As I said, if we use our March of Purpose, we should be able to reach Spider’s Bane tomorrow. I would like to simply attack right then, charge into the enemy from behind before they can prepare. I doubt we’ll get so lucky as for the Valar to send us weather you can manipulate to hide our approach, thus we will need to rely on speed, going from marching into the fight quickly. We can hope the enemy have no idea of where we are or our total strength, but even so, we will be in for a exceptionally hard fight.”

Karo sighed. “I know I disparaged this whole concept at one point, Harry, but we still need answers to what we can expect.” He looked at Harry closely. “Do you have any other spells which can get us some answers?”

“I...” Harry scowled, looking down at his feet. He too wanted some questions answered, but... *But am I willing to use the Imperio? I know I thought of it before, but Tauriel was right. Using that kind of spell, it smacks too much of the dark... Damn it.*

Now that it came to it, Harry shook his head. “I... do, Karo. But using it, it’s impact on me would be, I just don’t know. I’ve made no secret about coming here from another world. Spells here have an impact occasionally far more than at home, and... the spell’s dark, Karo. One of the darkest curses from my old world. I, I volunteered once to use it, but... are you certain we need the information we can get from one random skirmisher?”

“A skirmisher who was acting as an officer, and one who was looking to join the Blood Hand,” Karo retorted. “And, yes, Harry, I fear we will need that information. I need to know where to aim our army, to know the size of the enemy’s force, it’s deployment. We’re going to be badly outnumbered regardless, but any information we can glean will be helpful.”

Harry scowled, but heard much of his own thinking in Karo’s words. *Maybe that’s why I’m fighting so hard against this idea, after everything I saw earlier it feels even more wrong. No. Tauriel was right, and I am thankful for her words to me then, and the memory of her now. I do not think Arien and the rest of the Valar would approve of my use of that spell.*

“You’re talking about tactical questions, and for those I don’t think the Imperio is needed. remember, I can go forward myself, enter their camps and listen to any conversations going on. That isn’t perfect, but it can help.” Harry shook his head. Having voiced that, he knew

that was the way to go forward, as if Arien had spoken into his mind again, warning him about this spell and its impact on his own Fëa. “No. Just like torture, there are some depths that just aren’t worth it to plumb.”

When Karo scowled and made to speak, Harry held up a hand, becoming more and more certain that this wasn’t the time to use his Imperio, that doing so was not the way forward. “The Imperio is a spell that the Great Enemy would vastly appreciate, one that allows the user to dominate the mind of another to the point they become little more than a puppet on a string. It’s based off a desire to control that I would have trouble bringing together. If I’m going to use it, I damn sure want to be certain I’m using it on the right target. That isn’t going to be our current prisoner.”

At the seriousness and the image Harry’s words evoked, Karo shivered. “Very well. I... I think you will be forced to use it eventually, Harry, but you’re right. Now your ability to sneak in will be just as useful to us. I want you to leave the army tonight. You can use a spell to find us, correct?”

“I have a spell that can point me in your direction, yes,” Harry agreed.

“Good. We’ll have our meal and then push on, heading hard eastward until tomorrow morning. I want you to start thinking about how close we can be to the enemy’s lines and still rely on your wards to hide us. If we can come out of nowhere on their flank or from directly behind one of their camps at the very least we can a major advantage.”

Harry nodded, then turned away. Within moments he was once more leaving the army behind, pushing on in the direction a point me spell was taking him. Not, annoyingly, to Spider’s Bane. Evidently the name in Common wasn’t enough to let him use the spell. When he learned that, he used the Point Me spell to instead find the Easterlings. The last man he’d questioned had given him the name of his tribe, the Bronze Hill tribe. So, “Point Me Bronze Hill Tribe Camp,” worked, and the small stick he’d used the spell on tugged him in the proper direction.

Not a day later, he was back, coming out of the morning’s light, flicking up his hood to allow the dwarves to see him. “Karo! We’ve got a bit of luck on our side!”

Karo fell out of the formation and made to stop the march, but Harry shook his head. “Keep going forward, there’s a series of hills about two leagues further on, the furthest are so tall that you can’t see the other side and vice versa. We’re nearly there. If we rest there, we’ll be within another three leagues from the nearest enemy camp.”

“We’re that close? Blast these rolling hills,” Karo muttered, shaking his head. “The scouts thankfully haven’t spotted any skirmishers out this way.”

“That’d be because we’re not just north but northwestern from Spider’s Bane. And I have a lot more to tell you too,” Harry said jubilantly.

Karo took the suggestion and the army pushed on, continuing to march until they reached the area Harry had told them to look out for. There, while the dwarves settled down, Harry set out the ward stones before returning to speak to the officers of what he had seen.

“First of all, our concerns about siege equipment being sent forward was well founded, but I didn’t see very many of it. Catapults for the most part, and no ammunition. Those skirmishers we’ve seen were really more to gather up rocks for the catapults. I saw several large siege towers also being put together, but they were going slowly. I assume because of how little wood there is around here, meaning everything needs to be shipped in. I’d have thought a battering ram would’ve been a better idea.”

“Against a dwarven hold? Direct attacks on our gateways would be utterly foolish,” Karo snorted, and Harry had to agree, reminded of the dead drop that had been in the ceiling above the sole entryway into Erebor. The speed of Smaug’s assault meant it hadn’t been used against him at the time, allowing him to smash the doors open and enter Erebor before it could be shut down. But the Easterlings certainly had no dragons with them.

“Still, the odds are deeply against us,” Harry warned. “I didn’t go to every camp, but I think there were at least forty-seven thousand Easterlings in this army. It’s hard to tell because this army’s not as concentrated as the one outside Varni’s Folly, and the Easterlings here seem to have been allowed to split up into their various tribes. Of the five camps I explored, all of them had different banners over them, and were of different sizes to boot.”

Luckily none of them had contained any of the cursed objects they’d seen in the camp outside Varni’s Folly. Harry assumed that meant the Blood Hand had a single camp where such vileness was kept. *I also didn’t see any women in those five camps, thankfully. I’d wager such women are also housed in the same camp as the Blood Hand and the general of this army, Cromtuah.*

The dwarves looked stunned, and many of them cursed about how profligately Man could breed in comparison to their own folk. But Karo frowned. “You said there were at least forty-seven thousand?”

“I did. I overheard a logistics officer lament about how little the land around Spider’s Bane could continue to support them, complaining about how much food they had to ship in for their army. Hence why I know that number, although as I said, their distribution around Spider’s Bane isn’t all that organized,” Harry explained. “There was also some talk of a reserve army. But most importantly for us, yesterday, a force of twelve thousand was sent out to find our army.”

“They’re out of position!” one of the officers shouted in delight. “Hah!”

“That army’s going to need to be hunted down later,” another officer warned. “And they’re between us and the other holds now.”

“It doesn’t matter. We don’t have any food left. We need to break the siege on Spider’s bane. The hold’s army is mostly intact behind their walls. I’ve no doubt they’ve been making skirmishes all this time. They can feed us, and better, being attacked from two sides at once will make a difference to the battle in front of us,” Karo said firmly.

“Better...” the oldest dwarf there spoke, his voice gravely and disused, but his eyes sharp as he gazed up at the sky above. “I wager we’ll see rain soon, rain that will last well into the night. If we are quiet enough...” he glanced at Harry who shrugged.

“In this terrain, I think my spells could silence our army for maybe a few minutes, if that, although if the rain’s heavy enough that will help. But between me and the scouts, we should be able to sweep what few watchers I saw in this area. As I said, we’re coming at them from an angle they very obviously aren’t expecting.”

“To the point we won’t run into any defensive barricades or similar?” Karo asked, clearly expecting the worst, but Harry shook his head.

“There aren’t any barricades or trenches protecting the back of the army. Not as far as I went to either side of where we’ll hit them,” Harry answered with a smirk. “There’s nothing between this army and the edge of the besieger’s scattered camps. There aren’t even any such between them.”

He hesitated, but unlike with the Imperio, this time, Harry had felt something that was, while not something he’d normally do, could have an impact well beyond putting his Fëa on the line using that spell. He voiced this, then continued, “It’s not exactly honorable but I think when you’re outnumbered more than four to one, you can set honor aside,” Harry said, tapping the empty bowl in front of him thoughtfully.

The other dwarves listened as he outlined his plan, with many of them scowling, and several of them actually spitting to the side. But none of them argued that it was a good idea. It was simply one they weren’t comfortable with, somehow seeing his idea, that of lightly poisoning the food of their enemies, more dishonorable than torture.

But Harry was fine with that. The food supply of the enemy army was a legitimate target in time of war, in his opinion.

That night, after resting the rest of the day, the army moved forward again under the cover of darkness and rain, splitting up into groups of a thousand to move more quietly up over

the hills and forward towards Spider's Bane. Harry and the scouts went out before the first group, silencing a few scattered watchers, and allowing Harry to put down his ward array in a new position. When each group was near, Harry depowered the wards, letting them in before putting them up again.

When the last group arrived, Harry, still feeling fresh despite the night's work, once more left the dwarves behind, pushing a little westward around the light of the nearest encampments a bare two leagues away, then closing in. With his invisibility cloak on him and a Mufflatio spell to muffle sound and another to stifle his smell, Harry wound his way through what few pickets there were out on such a night.

Now, Harry didn't have any spells to conjure poison or anything similar. Further, Tauriel had never gone into teaching him such things, at least not when it came to actually poisoning people. Putting down wolfsbane or other smell-based protections around camp when for some reason they couldn't use Harry's wards yes. Pointing out mushrooms which had deleterious effects on the stomachs of people who ate them, yes. Outright poison, no. And it wasn't exactly something he had ever planned for other.

However, Harry was a cook. He was a very good cook. And he knew there were a number of things you could add to meals made around a fire that would result in exceptionally unpleasant things that most people wouldn't recognize until too late. Meat that had gone bad such as a few slices of horse meat, a few seasonings added at disparate points in the creation of the stew, a couple of bugs. That sort of thing.

However, doing all that took time, far more than Harry had anticipated. Even on a rainy night like this, there were a lot of people moving around, too many for him to just rush in and out. He got to four of the camps that were facing northward before the rain began to peter out. Another two were seen to before dawn began to break, and he began to make his way back the way he'd come to rejoin with the dwarves.

The sky remained overcast, and as Anar began to come over the horizon, fog began to build up a bit around the area.

"With all this, I can conjure up fog well enough to cover our movements for a league at least, but it won't work for very long given how large the army is and how open the terrain," Harry warned.

"That is fine. We need to take the attack them, force them to react to us so that the Spider's Bane can sortie out to help, and you've gotten us close enough has it is to take them by surprise," Karo replied.

Harry nodded at that, then fell in with the dwarves as they marched forward. His spell was able to cover them until they were a little more than a league away from the nearest camp, and at that point, the natural fog had lifted to the point he could no longer sustain the fogbank around the army. "The'll be able to see us soon, Karo!"

Karo responded by bellowing something in Khuzdul. Throughout the army various officers began to bellow a chant, the same one they had been using all throughout the march up to this point, with an added line for some reason at the end. That line sounded far more warlike than the rest, but Harry would be hard-pressed to explain why. Whatever that sentence implied, the dwarves instantly began to pick up the pace, now charging forward at a pace Harry had to run to keep up with.

Soon, the army caught sight of the nearest enemy camp and vice versa through the little remaining fog. From where he sped alongside the dwarves, Harry could see men were running around everywhere, however, that was one of the camps that Harry had hit the night before. He hadn't been able to distribute anything incredibly dangerous, but he could almost guarantee there had been some severely long lines at the latrines soon after breakfast began.

The dwarves continued to chant, even as they pulled out weapons, and the column began to spread into a battle line, three dwarves deep. Archers, around two hundred of them, pulled back, falling out of the song entirely, although even that move seemed almost choreographed. They began to fire arrows into the enemy trying to form into a battle line, disrupting it a bit longer.

Then, with a roar, the song ended, and practically every dwarf in the first row hurled their harpoons forward, a hail of death slamming into the enemy army by a little over a hundred and ten feet, the dwarves able to toss the heavy harpoons further than any human could have tossed a similar weight.

Harry didn't know how many of the enemy they had killed in that first volley, but it certainly ripped the heart out of the first enemy tribe's forces to try and come together to defend against the dwarves that had suddenly appeared behind them where they had not expected it.

Before the scattered remnants of that force could even realize what had happened, Karo bellowed a charge, and the dwarves swarmed forwards.

Harry did not join them. He didn't think this first camp would slow the dwarves down much, and instead, kept well back from the battle, pushing himself up onto a small rise so he could watch the two nearest enemy encampments. They too had been among those he

had visited, but one of them to the southwest seemed to also be among the most organized.

Its forces were not forming up and immediately charging to help their companions as the other encampment was doing. Rather, they were pulling back. “Damn, I hate smart enemies.”

The battle in the enemy encampment nearest Harry’s current position was furious, but with the numbers on their side and the enemy still dealing with stomach related issues, as well as the sheer surprise of the attack meaning few of the Easterlings were armed, the dwarves were cutting down the Easterlings quickly. Even the other enemy encampment on the southeast sending help didn’t matter much.

Harry watched as a group of the dwarves broke off from the battle in the encampment, forming up battle line to receive those reinforcements. Shields and stabbing spears came into effect here, and once more, blood began to soak the ground.

Feeling as if that aspect of the battle was under control for now, Harry glanced back to the southwest from where they had hit the army besieging Spider’s Bane. There, as he feared, the nearest enemy tribe had fallen back to join its fellows. Those in turn also fell back. Soon, a larger prepared force began to form up between two of the encampments.

Harry waited a tick until he was certain that that force would be large enough to threaten the dwarven host, then raced into the tumult still going on inside the camp, searching for one of the commanders. He found Proli, Karo’s second-in-command among the forces of Varni’s Folly, and shouted, “The enemy is getting organized to our right! The left flank looks as if it’s good for now, but we need to get the army formed up again!”

The stoic dwarf nodded before pulling out a horn, making Harry somewhat sardonically note that both Easterlings and Stonefoots used the same method of communication in battle. He blew on it in a series of long blasts, and all around him, the dwarves stopped what they had been doing. Soon several of the officers began to bellow orders and out of every five, three dwarves broke off the battle inside the encampment, shifting to the right flank.

Karo was among those who pulled out of the camp quicker, and he bellowed commands in Khuzdul, getting his forces to form up into a thick line of four, facing the direction of the oncoming enemy army. He glanced over at Harry who had joined him and gestured at the ground. “A wall,” he ordered.

“I’d quip something about demanding a please, but that can come later,” Harry snorted before leaning down and touching the ground. Ahead of the dwarves, a wall of stone and

dirt rose as Harry grimacing slightly at the effort. Mahal didn't like changes met made to his earth magically, but at least this one was a relatively small one. The wall formed into a largish half circle, the outer curve facing towards the incoming enemy forces.

The enemy did not randomly charge towards them, nor did they seem surprised by Harry's use of magic. Instead as they pushed through the southwestern most camp, they stopped and addressed their own lines. This let the dwarves hop up onto the fighting step Harry had crafted into the wall and allowed Harry to examine the Easterlings more closely.

Whereas the Easterling skirmishers and the force that had been sent out to take apart that farm had been light infantry, these were heavy infantry, much like the dwarves. Thankfully, the Easterlings did not seem nearly as well-equipped across the board. There were dozens, perhaps hundreds of them in this force that had kite shields, heavy scale mail to go with their heavy helmets, long spears, and swords, but the majority of them seem to be wielding maces of a strange design and didn't have shields. Almost like the pickaxes of dwarves, these maces had four heavy spikes rather than a series of smaller spikes around the head, and Harry guessed they were designed to punch through armor. Ring mail also abounded more in this infantry force than Harry had seen in the majority of the army outside Varni's Folly.

As they approached, the Easterlings actually formed into a kind of shield wall. It wasn't a very dense one, but it was a shield wall nonetheless, and the kite shields protected them from the archer fire of the dwarves even use their own archers began to fire back. Stonebeards began to fall, hit with arrows that found their faces or with arms and legs perforated. Yet more of the enemy archers were falling to their fire, and Harry decided he'd seen enough.

Targeting one group of archers, Harry lashed out with a cutting spell that cut more than half of the archers in that company in half. At that range, that had taken a vastly overpowered cutting spell, but it had certainly evened up the odds in terms of archer fire. It also caused the enemy army to halt in place more than his pulling a wall out of nowhere. Many of them turned to stare at where their archers had been, then towards Harry, their momentum falling away.

Some kind of shout rose in their own language, making Harry growl a little. "I really wish you all weren't so fanatical about me not learning your language," he grumbled, before targeting one Blood Hand warrior underneath a banner with a stag's antlers of some kind on it. The man and the banner fell as Harry's Rifela took the man straight in the head, removing said head entirely despite his armor.

Despite losing its local commander, the enemy didn't break. Indeed, more of their troops began to form behind the slowly forming shield line, and then far behind the front lines, someone raised a signal flag.

"RAHHHH!!!" The enemy charged, with dozens of them then hundreds stopping for a moment to hurl throwing spears, before pulling out their swords and maces and charging forward. That first volley slammed into dwarven shields, killing a few on the wall, but most had hunkered down behind it for a second as soon as the enemy began to stop their spears. Now they stepped up onto the lower fighting step and began to hurl their own reply.

Easterlings fell, dead and wounded alike being trampled under their fellows and then, there was a loud booming sound as the armies came together. The dwarves held the line, the advantage of the wall protecting their lower bodies and their own strength easily allowing them to hold.

The Easterlings began to spread out, but before they could roll up the dwarves position, more dwarves came out of the enemy encampment behind them, their work finished within. They formed up on either side of the semicircular wall that Harry had erected, and Harry quickly constructed not a wall in front of them, but rather a ditch.

This he opened up underneath several of the enemy dumping them down a few feet, breaking legs and ankles, and slowing the attempted encirclement. By the time the enemy got through that, the dwarves were fully formed up, and the remaining Easterlings, who had been moving in that direction in a far less organized manner than their first lunge towards the wall, found themselves facing the dwarves without any impetus behind them. Dozens began to fall, yet still more tribes were forming up further away around the blockade around Spider's Bane.

Returning to where Karo stood on the wall, Harry stuck his head over the edge and surveyed the area behind the front lines as the last clouds parted above him. He began to smirk at that, and then held up his hand, calling on his connection to Arien, the lady of the sun. A beam of sunlight fell on him, coalescing at his fingertips, and as at The Battle of the Lonely Mountain, he slashed those fingers outward.

His target this time wasn't a horde of trolls and orcs, but rather men. However, that mattered not at all to his spell, which cut through men in their hundreds. The effort caused Harry to stumble a bit, but he righted himself quickly.

The enemy army recoiled. Unlike orcs goblins and trolls, human armies were susceptible to losses, even armies as fanatical and organized as the Easterlings seemed to be. Especially against losses taken in such a way as magic. The majority of the attackers didn't retreat, but

even the Blood Hand elite among them stumbled, staring over their shoulders at where the reinforcements had once been.

Despite that, the Easterlings quickly regained their courage, and pushed forward.

Now, Harry began using Bombarda spells, hurling them down into the midst of the Easterlings away from the wall. In this manner he helped the Stonefoot archers keep something of a monopoly for time, but the enemy soon began to push forward too hard for that, with more archers coming up all the time. Losses began to mount despite Harry's best efforts, as numbers started to tell with more Easterlings reaching the dwarven line in organized groups.

Harry's hasty creation of a defensive position continued to serve them in good stead, as did the dwarves' own discipline and skills. Yet unlike Longbeard chain mail and Blacklock gambesons, the gambeson and chest plates of the Stonefoots were not the best next best thing to immune to the weapons of their enemies. The spiked maces smashed in here and there, puncturing chest plates if the enemy hit them hard enough, although the Easterlings found it far easier to stab through helmets or arms and shields.

Watching a group of five dwarves go down at once to a particularly hard push, Harry was about to use a spell to clear the Easterlings off the makeshift battlements, but the dwarves pushed back quickly, dislodging the Easterlings and reclaiming their position on the fighting step.

Still, Harry could tell that the dwarves were being hard pressed, and as he created his own small viewing platform, he wondered if they had bitten off more than they could chew here. From his new vantage point Harry launched spells down into the attacking Easterlings again and again before he spotted something in the distance.

The largest tribes had small mounds inside their camps, on top of which what looked like a flag tower, one which used flags to signal rather than simply announce that clan's presence here. Only a few were close enough for Harry to see the actual flags in question, but now he watched as one of the signal towers suddenly collapsed.

"Look! Something else is going on there," he yelled to a nearby dwarven officer, Karo having remained at the front on the wall. This dwarf, on the other hand, was nursing what looked like a badly broken, bleeding arm.

The dwarf looked in the way Harry was pointing and nodded grimly. "The army of Spider's Bane has made its move. I've no doubt there are numerous hidden tunnels, secret passages where they could come out from behind their defenses. Now they're in the enemy's defenses."

That quickly proved to be the case. Around the siege lines around Spider's Bane, small forces of fifty to a hundred dwarves sortied out through tunnels that had been left unused up to this point in the hope that some help would come for their beleaguered home.

These forces scattered throughout the camps, burning, destroying, killing anyone they could come across. They quickly became embroiled in more than a dozen small battles, and more than a few expeditions were wiped out, but others weren't and they were quickly reinforced by more dwarves.

At the same time, still more dwarves began to appear over the side of Spider's Bane's wall, rappelling down in ropes. There, on the ground, they quickly formed up into a real battle line as they marched down.

Soon, all across the front, General Cromtuah's forces found itself under attack and Harry bellowed the news at the top of his lungs to give the Stonefoot warriors more heart. They took to it with a will, shouting out their battle cries, "Baruk Khazâd! Khazâd ai-mênu!" and still further shouts in Khuzdul the meaning of which Harry didn't understand, but seemed to galvanize the dwarves even more.

Short hatchets hacked, spears thrust, maces hammered, and the battle became a seesaw slaughter all around Harry and the army he journeyed with, one he joined quickly, shattering any group of Blood Hands or more organized group of Easterlings he spotted, including many a group of archers.

When he stepped back and looked beyond the immediate battle, Harry saw that the built-up forces from Spider's Bane had already hit one of the defensive positions, hurling themselves up over the wooden barricades and spiked walls there. They took losses in the doing, but thanks to a portion of the nearby tribe's men having been pulled away, they were able to overwhelm the enemy at that point, getting in among the enemy on the other side as their infiltration teams already had.

The enemy commander's attention was split thus in three different ways. One was the enemy who had suddenly appeared at his back, and it already succeeded in smashing at least two encampments entirely, denuding several of fighting men and was now tying down a significant portion of his army that he had been able to ready and send in its direction. Worse there were reports of a magic user using his magic most profligately. That assault had already cost him thousands of fighting men.

The second avenue of attack was the internal threat posed by bands of hundred strong dwarves scattering across his equally scattered encampment, attacking in places he had never realized they could, where his people were not ready for it. Those groups were disrupting the Easterling's communications, destroying signal towers and torching as much

of the camps as they could, snarling up still more of his men, most of whom had yet to arm themselves or even put on their actual armor.

The last threat was the force out of Spider's Bane. That one was at least hitting his army in prepared defenses, but it had forced him to keep that force where it was rather than shift it over to help hunt back up the force already engaged with the magic user and the other Stonefoot formation.

Worse for the enemy commander, he had sent out a host of twelve thousand men the day before in an effort to find and pin down the army from the west. The same army that had somehow marched hundreds of leagues to the north and west, to then come on his army without any of his skirmishers spotting it until it was already closing to attack.

Cromtuah tried. He tried hard to organize a defense, but the work Harry had done the night before, coupled with the new attackers from inside his own encampments meant that his command started to break apart. Cromtuah hadn't drilled his army as well as Auctar had his separate command and now, almost every tribe began fighting on their own against the invaders of their personal camp. Only those camps which had already begun to deal with those invaders responded to his orders.

Because of this, what reinforcements were sent to the battle against Harry began to ebb away, allowing the dwarves there some respite and to go on the attack.

Karo felt it, the moment the Easterlings facing their lines began to lose impetus, when the enemy commander, wherever he was elsewhere along the semi-circular siege lines, began to lose control. "Harry!" he shouted. "On my signal, collapse the wall!"

On the heels of that order, he bellowed a series of commands, and every third dwarf stepped back from the line, pulling from their backs their throwing harpoons. They hurled them forward into the face of the attackers, and then, the dwarves pushed forward as Harry reduced the wall, transfiguring it back to the grassy ground it had been before.

The dwarves took one step, hacking and slashing, yet the Easterlings held, retreating slowly and with good coordination. Two steps, maces and swords continued to exchange blows, with men from both sides going down. Three steps, and the enemy broke.

Fanaticism could only take you so far, and that had already taken a hit thanks to Harry's earlier spellwork. Now, as Harry rejoined the dwarven line, stabbing over their heads and lashing out with spells directly into the enemy formation from spear range, the Blood Hands began to lose control of their fellows. The Blood Hands themselves stayed, congealing together even as the rest of the host retreated, but they were overwhelmed, unable to hold up more than a few hundred dwarves across the line as another shouted

command from Karo saw his men charging after them, cutting the fleeing Easterlings down from behind.

As they reached them, Karo shouted more orders, forcing his men to skirt around the next two tribal encampments, slamming into another force of a few thousand Easterlings on the other side of the second encampment. They had formed up but seemingly didn't know what to do or had been unwilling to join the attack on the Stonefoot host after Harry had slaughtered the initial reinforcing group.

The group of Easterlings was able to throw a single volley of throwing spears at the incoming dwarves, but the army of Stonefoot dwarves didn't even stop despite dozens of them going down. They slammed into the enemy force, and for the first time, one formed enemy force faced off against another without any kind of defensive position on either side. However, the dwarves had the numbers and their charge had given them momentum, allowing them to shatter the enemies shield wall despite that shield wall having been made, to Harry's surprise mostly of Blood Hand warriors.

Harry did not engage with the rest of the dwarves, having known from the instant he had seen that small force that Karo and the others would be able to overwhelm them. He skirted around that battle, and when he saw another force coming towards them, instantly began to target it with Bombarda spells. The enemy had yet to close ranks into a battle formation, so his attacks actually didn't kill all that many attackers one after another, but they still hit, and they still began to demoralize the enemy.

A moment later, some of them turned to retreat, but the Blood Hand warriors with this new force started to kill their fellows. One shouted something, some order to keep going but lost his head a moment later to a cutting spell that also sprayed the guts of the men around him onto their fellows.

Without a heightened position to view more of the area around Spider's Bane and the besieger's positions, Harry had no way of knowing that by that point, the force coming directly out of Spider's Bane had broken through and out past the defensive lines. Nor that several of the skirmishing forces, even as still more had been wiped out, had begun to break out of the various encampments and coalesce into their own smaller yet still deadly forces.

While the Easterlings still had numbers on their side, they were now fighting as disparate tribes, and Cromtuah knew the battle was lost. With that in mind, he sent out riders, all the horsemen he had retained, straight east to the reserve army. He on the other hand did not go with them. Lord Cromtuah formed up the forces of his own tribe and soon, that force,

nine thousand strong, appeared in front of the Stumpy host that had appeared and attacked the back of his army.

Harry saw them coming and quickly retreated shouting a warning to Karo and the other dwarves as he closed with the melee that was occurring in yet another enemy encampment. Breaking away from that melee took time, but eventually, they pulled back from that encampment and formed up in a line to receive the enemy. By this point, none of the Stonefoot had any more harpoons to throw, and Harry watched as more than a dozen of them went down to the volleys of their enemies similar spears before the enemy charged. Even as they did, another storm of javelins was in the air.

As they did though, Harry had gotten to a position where he could see a significant portion of the enemy formation. And the sun was still high in the air, the last storm cloud a distant memory. Calling upon his connection not Arien once more, he lashed out with his laser-like spell once more.

That tore the guts out of the enemy formation, and, although Harry didn't realize it, also claimed the life of the enemy commander. The nine thousand had become six thousand with that strike, and while the dwarves had still sustained heavy losses so far, they were still, man-to-man better warriors in the Easterlings.

A force of the infiltrators attacked moments after the battle had been joined, with another joining in moments later, both hitting the enemy in the rear. This further diverted the enemy's attention. More fell, and Karo shouted the command, sending the dwarves stepping forward again and again.

This force however did not break, giving ground only slowly. They continued to be reinforced by small groups coming up towards them from the scattered tribe-based encampments. It would not be this portion of the battle that finally broke any hope the Easterlings had of winning this battle.

That honor lay with the army of Spider's Bane, which, having broken through the inner defenses of the encirclement around their hold, had fallen upon the enemy encampments one after another, wiping them out, slaughtering thousands in small, short battles. By the time they had wiped out a fourth tribe, the rest, to the south and west of Spider's Bane, began to flee, their morale shattered to the point that all fight had gone out of these forces, many of which had yet to actually be engaged by more than the infiltration teams.

But without an overall command, only the Blood hands were left to try and instill order. It didn't work. Only a few scattered Blood Hands were able to command enough respect to halt the exodus, but that wasn't enough to recreate the army's command structure. Some pushed towards the sounds of combat, others attempted to just try to control the retreat.

All while the infiltration companies were still fighting in scattered pockets around the siege lines.

Soon after the enemy commander had died to Harry's spell, the host out of Spider's Bane shifted. Two-thirds of their forces turning toward their embattled fellows, continuing to roll up smaller enemy forces one after another, while the other third remained behind to guard their back from any further forces, situated around the encirclement, protecting against any formed assault from the rest of the Easterling army. That force faced stiff assault, but by small pockets of enemies led by or consisting entirely of Blood Hands. It took grievous losses, but succeeded in holding that position, letting the force from Spider's Bane eventually reach the fierce battle going on around the relieving army.

How long they kept fighting, Harry didn't know. He had joined the fighting at the front after his last spell, his magic telling him he needed to take a rest from overpowered spellwork for a time. But soon he heard the shouts of dwarves ahead of them, followed by horns. And finally, finally even the Blood Hands began to lose any kind of cohesion, pulled in two different directions.

Griding them together still took forever. One out of every three of this group was a Blood Hand, and the others were almost as well accoutered. They fought and they died where they stood, taking many a dwarf with them, but eventually even the greatest of their warriors fell, letting the two Stonefoot armies meet.

Harry let the Sword of Gryffindor fall, shaking his head as he stared out over the burning fires of a nearby encampment, the dead scattered across the area. Among the hundreds of bodies were dozens of dwarven dead, and he slowly shook his head, looking over at where Karo stood, his face a mass of bruises, one arm hanging limp at his side.

He had no idea what to say, but thankfully, Karo, who had just ordered his men to join the army from Spider's Bane, seemed to understand. "A battle won is the most terrible thing imaginable, Harry Potter, save for a battle lost. We have won, and our holds survive. That is all we can hope for. We simply must keep moving forward, finish this day's work, and go on from there."

Harry shook his head slowly, staring at the thousands of his fellow Men who he had killed this day, stared over the heads of the army from Spider's Bane even as it turned to head back the way it had come. This entire time the small interdicting force at the back of Karo's host had remained mostly unmolested. For some reason, perhaps because they had supplied the majority of the host sent off to find the combined host of the Stonefoot House the camps to the southwest of the first camp they struck hadn't ever been able to gather enough forces to dislodge them.

“Perhaps you’re right, but that doesn’t make me wish any less for there to be a better a way,” Harry retorted. “For now, though, let me see to that arm and face of yours. Then we need to see if we can find some prisoners in this horror. We still need more information about our enemies, Karo, especially on the wider front, and maybe after a battle like this, more of them will be willing to talk.”

End Chapter