

I am not related to Tolkien and thus have no connection to him... which is a pity because I would never have sold out to Amazon for any amount of money. Nor am I British or a woman, so can't be JKR.

Howdy everyone. This was the HP winner for August. It isn't the full chapter I'd wanted, but for barely six days all told of work, I think it works. More to say at the end of the chapter, but until then, Enjoy!

Edit: later the same day it was first posted. Forgot to replace all one of the dwarf's names!

Chapter31: A Friend Unlooked For

"At the rate we're able to move, we should be in sight of Foldorin's forces in another day and a half," the scout reported, breathing in tiredly. He had run most of the way back from the moment he had made contact with his alternate number among Foldorin's forces, and dwarves were not built for long-distance running. "However, my King, they're already being basically besieged in their fortifications. A significant force of light cavalry is screening their rear and flanks, and I personally saw a large force of infantry putting up camps, with ditches and berms being placed around them in a circle."

The scout, whose name was Nilrok and who was one of Nori's best, scowled a bit. "It's so bad my opposite number, Fref, was essentially cut off from Foldorin's forces, but he wanted to try and get around them to the east, through the light cavalry screen. I couldn't convince the old fool otherwise."

Scowling a little at the fact that one of his folk had chosen the path of stubbornness rather than reality, Thorin shook his head. "Was he able to guess at their numbers? Where the light cavalry of Easterling infantry were most concentrated?"

"No, my Lord. I might've tried, but there's still a thin cavalry screen between here and where the Easterling infantry are setting up camp. I didn't think it wise to chance it, thinking returning to you was more important."

"You did right there. I'd simply have liked more information, but I suppose that isn't exactly unique for military commanders." Thorin joked, allowing his lips to twitch upwards into a brief smile, barely visible through his beard. "Do you have anything else to report?"

It turned out the other dwarf did, and in this case, it was actually good news. "Fref said that Mik's forces were able to meet up with Foldorin's, and they brought in their baggage train too. They apparently got lucky. They didn't run into any significant enemy force, and what cavalry forces they did run into either avoided combat entirely, or were wiped out by clever use of their crossbows when they came in. Foldorin's corps even met up with a large force of Blacklocks, near three thousand strong."

That had Thorin's eyebrows rising in surprise, staring back west and south for a moment. "Did he say where they came from?"

"Aye, my lord. They come from Red Rock, your queen's folk."

"I thought as much. Surprising. I would have thought Krurlen was going to keep his troops home or at best, on escort duty. That was the plan he and I had devised via our letters back and forth," Thorin frowned. "With the forces we've already seen from them, that force can't be composed entirely of full-time warriors, can it?"

King Krurlen was the younger brother of Ani Redring, Thorin's wife. He had been serving as a merchant's apprentice and bodyguard before the fall of Red Rock in the last war against the Easterlings, and had not taken part in Ani's clandestine war against the Easterlings, which had kept her people safe and fighting until the other surviving holds could send aid to reclaim Red Rock. He had been made acting King when he returned, ruling in place of his nephew until the young boy reached his majority.

Of course, among dwarves, the position of King was more fluid than in human lands. If Krurlen did a good enough job to earn his people's trust and respect, he could switch from ruling in young Tiluk's place to ruling in his own right. Dain Ironfoot had done much the same thing in the Iron Hills, as had several Stiffbeard kings currently ruling their realms. However, Thorin didn't really have much of a good opinion of Krurlen.

Krurlen was five years older than Thorin's oldest nephew but had none of Fili's combat skills or easy charisma. He had a good head for numbers and was excellent when it came to handing down rulings and codifying laws, but frankly, he was a follower, not a leader.

It wasn't Krurlen's fault, really. He should never have been the heir, let alone king. Ani's older brother had been groomed as king for several decades, and had welcomed a son into the world with his wife before the last war began. But while the dam and son had lived through the war, Ani's older brother and father hadn't, both dying in defense of the last dams to be evacuated from the hill hold.

Thus, Krurlen simply letting Thorin and his army fight this war made sense. The younger man had also done an excellent job of not only organizing the various supply caches but getting the rest of the Zigûr-khaz House to do the same throughout their territory. It was also why, despite being the hold with the best weapons and armor, Red Rock troops had been seen only in small, scattered groups before this.

Although we might be close to Red Rock territory, now that I think of it. We've been forced to change our route of march and have been pushed so far south it's possible. But

still, why? Especially after our battle by the cliffs. We sent half the surviving Zigûr-khaz forces to Red Rock after that battle, and most had come from there besides. Krurlen should know his people aren't up to fighting the Easterlings openly as well as we can.

"Nay, my lord. Apparently there was a large village about a day's march south of where Foldorin's forces are setting up defenses. It's called..." Nilrok hesitated, his eyes flicking over to Saruman, changing the name into common. "Red Vein."

The name implied it was indeed an offshoot of Red Rock, but also that the dwarves might have found a vein of some kind of ore underneath, which Thorin understood instantly. "They had been holding out against mixed groups of Easterling skirmishers, and hadn't been attacked in the last war due to being the only source of water for many days in every direction."

"A problem we've run into, but which the Easterlings and we alike have the logistical wherewithal to solve in this war," Thorin mused. "I take it Krurlen sent out a force to demand they leave."

"Exactly, my lord," Nilrok agreed, shaking his head. "They refused, and the force stayed until recently. Most of the dams, youngsters and so forth have been sent further west by this point in small lots, but even that was apparently quite fraught."

"Aye, that's understandable. We made a mistake from the first, moving more to the north than the south," Thorin grumbled.

"Eh, not so much, my king," Tholi disagreed with a snort. "We made a mistake in terms of the numbers of Easterlings we'd be seeing. Shrink some of the fights we've seen, and we could have spread our corps as we had hoped to across the Blacklock lands. Still, why was this force still in the area?"

"..." Nilrok hesitated, then sighed. "Well, I figure the Istari don't care about such things. They found a vein of gold nearly on the heels of the last war near the town. Fref says the warriors from Red Rock literally had to coerce the townsfolk to leave, as it's still there and being worked. They had to write up a full contract in Krurlen's name to get each family to leave and even then they were reluctant."

Saruman chuckled, making the sound as warm as he could, while Thorin sighed. "Well, you are correct, good dwarf, in that I do not care at all about material wealth. I suppose it also does explain why this particular group of dwarven folk were so intransigent despite the disaster unfolding across their lands."

"It does," Thorin grumbled. Gold was indeed very important to his folk. Not to the level of works of their hand, but as had been seen after the Battle of the Lonely Mountain,

even knowing it was cursed wasn't always enough to keep his folk away from gold and riches. *Fools would have let their dams and young be slaughtered for gold*, he thought, sadly understanding, but also disgusted by that decision made by the miners and other townfolk.

"Regardless, that's an interesting development. I hope this force of troops was willing to work under Foldorin." As part of the back and forth, Thorin had made it clear his Nâlbarâk Râdûn would have seniority over any local Zigûr-khaz commander. "Thank you, Nilrok. Grab a water skin for yourself and some food. We're eating on the go, obviously, but we still have food and water for now."

As the scout walked off, Thorin turned to his commanders. "A part of me thinks we could just punch straight through, but I don't think we're going to get that lucky. Not when it's clear from that report that the cavalry which has been hounding our heels has linked up with an infantry-focused host."

"That has got to have been planned," Tholi grumbled, while Khnouk grunted agreement. "It is too great a coincidence."

"Indeed," Saruman mused. "Although this infantry host might have been traveling already towards Red Vein."

"Both communication via horseback or chance is possible, but they are obviously working together well. Not a surprise given how well-organized the Easterlings seem to be on the logistical level. Regardless, I want to shift our course so we're moving a little further southward again," Thorin announced brusquely. "Let's see if we can come at this Easterling force from its flanks, where they might not have yet set up siegeworks."

Duroc, Matias, Khnouk and Tholi all nodded, with the human holding back a yawn with some difficulty. Despite being unable to use Baraz-felakuz (Sharing of Will) since there were so many humans with them, the dwarves had set a horrific pace, and having sent his horses with Foldorin's forces, Matias and his men hadn't been able to take breaks in the saddle.

Still, he and his men had kept up with the dwarves on the march, winning the men of Dale still more respect in the eyes of the army.

In contrast, Saruman looks as if he could keep this up forever, Thorin thought, glancing over to where the wizard was stroking his beard thoughtfully, staring up at the sky again. It seemed to Thorin that he had been badly shaken by the idea that the great enemy could somehow give the ability to communicate with birds to his human servants, which

he'd mentioned late the night before. Although why that piece of information could throw the wizard, Thorin didn't know.

Shaking his head at that, Thorin turned to Matias, asking, "How many quivers of arrows do you and your archers have left?"

"Since we unloaded from the donkeys, we've gone through more than half of our store," Matias answered grimly. "And we haven't been able to police the battlefields either to get them back often. Unless we can resupply our arrows with some Blacklock weapons cache, which isn't likely from what we know of this area, we'll probably only be good for one more sharp clash."

In actuality, Saruman was indeed thrown by the fact that the human commander of this incursion, Saruman would have been able to feel a Nazgûl from this close - was indeed getting information from carrion eaters like crows and dwarves. Yet that had little to do with his current inattention. Rather, he was staring into the nighttime sky, using his own connection to smaller birds than the crows and ravens favored by Sauron to gaze all around them.

Because he could see what Thorin and the others could not. The force of infantry facing Foldorin was not a small one. Rather, it was a significant host. At first it had seemed to be forming up to attack outright, but then it had shifted to doing what the other scout had passed on to Nilrok: setting up siege works of their own around Foldorin's position. Despite not having been there for very long, the fortifications were going up quickly, controlled and organized well.

On both sides, not just facing towards Foldorin's... well, Saruman wasn't certain what he was looking at there, if he was honest. Regardless, the berms and ditches being made by the Easterlings in a full circle around the area were not just facing towards Foldorin. Rather, they were being built to also protect the rear of the besieging force. That wasn't something Saruman had seen often, but it was clear the Easterlings knew that Thorin was in the area.

Meanwhile, other Easterling hosts were closing in on Thorin's own position. From Saruman's bird's-eye view, it was clear that the enemy had been keeping in contact with the screen of scouts all around Thorin's army, deliberately keeping those scouts from being able to see anything going on further away, and had been very successful in doing so. Even one dwarf Saruman recognized as Nori had just been forced to hide and then retreat from a cavalry scout, unable to kill him because there were others in range to see him.

Right outside of what Saruman expertly discerned would be the eyesight of the scouts in question, two large forces of light cavalry were forming up on either side of

Thorin's current route of march. While staring through the eyes of birds, or 'borrowing,' as Radagast called it, wasn't exactly the best medium in which to try and estimate enemy numbers, Saruman thought that he could see at least two thousand horse in both sides, with more on one side than the other.

Not enough on its own to perhaps break the dwarven host, which still numbered a little under three thousand, along with the accompanying archers of Dale, who still numbered their full allotment of eight hundred. Yet enough to slow them down, maybe even pin them in place again. *Which would be enough for the enemy's heavy cavalry.*

However, that would be known to Thorin momentarily. Nori seems to have spotted something of the host to our left flank. What he will do about it is a question. And what I will do about it and turn. I wonder, is this the moment where Thorin fails, or relies on his final trick? My instincts are telling me that Thorin is hiding a secret, something from Harry Potter, which he has been loath to use up to this point, but which I might find fascinating.

Suddenly making a decision, Saruman looked away from the sky for a moment, his eyes grave as he directed his voice towards Thorin. "Thorin, two forces are moving out beyond the sight of your scouts. I cannot tell their numbers through the eyes of my little friends, but they are all on horseback, and their armor matches what we have seen of the enemy light cavalry rather than heavy."

"From both flanks?" Thorin asked sharply, his brows furrowing as he also stared up into the sky while Khnouk grumbled, shaking his head, not very much at home with how wizards seemed to be able to see things that normal people couldn't. "I take it you are still using your birds to scout around us? You've been calling them down to you occasionally throughout the day."

"I have asked several birds of Manwë to share with me what they are seeing, yes. It's paying off now, though it might not for much longer as ravens and crows have begun to attack their fellows. I can't use their senses to give me much information, but there are at least two large forces out there." Saruman's eyes widened a little bit, and he shook his head quickly, pointing to the right flank in an affected look of surprise that fooled all those around him. "The one to that side is coming in now. I don't doubt that your scouts will see it within minutes."

That was at the rate a horse could trot. No cavalry force worth their salt would ever start their horses at a gallop until the last moment, the better to conserve their endurance.

Thorin scowled, thinking quickly, knowing if they stopped and formed to simply receive the charge, the light cavalry would be perfectly willing to simply circle them, keeping them in place with quick jabbing attacks, a target for a better, more formed force

from elsewhere. *Probably heavy cavalry, but given what we've done to them in the past, and how quickly this enemy seems to be learning, I doubt they'll come at us in the same way they did before*, he thought, scowling. *Circling like that would be expensive given our archers, but for us as well given what Matias said about his supplies.*

He knew it had been both Locke and the differences in equipment and their armor that had kept the dwarves from taking significant losses the last time heavy cavalry had attempted to crush the ranks. That and the fact that they hadn't come at them from one angle, rather coming at them from two, acting more like light cavalry rather than heavy.

"All right, here is what we are going to do. Matias, I want your force to conserve your ammunition for this first clash. Duroc, get your men now, put your riders in close in the center of our formation. Tholi, this will fall on you. I want those of your men who can use crossbows to break them out, and for your warriors to look as if you're **trying** to form a line. Make the enemy see what we want them to see."

"That we haven't broken from our marching column to receive them just yet," Tholi answered crisply, understanding the plan. "Then we shoot our crossbows, split, and let Duroc and his forces through to countercharge?"

Beaming at the younger dwarf with pride, Thorin smacked him on the shoulder hard enough to send most humans flying sideways, but Tholi simply took it with a grunt as he returned his King's smile. "Exactly!"

Turning to Duroc, he grinned over at the exuberant, bombastic dwarf from the Iron Hills. "When you go, make a lot of noise. We've seen before that your boars can spook horses. Let us start using that."

"Right!"

The two dwarves had barely time to turn and race off elsewhere along the column, which had not, even as Thorin spoke to the scout along with his commanders, stopped moving. This put them actually near the back of the column now, which allowed Duroc to reach his boar riders faster than Tholi could reach his own men further up the column.

Soon though, even as one of the scouts in the distance fired off one of their emergency noisemaking arrows into the sky, the orders have been carried out. The two hundred and thirty crossbows of Tholi's company were quickly brought out from packs and crossbowmen began to shift position through the marching column slowly, while the column itself expanded in terms of thickness and shrunk in terms of length as the boar riders shifted forward in between the columns of marching dwarves.

The riders soon got off of their boars and marched along beside them, tugging their heads down so that they could be seen from a distance hidden among the dwarves... and also to control them. Boars did not play well with others, and these boars had been forced to keep up with the dwarves, with little chance to graze, since the last battle. That made them quite surly, to say the least.

Meanwhile, Thorin, knowing that Tholi and Duroc would break that first attack, turned his attention to thinking of how to deal with the next assault that would come in from the left flank. To that end, the humans also shifted their formation from where they had been marching in small clumps scattered throughout the rest of the dwarf in becoming a solid line between Thorin and Khnouk's forces even as they kept moving.

Thorin gave up his own corps' crossbow bolts to Khnouk's, while slipping into position alongside his guards, where they would turn and create a thin battle line to engage the incoming cavalry host on that side. Thorin and his royal guards were the most heavily armored, and even spread out in a single line, would be able to stop the incoming charge. So Thorin hoped.

He didn't know, because Saruman didn't tell Thorin, that that attack would be far heavier than the one coming from the right. After all, Saruman wanted to force Thorin to use whatever secret magical means he still had from Harry Potter. Thus he couldn't allow the dwarves to have too easy a time of breaking these two forces of light cavalry.

Saruman also could see that the enemy hadn't gotten their timing just right. The attack from the right flank was coming in too fast for the one on the left to hit the dwarven column at the same time, as Saruman could see the enemy had hoped to do.

That too is a lesson, Saruman mused to himself, stroking his beard even as he trooped along, having joined the humans in their segment of the column, nodding affably to several of them as they bowed their heads in respect. Complicated joint maneuvers over any kind of distance are folly, and the local commanders here have failed to coordinate appropriately. They can have a tremendous impact if they work well, as they did in the destruction of the army out of Parn's Tower, but they can also open up your army to defeat in detail, just as what Thorin and his army have so far avoided.

Waving off the offer of a water skin with a polite "No, thank you," Saruman allowed a faint smile to cross his face, which the man who had just offered it to him thought was for his offer, when in reality, it was for Saruman's own thoughts. *This whole campaign has been a learning experience for me. And I would be hard-pressed to decide if it has taught me more about the Easterlings' method of war, or the dwarves. How to adapt both to my own resources is going to be fascinating going forward.*

Moments later, the first cavalry force crested the horizon to one side. They crossed the intervening distance at a trot for the first few hundred yards, as three dwarven scouts scampered ahead of them. However, they couldn't get away. Soon, as the dwarves in the column watched, still not breaking formation, those three dwarves were ridden down.

Two went down hard, twisting around, striking back at their attackers, downing at least one horseman apiece, before being stabbed through with lances. As good as even dwarven gambesons were in comparison to things made by man, the scouts of the dwarven host sacrificed wearing chain mail over those gambesons, and without that, they were no more armored than any similar force among humans or other dwarven Houses might be.

A low growl went through the column, with the men around Saruman joining it, teeth grinding in fierce faces as dwarves tugged at beards. For a moment, it seemed as if the rage at seeing their fellows dealt with so quickly would cause the entire host to turn and rush towards the incoming enemy, which would have broken their lines enough to remove any hope of standing up to the incoming charge.

Yet discipline held, and only Tholi's force broke ranks. They visibly tried to shift into a defensive line as the galloping horses brought them closer and faster than anyone who had yet to see cavalry on the move could ever have thought they could.

With a roar from Tholi, the two hundred and thirty crossbows within his force fired, then fired again rapidly, shooting a single crossbow every twenty seconds. And they weren't aiming for the men within that cavalry force. Rather, they were aiming for the horses themselves.

When an archer shot a man from a saddle, the horse kept on going, still adding its way to any charge, or perhaps getting out of formation, maybe getting in the way of one or two others. If the archer shot a horse, however, it went down, the rider went down, and both of their bodies tangled up anyone coming in to either side or directly behind them. It was perhaps the simplest arithmetic of warfare against cavalry, and the dwarves had embraced it from the first.

It wasn't enough to break the charge of the enemy host entirely, but it did slow it down, and then, Tholi's force shifted, the loose line of infantry becoming even looser, as Duroc, his men already in the saddle, charged forwards with bellowing warcries and the snorting of their boars.

The enemy host tried to twist away, but it was too late. The two cavalry forces crashed into one another barely 2 yards from where Tholi's force had been lined up waiting for the charge. The boars thankfully didn't take as long as horses did to get up to a gallop,

and they crashed into and through the front of the enemy formation. Soon, the entire enemy host had devolved into a wild melee, where the boars were at their strongest. Dozens of Easterlings escaped, but they still charged forward, and Tholi ordered his crossbow men to target one such group while his line thickened to receive the other.

Saruman watched as Tholi shouted orders. Soon, a few forces of eighty dwarves from his host were charging into the melee, hacking and slashing, roaring their own battle cries as they went to aid their outnumbered fellows. *Outnumbered though they might be, Saruman reflected, yet that entire enemy host is now embroiled in a melee. They might have succeeded in stopping Tholi and Duroc's forces from continuing their march, but I rather doubt that any of them will survive for very long. On the other hand...*

With his observation of that battle finished, Saruman turned his attention to the other side of the column. There, no warning had come. Evidently, the scouts on that side of the column hadn't been able to get off one of their warning arrows before being overcome. Now, an even heavier host of light cavalry appeared in the distance on that side, charging forwards, sabers raised.

"Archers to the left flank! Prepare to receive a charge!" Thorin bellowed from his position on that side. Throughout the fight going on the other side of his column, Thorin had kept his own attention on this flank, trusting Saruman's words that an enemy host would appear there. The size of that host worried him, though.

The one that hit them from the right flank was barely a thousand, nowhere enough to actually prove a danger to the dwarves, even if it could slow their march down by hit-and-run attacks, forcing them to use crossbows or arrows to fend them off. This host had to be at least two times that size, maybe more.

On his orders, the arrows of the men of Dale flew quickly, peppering the horses at the front of the enemy host, but that host had spread out so much that the riders and horses who collapsed only entangled one or at most two others with them. The crossbows hit next, doing still more damage, but the enemy cavalry came on, slashing in, twisting around and trying to hack or spear at every point along the column they could reach, showing the disdain for their own lives that the Easterlings had shown from the very beginning.

Whatever orders this force might've had at one point, it had been forgotten, in their eagerness to close and attack the enemy.

Thorin's corps bore the brunt of that initial shocking charge, and the horses swirled around them, hacking, slashing down at them, constantly moving, trying to use momentum

and speed against the low, armored targets of the dwarves. Meanwhile, the crossbows and archers continued to wreak a heavy toll, but here, dwarves also started to lose their lives.

Five dwarves were smashed off their feet as horses slammed into them, either without the control of the riders or the riders themselves simply forgetting that they needed to keep their distance. Two of those dwarves died before they could get to their feet, spears stabbing through eye slits or throats, getting in under their armor.

One other found his helmet knocked off his head a bit, and a heavy hoof coming down with enough force to crush bone right on his forehead. A few others were wounded by lucky strikes from human swords hacking at weak points, with one dwarf being unlucky enough to get a spear tip straight through his eye slit.

However, the better armor of the dwarves of Erebor meant those casualties were incredibly light in comparison to what they would've been for any Zigûr-khaz host of similar size. Better, the same thing that had happened before with these cavalry attacks happened now. To strike at the dwarves on the ground, the humans had to lean far out of the saddle, and that overbalanced them when they used their light spears and sabers, making the overall impact of the light cavalry far less dangerous than would otherwise be.

However, numbers would begin to tell. Not so much in terms of more deaths, but in time. Because that had been the main objective of these two forces: to pin Thorin's army in place.

Growling as he realized that even as he ducked under a blow from one Easterling, Thorin hacked forward, removing the nearest leg from the horse of the Easterling, causing the horse to scream in that pitiful animal manner, dumping its rider to one side where Dori finished him off. A blow from his heavy club crushed the Easterling's head despite the armored mask all Easterlings wore. "Push, push, break them, do not get bogged down!"

The majority of his host took a step forward, keeping back only his and Khnouk's crossbowmen, who continued to fire into the enemy wherever they could get a clean shot. Similarly, the archers of Dale were flinging arrows into both hosts now, doing what they could to try and finish this fight quickly.

However, they didn't work fast enough, and Saruman, holding back a smile with some difficulty, shouted a warning. "Thorin! Another host coming in from directly behind us. This one seems different, more organized. I'd wager they are heavy cavalry!"

Cursing, Thorin tried to pull himself out of the melee, but even with his personal guard doing what they could, the Easterlings around him were still pressing in too hard for that to be possible, hacking and slashing, trying to use their horses to smash the dwarves

to the ground. They were paying for it in blood as all of them had lost their light spears by this point, and now used sabers, meaning they entered the door of a range even more than before, but there were still too many of them.

Tholi, similarly, was engaged on the other side, which left Khnouk in overall charge of the fight. He swiftly ordered his crossbowmen to pull back, and several bellowed orders were sent out. The remainder of Tholi's force shifted from the right flank to the back, setting themselves up in a thick, short three-line formation there, with Khnouk's crossbowmen facing backwards.

However, this assault wasn't made of heavy cavalry. As the third Easterling force charged forwards, two out of every three men of this group dropped from their horses to the ground. The horses automatically peeled away behind them a second later, a sign of tremendous training, something that made even Khnouk, watching this angrily, nod his head in respect.

His moment of respect for the Easterlings faded into anger as the men who had dismounted grabbed at bows from their backs and began to fire at his host. Shields were raised where they were, but most Sigin-tarâg didn't carry such, trusting in their armor. This was proven accurate again, as arrows spanged off even chainmail, not penetrating at all, but they weren't the target. Most of those arrows lanced up over the small, prepared position Khnouk had thrown up, and began to hit the archers of Dale.

At the same time, the rest of the men who had dismounted charged forward. Several dozen died to crossbow bolts from the dwarves, but then, the enemy infantry slammed into the dwarves.

Only the inability of the enemy to bring its composite forces together at the same time and Saruman's warnings saved them. As it was, even as more infantry raced into the conflict, Duroc's host of boar riders and the forces Tholi had sent forward to help them finished off the enemy host on that side. Duroc didn't reengage immediately. Rather, he led his troops on a loop around the front of where the host had been halted, coming in on the rear of the enemy host.

So eager were they to break the small screening force that Khnouk had thrown up along with archers and crossbowmen, the men of that force didn't notice what was going on until the boar riders crashed into their archers. Within moments, the boar riders had slaughtered the archers to a man.

At the same time, Tholi's infantry had shifted and charged into the melee on that side. Between them, that last enemy host was ground under, although it still took nine more

dwarves with it, along with nearly fifty Dalemens dead, and a further seventy-five wounded enough that they were unable to wield their bows any longer.

However, Thorin's host had been forced to stop and deal with this series of attacks, and Thorin, glaring around at the battlefield, knew that meant more trouble could be coming quickly. "Form up! Form up." He pointed directly south and away, further breaking from their former line of advance. "We need to move!"

As several officers broke off to see to the dead, pulling off their armor and personal effects and heaving it into their own packs, while others saw to the wounded, but the majority did indeed start to form up, and some order began to return to the battlefield. Unfortunately, as Thorin knew it would, getting prepared to march again took another turn of the candle, and Saruman was already reporting another force to their left flank.

Moments after that report, Nori came in, his head heavily bandaged from a bit of his own legging he'd turned to the purpose. He also wore a look grimmer than any Thorin had seen on his face since the funerals of Ori, Bombur and Bifur after the Battle of the Lonely Mountain.

"We lost seven more scouts out there," he began without preamble. "Their numbers and their use of cavalry just make it that we can't break contact cleanly. But there's at least another host out there. Light cavalry again, but they've kept their distance. Forcing us away from Foldorin in his force. They have engaged them much yet from what I was able to see with my spyglass, but he is well and truly encircled."

"Damn!" Thorin grunted but nodded. "Get your wound seen to. We move out in a few minutes." He looked up at the sky, thinking hard, then shook his head, turning to look at Saruman. "It's pushing night now, and when it fully closes around us, we will make camp. And when we do...I will have your word, Saruman of Orthanc, to **never** talk about or make any notes about what we use when we do."

"An interestingly open way of asking for secrecy on my part, without giving any details away whatsoever," Saruman answered dryly, before nodding his head. "You have my word." *After all, I don't need to make notes to remember something I see that's interesting, and I certainly have no desire whatsoever to share whatever I learn that you have been keeping from me this whole time with Sauron or anyone else. This, it **MUST** be rune related!* **FINALLY.**

Thorin stared up into the far taller human-shaped Maia's face for a few seconds, wishing idly that the Arkenstone gave him any insight into other people's minds. Still, Saruman had, while at times appearing a little arrogant and a little too certain of himself,

proven a worthy ally. He had given Thorin no reason to suspect him, and after a second, he nodded. "Thank you, Saruman."

As soon as they could move again, Thorin kept his column moving until well after dark. Once more, they had been circled in the distance, the enemy light cavalry keeping them in sight from every angle. *That won't help them, though... at least, I hope not*, Thorin mused as he thought about his plans, staring out into the darkness at the moving shapes he could barely see from here.

Around them, the terrain had changed a little bit. The bit of rolling grassland with clumps of quartz sticking out of it had shifted into more grassland and scattered small bushes, with only a few, but far larger rocks in places. They'd even found a small water cache hidden under a few false hides. Given how their water supply had been badly hammered over the past few days, it was a welcome respite. Fighting and marching was thirsty work after all, and they hadn't had any opportunity to stop and forage.

Unfortunately, that was the only cache they had seen since before learning about the enemy host from the north. Their food was still... okay, but water had not been before this, and now Matias and the others had no more arrows, while the dwarven crossbows only had a single quiver remaining.

As Thorin had feared, his scouts weren't up to keeping away the enemy scouts any longer. Several dozen times, movement could be seen out into the evening darkness, even as darkness and soon, Saruman was the only one who was able to keep up any kind of commentary about what was going on out there. Several small hosts had gathered around them, mostly heavy cavalry and light cavalry, but with a mix of infantry now, mounted infantry like what had attacked them several turns of the glass ago, ready to attack at dawn while the light cavalry kept circling the still-moving column.

That wasn't good. What was worse was that it was obvious that several Easterling hosts had come together here. The forces that had surprised and helped to wipe out the army out of Parn's Tower, which Thorin had been fighting all day, were pure cavalry. Now they were facing more infantry, while other units, also of infantry, bottled up Foldorin's forces. That had to mean at least two, maybe three forces of the normal, already oversized, raiding forces had come together here."

"Definitely not because of Red Vein, no, this is something else. It makes me wonder about this whole campaign," Thorin admitted to Saruman and Khnouk later that night. Tholi was seeing to his troopers, while Duroc was seeing to his own men elsewhere in the column. "Where did this cavalry host come from initially? Was it the reserve force? Were they really in communication with, or at least able to keep track of the campaign up to this

point? If so, that means their use of birds is a strategic asset, something we will need to plan for in the future.”

While Saruman was intrigued at the fact that even now Thorin was speaking as if he could lead his army out of this, he let none of that show, instead nodding pensively, really also agreeing with the rest of Thorin’s words if not his tone. “True. If that is indeed the case, that Sauron has somehow been able to give the gift of Language or Ravens and Crows to Men, it is something that the White Council and I will need to do something about. A means to combat his ability to send messages like that will need to be found, if not a way to do the same ourselves. I know you dwarves can speak the Language of Thrushes, you Longbeards anyway, but that is not enough.”

He then shook himself, as if waking from an introspective moment. Part of his personality he had shown to the dwarves was the knowledge hunger that was, honestly, a large part of Saruman’s real one, and it served his purpose to show it now. “However, I don’t believe that is really pertinent to our situation right now. How do we break contact and meet up with Foldorin, if that is still the plan? Or do you think we can somehow find another place that is good enough to fort up elsewhere?”

“Judging by what we were told earlier, that would be a no. But we do have one method of hopefully breaking contact. I just wanted to wait until darkness to make it more believable. Can you tell me if the Easterling cordon around us is fully in place?”

“It isn’t, not yet. The darkness is fouling the Easterling light cavalry up a bit now. You still have another few hours before their forces are entirely surrounding us again, although they won’t be surrounding us in any particular strength at that point,” Saruman mused. “Still, given the speed with which their cavalry can go, if we tried to break out in any direction, they’d simply move with us.”

“I know, but we need to allow for the illusion of us being able to slip away somehow for my plan to work in its entirety.”

With that, Thorin turned to Dwalin, holding out his hand for a pack that, Saruman realized, Dwalin must have gone and gotten from somewhere else in the column. He, Dwalin, and Dori all reached into the pack, pulling out small discs. Nori did the same a moment later as he hurried to join them, his head still wound around by his makeshift bandage.

They were large discs of stone, about twice as large as a dwarven hand, and thick, about two inches thick stone plate. It looked like the kind of thing that would be heavier than a human would prefer to carry for any length of time.

Saruman moved with Thorin as the four dwarves separated, shifting around and through the column. At that point, Thorin shouted a halt, and the column started to spread out as if getting ready to set up for the night. However, only the humans set down their packs and rested where they were. The dwarves remained standing, even the wounded, while their friends moved to see to them. Drink and food were had, but that was all for the moment, as the dwarves shifted into a circle formation, staring out into the darkness warily.

The watching horsemen didn't move, shifting and staring through the darkness toward the dwarves. But with no moon out and only a few stars, the humans were at a major disadvantage there.

Joining Thorin once more after several minutes, Saruman saw Thorin settle the large stone plate into the ground, before standing up and waiting. Soon a runner came, whispering, "We're ready, my King."

Thorin nodded gruffly, while Saruman frowned, looking through the darkness. He had broken off from Thorin a few moments before and had seen that Dwalin, Dori and Nori had moved until they were at equidistant points around the group. Dwalin was at the back, directly across the area where the army currently resided, while Dori and Nori were at the sides, equally separated by distance straight across. *So, these stones must be placed around the area, or is it more important they are set in a diamond pattern?*

A gleam brought Saruman's attention up to the dwarven king as he pulled out the Arkenstone. The white and gold light from the small, intensely magical stone was blinding, and Saruman felt a part of himself twitch away from it, as if the thing was threatening to sear his very being just by being near it. *It is like Aule's own power formed into a stone, or perhaps, as horribly droll as it might be, his love of his shaped people. Odd. I wonder when my 'lord' crafted such a thing.*

Holding the Arkenstone in a clenched fist so that only slivers of white light could be seen, Thorin, who had already pulled off gauntlets for this task, took out a small dinner knife from his belt pocket with his free hand. Kneeling down to the inner side of the area between the wards, Thorin breathed in deeply, then, with the tiny knife, he cut open the side of the thumb of the hand holding the Arkenstone.

He then pressed his hand down into the center of the plate.

There were runes carved into the surface, small, delicate, and Thorin's blood flowed into a few of them, and soon, two began to light up, enough that Saruman could finally see them all. He stared down into the intermixed blue and white light of the runes and the Arkenstone, memorizing every line, every shape, committing them to memory faster and

more accurately than any master of Occlumency in Harry's home dimension could have done. "What... what is this..." he whispered, staring as that magic disappeared into the ground.

Or rather, that is what those without magical senses could see. Instead, that magic seemed to split up, shifting in different directions thanks to a few specific marks on the stone, heading towards the other three rune-covered stones.

"I am no Runemaster, but the Arkenstone allows me to empower such things. Harry and I have experimented with it before," Thorin grunted, stepping further into the area covered by the ward as it formed slowly, not instantly as it did with Harry. "This is what Harry calls a Notice Me-Not ward. They cannot be used by those without magical skill normally, but as I said, the Arkenstone allows me to do this, via a bit of my blood."

Soon, Saruman could sense a thrumming in the air from three other places, the other stones reacting to this one. As Saruman watched avidly, that magic reached the other stones, and a circle began to appear, shaped by the runes again, covering the area where the army stood or rested.

Saruman slowly nodded, trying hard not to twitch away from the light of the Arkenstone as Thorin tucked it under his armor and gambeson once more. *Given the fact that it has demonstrably given Thorin added strength and endurance, it is not a stretch to assume that it could also allow Thorin to empower such things, although not directly. Hence the need for his blood.* "I see. I also see why you are so reluctant to use it. This is a single-use item, is it not? How long will it last?"

"The stones can't contain the power necessary for the ward for very long," Thorin admitted. "It will last seven hours at most, but given the area covered, I am hoping for five at best."

"And what does it do, exactly? Notice-Me-Not is an interesting phrase, but how does it work?"

"That, Harry also explained to me. Essentially, wherever this ward is cannot be found or noticed by anyone who is not within the area itself. No one can even look in that direction or harbor any interest in anything within. They will simply wander away, their minds unable to do so. It isn't perfect, as anything coming out of such an area will break the ward, but it is still an incredible piece of magical craft. Hence why I demanded your word on not speaking of it to anyone, Saruman," Thorin finished, his beard bristling a bit as he glared up at the Istari.

“I see, and understand completely why you want to keep it a secret. It works on animals as well,” Saruman mused, staring up into the nighttime sky. “The larger birds of the Great Enemy have been above us, and are now winging away on their own business. Fascinating, but how will such a thing impact a whole army when it was so interested in our movements and so certain of our location?”

This... if I can replicate this, the possibilities are... not quite endless, given I would need to be the one to empower such, but still... Saruman thought, feeling more greed and knowledge-hunger than he had since the first time he learned of the One Ring. His current desire to learn, to take this knowledge and make it his own, wasn't quite that strong, but it was still powerful for all of that.

“I believe that the men further away will realize something is going on and will try to find out where we have gone. They have not lost interest in **us**, just the area we are currently on,” Thorin explained. This, too, was something he and Harry had talked about at length after the first time Harry had used the ward with Thorin back when the two of them had been traveling just the two of them. “I’m hoping that your birds will be able to see what is going on out there and tell us when the enemy realizes we seem to have escaped. They should then remove their net from this area in an effort to try and find where we have gone.”

“I.. suppose that would work, if the ward wasn't affecting most normal birds in the area too,” Saruman snorted.

“Well... bother,” Thorin grunted. “We’ll have to send out our scouts then. Dangerous business that.”

“No, I will have to force my will upon one of my little friends up there, and use them in that manner,” Saruman grimaced, and when he spoke, he injected regret and distaste into his voice, such that none would doubt his next words. “This is not something I do lightly, Thorin. Asking to borrow the senses of a bird or other animal is one thing, but overriding their minds, dominating them, that is rather vile to contemplate, no matter how temporarily.”

One of Saruman's primary powers was his voice, and it worked well here to convey the revulsion and worry that Saruman wanted it to. Thorin instantly reached up, placing a comforting hand on Saruman's shoulder. “I am sorry to ask this of you, my friend. If we had only realized, then we could have asked you to bring some of the birds down into the wards before they were activated.”

“It, it is fine, Thorin. I will do this for us, just this once.”

“You don’t have to, Saruman,” Nori announced his presence with his words, almost startling both wizard and dwarven king to jump, something he must have seen despite the darkness given the chortle he released. “I’ve already sent out two of my scouts to hide nearby. I figured that if the enemy sends scouts as near the warded area as they can and we kill a few, that’ll just add to the idea we were able to sneak away somehow.”

When Thorin looked at his old companion askance, Nori simply smirked. “You often miss the little things like that, Thorin. Besides, my men have taken severe losses up to this point, and we all wanted some of our own back. I had to work hard just to convince my lads that only two of them should leave the warded area.”

“That is dangerous, but it’s probably too late to call them back,” Thorin grumbled, looking away in momentary embarrassment.

“Well, I for one hope it works. As I said, the alternative is... unpleasant,” Saruman breathed out a sigh of relief that was not wholly feigned. *Taking control of the birds of the air like that would perhaps bring attention to me from Manwë himself, which I very much do not want. I was willing to do so, but only because there was no other recourse.* “And your scouts will be able to return?”

“Nay, they won’t. That’s trickier to pull off apparently,” Nori shrugged. “However, we chose one of those stone out there to write messages on, and I ordered them to stay near it. They might not know we’re here any longer, but my two scouts will know our army’s around here somewhere and will know to leave messages there. It’s not perfect, but it is the best I could think of.”

“Well, for now, while we wait, might I suggest that you and the others get some rest? Even dwarves have limits to their endurance, after all,” Saruman suggested, eager to return to his study of the runestone.

“I’ll make sure the others do,” Thorin answered blandly, causing Saruman to smile faintly. He then left quickly, with Nori beside him, to do a round of the army. As he went, small torches were lit, tiny but enough to let the dwarves see better, as well as the humans.

Saruman watched them go for a moment before turning his attention back to the stone, memorizing each line, each different glyph there. He couldn’t tell where one symbol ended and the other began, bar the one where Thorin’s blood had initially touched, but with that to begin with, Saruman thought he would eventually be able to figure out each of the rooms in turn. Figuring out what each of them meant would obviously take a lot longer, but trial and error would be his friend there.

*Yes, this, **this** alone makes this entire trip worth it, setting aside everything else I've learned. Truly, I am very glad to have joined this campaign, even if, even with this, I feel it is going to end in sorrow for the dwarves,* Saruman thought mock-sadly.

True to Saruman's words, all the ravens and crows in the nighttime sky that had been watching the army from on high were gone by this point. Soon, loud shouts of consternation, shock and worry resounded in the distance as the Easterlings' habitual discipline disappeared. Soon several cavalry scouts could be seen racing in every direction around the warded zone. Still they couldn't look in that direction, or even notice they were not doing so. Saruman could understand their words, and translated them to a few nearby dwarves and Matias, who had brought him a small meal to eat.

"It would seem that the ruse worked, my friends," Saruman stated, pulling at his long beard with one hand. "Some of the enemy scouts are trying to find a hidden hatch or tunnel out there, while others are racing in every direction to try and find out where the army has gone. While a few..." he pointed to several who had seemingly lost an argument, one Blood Hand among them, "are being 'volunteered' to go and report on what has happened here to their commanders."

"You just used the Common word, volunteered, for what is going on out there," a nearby dwarf muttered, his lips twitching behind his own beard as many others around them chortled quietly. Even with the wards up, none of them wanted to take chances. "I do not think it means what you think it means."

"That, my good dwarf, was sarcasm. I would assume that most of you short lot would already know it, but if your intellect cannot keep up, I do apologize for my assumption," Saruman retorted drolly, using his voice once more, this time to buoy spirits and the good humor of the army. This worked, and soon the dwarves began to joke and laugh with one another, while the men of Dale lay out, eager to get what sleep they could before Thorin ordered them to resume the march.

What reports those Easterling scouts told their commanders, neither Thorin nor Saruman had any way of knowing. But as they watched from their side of the ward, the army watched as the Easterling scouts and even the encircling light cavalry pulled away, acting as if they thought Thorin's host had indeed simply broken contact somehow.

Elsewhere, the larger portion of the army that had been harassing them shifted towards Foldorin's forces in the distance, barely 15 leagues out of sight of where the dwarves had used Harry's prepared wards. There, they joined camps that had already been set up around the area.

As Saruman had already seen, the enemy commander was preparing for something that almost looked like a double-sided siege. Many of those camps were being quickly protected with stakes and ditches, facing in either direction around the circle.

If Harry, something of an amateur historian, had been able to watch as Saruman had earlier via the birds in the area, he might well have likened these siegeworks to what Julius Caesar had done around the town of Alesia in Gaul, the territory that would eventually become France. Although he might not have realized why the enemy commander had decided to go for a siege rather than an assault, he would have recognized why: concern about enemy units behind him.

Soon, the last of the screening cavalry had been pulled away, enough that Thorin believed they could slip off and then punch through the enemy army to their fellows. It would still be ridiculously difficult, what with the defenses being tossed up, but if they waited any longer, those defenses would be even stronger, and at night, a lot of the advantages in terms of vision, and depth perception in particular, shifted to the dwarves.

Better, Thorin thought, to try and break through now even though the entire army host was in front of them than to let them dig in further. "I am also certain that the sheer shock of a night assault will work well for us."

It would turn out that this aspect of the plan would work even better than expected, as aid came unlooked for from the north...

OOOOOOO

Weeks before his campaign turned on Thorin, from the moment he left the Stonefoot army, Harry ran. No longer encumbered by the need to keep to even the pace of a dwarven scout, he ran, using the endurance and training he'd had with Tauriel and the endurance that had come with becoming an Istari to utilize the same ground-devouring lope of an elf. Within two days, he had passed beyond what land Spider's Bane controlled in times of peace, shifting on into the land of the stone grip. Three days later, as the sun was high above him, he saw something to the east, a pillar of stone jutting out from the horizon, and shifted his trek slightly in that direction.

Swiftly, Harry began to see the first signs of habitation: broken dwarven hamlets, long since abandoned to their fate, and a few farmsteads for sheep and other animals. By the time night began to fall, Stone Grip loomed in the distance.

Even with that limited light, Harry could see why it was called that. It was as if a hand had thrust out of the ground, complete with several fingers reaching up into the sky. If anyone had told Harry that thing had been created by Aulë, or that it was a cast of his fist thrust up into

the grip after some great working underground, Harry would've believed them. And if anyone had told him the place was unassailable, that too, he would've believed.

It was fully dark by the time he saw the first dwarven scouts and Easterling camp. However, what he also found was a clear trail, and so, instead of contacting the dwarves or exploring the camps, Harry raced on, trusting in his elvish cloak to let him move unseen by any save those who already knew where to look. He left the last such sign behind him to the east.

Following that trail, he found an even larger one, and then an even larger one again later around down. Standing there, holding a bit in one hand that had been discarded as broken at some point, Harry stared from one side of the trail to another. Hundreds of horses had passed through here, and there wasn't a single sign of a cart or man on foot among them.

No, they were just horse marks here, lots and lots of them. The ground was thoroughly trampled, with nary a bit of grass left, and a lot of leavings, but the trail led straight south still. "The whole of the Army joined up here," he reflected, examining bits and pieces that they had been left behind. More broken bridles, bits of leather tossed shamelessly aside, cloth bags that might have contained food. A broken sword here, several spear shafts left behind, their wood too green.

And then there was the blood and the dead bodies of a few dwarves left carelessly behind. Whatever fell ritual they'd been a part of had been cast long since, yet even so, he could feel the darkness of this place. Perhaps it was such acts, the taint of evil on the very skin of Arda, which developed to the point goblins would eventually be created here? It was a question Harry didn't know the answer to, but he prayed not, and he called upon Arien to help him cleanse the area with light, searing everything within to ash.

With that done, Harry quickly used his magic to create a cairn for each of them, leaving a note on the largest one, which he raised over the oldest of the four dwarves, with a description of each of the dwarves. Only when he was done did he begin moving on once more.

As he raced on, Harry's mind wandered, of course. Most of the time, he concentrated on what might be happening in Blacklock lands or tried to think of happier times. Yet what he mostly thought of was his lady, Tauriel. Not even just what she might be facing in the north, either. No, he rather sadly wondered what her reaction to his use of Imperio would be. He knew she would be wroth, but how much so, he didn't know.

On top of that was just a building longing, the same longing that began as soon as they had separated. Even if Tauriel would remonstrate with Harry, even if he would have to deal with the equivalent of being on the coach for a few days, he just wanted Tauriel there beside him once more. *After this is over, I rather think I'd like another few decades where we spent at least half of every day together, whatever we are doing at the time.*

Five days running and trying not to become maudlin at his current loneliness allowed Harry to leave the last of the rolling hills behind, the grassland slowly giving way to firmer ground, less fertile soil and more rocks for a time. Two days after that, Harry spotted what had to be the first of Blacklock territory houses.

They were slightly different in construction than the houses and dwellings of the Stonefoots. The Stonefoots worked in stone mostly, with wood for doorways and thatch for roofs. They also preferred to build outer walls to their farmsteads. Here, there was an outer wall but only around the houses, and those houses were both larger, had very obvious defensive structures on top, and were made more of wood than stone.

The fields have been burned. The door into the communal dwellings was smashed, and a goodly portion of every house showed burn damage. These were signs of a battle long, long past, with the most telling being the dead having become simple skeletons now, time and animals having ravaged them.

This is months old, Harry thought as he moved to the root wreckage. Maybe as much as a year ago, near the start of the conflict. It wasn't done by the Army I'm trailing. I'm certain of that. Even back then, Khamûl was careful to make certain that any communication between the Stonefoots and Blacklocks was cut.

Indeed, the trail he had been following had steered clear of this ruin, and still marched further southward, although now they had shifted their course slightly towards the west.

Finding the trail again, Harry raced on, ignoring the fact that his legs and feet were starting to bother him, his sight going a bit grainy. He continued for another day and night, finding evidence of a major battle along a riverbed. He stared there for a time, burying the bodies of dwarves that had been left there, strips of anything valuable and their weapons as well, before moving on.

A day later, Harry had to rest. His feet and his body were just too sore, with his knees joining his feet in revolt. He found a small area between a large tree and a boulder and lay out there, pulled off his boots, and rested throughout the evening and night, recovering somewhat from his ordeal. Not fully, though. When he woke up from a dream of his lady, the kitchen table and an attempt to make a dessert failing successfully, he was still sore, aching and tired despite it being a perfectly nice day.

But Harry refused to let himself rest for longer. Not when his first friend in this world and many others might be marching into a trap.

Later that afternoon, Harry found a horse grazing by a small fire pit, and slowed his pell-mell rush, moving towards the horse slowly. As he came, he saw it was hurt, a gash still

dribbling blood along its flank, with a great deal more blood marking its coat than could have come from that slight a wound. It still had a saddle on it, and stirrups, but no bridle.

"Now, where did you come from?" he murmured, his voice a croak from disuse. It had been a long while since he'd last spoken, after all.

Glancing all around and seeing no sign of movement, he pulled his hood back and slowly made his way towards the horse. "Easy boy..." he continued, his voice a bit less of a croak this time, his eyes on the saddlebags also on the horse's back.

The horse looked up, its ears shifting, but did nothing, simply staring back at Harry. It tensed as he reached it but remained where it was as Harry ran a hand down the gelding's back. Pointing one finger at the horse's injury. A quick Episkey, and the horse twitched back a half-step, twisting his head to stare along his side.

"Good boy," Harry whispered, wishing that he could understand and be understood by animals as Tauriel and other elves could. *Or even Radagast, though he seemed to prefer smaller animals than this fine fellow.* "Now, why don't you stay there for a bit, hmm? Let me get this off you and then examine that fire pit a bit."

Suiting action to word, Harry lifted some of the saddlebags off the horse, finding nothing of interest in them. A few bits of food, some slivers of a root vegetable he didn't recognize, but which the horse snuffled at as he tossed that bag aside, and some cleaning tools and extra bits of leather. Nothing personal, nothing important, and Harry turned, moving over to the fire pit.

An arrow slammed into his chest with enough force to send Harry staggering, his hood flopping off of his head as he did. Dwarven voices in the distance shouted, and several sling stones were hurled in his direction, but Harry ducked to the side. "Hold! I am not an Easterling. I'm a friend!"

Another arrow slammed into his chest, and this time, Harry was quick enough to cast a sticking charm on it, to make it seem as if it'd penetrated his armor. He fell back, rolling into a small fire pit he'd been examining as the horse bolted, racing away from both Harry and where the arrow had come from. Soon, there came the tramp of two pairs of boots. One halted as the other continued on, coming towards Harry.

As Harry faked his injury, he peered at his two attackers through semi-closed eyes.

Both dwarves were Blacklocks, wearing the thick gambesons of the warriors of that house, though they lacked the large shields or axes. They had also been given good, simple steel helmets at some point. Rather, they had two heavy iron bracers, and one had a sling and a dagger, while the other was only armed with a bow, its quiver practically empty where it hung

over his back. Both looked as if they had seen better days, with cuts and scrapes aplenty in their gambesons and a cut across one cheek, but both seemed hearty enough.

It was the younger of the two who came closer to Harry, his short sword raised, reminding Harry somewhat quixotically of Bilbo's Sting for a moment. This one was far more utilitarian, coming to a wicked point, a stiletto made to get through or under chainmail and pierce the underarmor to get to flesh.

Deciding he'd seen enough, Harry flicked a finger, sending an Immobulus spell at the dwarf, overpowered so it could get through a dwarf's natural magical resistance. As that worthy froze, Harry leaped to his feet and around him, aiming another Immobulus at the archer. He too froze, his bow raised, his arm still pulling back the string of the bow until Harry used another spell to pull the arrow off the string. He then did the same to the sling and dagger of the younger dwarf, tossing them to one side.

"Now, I apologize for using my magic on you two, but you didn't seem to be in a listening mood. I am Harry, friend of Thorin Oakenshield of Erebor," Harry intoned, gesturing slightly and realizing the immobilizing spell on both dwarves' heads, not their whole bodies.

The older dwarf stared at him for a few moments, but Harry could see him thinking behind his beard, even as the younger dwarf began to shout insults in their own language. A barked command from the older dwarf silenced the younger, and he glared at Harry, speaking in broken common. "Dwarf friend. Known. Thorin known. Worked for. Yet how proof?"

Harry shrugged his shoulders, then pulled off his elvish cloak, revealing the armor underneath. "This is dwarven make, as is my dagger. The armor has very clearly been made for me. Would an Easterling have access to something like that? Further, there are the spells I used on you, and my eyes. I've been told that my eyes are a central figure in some of the rumors about me."

The man looked closely, and Harry, reaching through his connection with the lady of the sun, allowed his eyes to glow even brighter than they normally did for a few seconds. That was enough to cause both dwarves to try and flinch backwards, with one of them going so far as to smack his own head into the side of the tree hard enough to make him start cursing. Eventually, the older one slowly nodded. "Rumor say yes, glowing green. Armor good, weapon not matter.

The younger dwarf spoke up now, his own Common far better than his older fellow's. "Why are you here, Istari? Why didn't you come with the Ereboran army?"

"Because I was sent with Thorin's heir to help against the goblins of the Grey Mountains, who have also been making trouble for the Stonefoot House even as they fought off their own Easterling invasion. However, when the sheer size of the Easterling invasion was finally

discovered, I marched from Varni's Folly to free Spider's Bane. We smashed two armies, and I left them behind to head into Blacklock land when we discovered that the other army up there, of around thirty thousand, had moved south to join the campaign in Blacklock lands."

Harry shook his head at that. Even now, the difference in the size of a dwarven and Easterling army was staggering and nasty to think about.

The older dwarf hissed slightly, shaking his head. "Well, you arrived too late, Istari. That army's been trailing and trying to attack Lord Oakenshield's host for several days. Most of it, anyway. Other bits have been moving around the land, scouting, hunting, and moving further southwest." The younger dwarf growled out. "We were with them before this, attached to King Oakenshield's host as scouts."

"Can you tell me where? How far away?"

As he finished asking his question, Harry stumbled forward as a soft nose nuzzled him hard in the back. Turning, Harry blinked, finding the horse he had healed a moment before. "Huh. Came back, did you?" he murmured, reaching up to run a hand along its neck. "Or did you think I had some fruit or something on me? Fraid not, old boy. Not after so long away from home."

Despite Harry's words, the horse whickered, nuzzling into Harry's chest hard enough to send him stumbling a bit.

"Ha, well, let me see if I have anything, hmm?" Harry, forgetting the two still-tied up dwarves for a moment, reached into some of his pouches. In one, he found a few of his cooking ingredients. In this case, a carrot. Lifting it out, he laughed as the horse instantly went for it, teeth chomping just above his fingers, surprisingly dexterous lips pulling the carrot into its mouth, chomping and chewing happily. "Liked that, did you?"

The older dwarf snorted at this sight. "Looks like you made a friend there, Istari. Do you know anything about horses? If you're looking to cover more ground faster, a horse might beat even an elf out for short spurts."

"Hmm... I've been on dwarven donkeys; does that count?" Harry asked, smirking a bit. "Certainly this horse is more to my size than they were."

"Er, before that, could you get back to undoing this spell on us, milord Istari?" the younger dwarf requested.

"Ah, right. Sorry, got distracted for a moment there," Harry apologized, his hands flicking out with Finite Incantatum. The overpowered spell ended the equally overpowered Immobilis spell he'd used on the dwarves. They instantly started to move, with the younger

one scratching at his nose brusquely. “And you said I was within how many leagues of Thorin’s army?”

“By horse?” the older dwarf stretched, staring out into the distance, his face scrunched up in thought. “Maybe a day from where we were cut off from the other scouts? If you head that way and can avoid the Easterlings in the area,” he pointed between two of the low hills in the distance. “you should start to see evidence of the passage of King Oakenshield’s army.”

“I see. Well, in that case...” Harry looked at the horse, then moved to its side, looking at the saddle still there. For some reason, he paused, as if his memories were trying to tell him something was missing, and Harry frowned for a moment, wondering what it was, before it came to him.

Stirrups. At least, that’s what Hermione called them in that book on the Mongols and medieval knights. They don’t have any... Huh. They don’t even have those small lips the dwarves use to step up into their donkey and boar saddles. I wonder why... and didn’t that same book say that the stirrups were really important? They changed the effectiveness of cavalry a lot. Darn it, I always preferred to look at tactics and strategy, not the technical innovations... but, yes, it’s about momentum and weight, right?

For a dwarf, the lack of saddles wouldn’t matter. Any dwarf was at least twice as strong as a human, and their center of mass was lower. But for a human, the lack of stirrups was telling. *For the Mongols, stirrups let them control their horses with their legs alone throughout a battle. For knights, it meant their weight was more, um, connected to that of the horse. The impacts they could both survive and deal out were way higher.*

I wonder if they just haven’t been invented, or the Easterlings just haven’t heard or invented them themselves? Something to think about if Tauriel and I ever go traveling into human lands. After a few years just resting in our house after all this is over, maybe.

Pushing aside another twinge of longing and sorrow that the memory of his lady-love brought, Harry grabbed at the saddle’s top and pulled himself into the saddle. This wasn’t as easy as he had thought it would be, but eventually, despite the horse side-stepping and throwing his head, Harry was in the saddle. Grabbing the reins, Harry tugged, turning the head of the horse in the direction he wanted to go, then used his heels to urge the horse into motion.

At that point, he nearly fell off, as the horse instantly started to move at a trot, which had nothing in common with the equivalent movement in a donkey. There were far more up and down motions, and more movement from the horse muscles right below the saddle.

“AHH! Oh my word, my man bits are not going to thank me for this, if they even survive the day!” he hissed, pulling on the reins to halt the horse.

This caused the horse to give him a rather pointed look over his shoulder. Harry pointedly ignored it, trying to settle himself more comfortably in the saddle so his man parts weren't in further danger.

“...Rather egotistical to call them Man, oh the gender, not the race, right? They're the same word in Common. Such an odd language,” the younger dwarf snickered. “So I take it that the legends of Istari getting along with all right-thinking animals is wrong?”

“That would be elves and Radagast. I doubt even Gandalf, who you call Tharkûn, would be able to do that... although come to think of it, he did actually know how to ride. I just never asked him for lessons. More fool me,” Harry grumbled. *Or Tauriel... no, stop it. I have wallowed in those thoughts long enough. Now is the time for action.*

Shaking his head and once more setting aside thoughts of Tauriel. “I'm off, gentlemen. I'd suggest moving further west, but you know your lands better than I do. Perhaps after this war is over, we'll meet again.”

With that, Harry flicked the reins once more, and instantly began to curse luridly as the horse trotted on. If not for the fact it was moving a little faster than even Harry had been able to run, Harry would have given up quickly, but this horse seemed built for speed and endurance and, after a few yards, even began to speed up. Soon, it was moving much faster than Harry could have under his own power, and Harry grimly clung to the horse's back, his legs locking around the horse's middle like a vise, trying to hold back grunts of pain shifting slightly every few seconds to figure out how to sit to not be shaken to pieces or bruised every other step.

True to the dwarf's words, by the time evening started to fall, Harry found evidence of combat and war. At first it was just the small fight that the two dwarves had fled from when they had been discovered by the enemy scouts. Soon after that, a few Easterling bodies and upturned dirt followed, the bodies left to rot in the sun.

That startled Harry somewhat, as he would have thought the Easterlings would burn their dead as the prisoner he had questioned wanted to be. After a few seconds, he decided that the scouts who had fought here had put their orders to follow Thorin's army above seeing their fellows. Still, Harry found himself pausing for a second, dropping from the saddle, and not just because his boy bits demanded a break from the bizarrely masochistic exercise he was putting himself through.

He spent some time going over the bodies, but found nothing of interest, be it in terms of maps, equipment or personal effects. When he was done, he lit the bodies on fire as he found them with an Incendio, using another spell to dissipate the smoke along the ground so it could not be seen from farther away.

In the middle of the night, Harry found evidence of the first real battles. He didn't do the same here, though, despite there being far more Easterling bodies strewn across the ground because, long before he could see those bodies, he saw men on horseback moving among them. Realizing instantly they'd be able to see him as well, Harry dropped out of the saddle, hoping none of the five silhouettes in the distance had been looking in the right direction.

"Well, it's been... fun... boy, but I think your friends over there would be rather cross with me, so..." With that, he slapped the horse's rear, sending it forward.

After a second spent looking at him, the horse tossed its head and raced off towards the group of horsemen.

Harry crouched there for a moment, pulling out his Invisibility cloak and switching it out with his elvish one. Once that was done, Harry cast a Mufflatio at his feet, happy that in this area of the world grass and solid ground dominated rather than tiny stones or worse. *My cloak will slow me down a bit and will make me invisible to friend and foe alike, but out here, I'm less likely to run into friends.*

Debating for a moment, Harry recalled what the two scouts had said of Thorin's plans, then decided to skirt around the area eastward a bit before making his way south. Soon, Harry had left the group of Easterling horsemen seeing to the rites of their folk behind.

A few hours later, he found still more evidence of battle, along with more Easterlings. This had him frowning, and he shifted forward, closing on one group, hitting several of them with the silent, invisible Rosetta Calx spell.

"— Steel is just better than the black-bearded stumpies. If we had been facing such from the start, this whole campaign would have been bloodier than it has been. Perhaps we should take samples of their metal and send them east," the speaker said.

"Perhaps, but samples don't mean much. You know what the Makers say of the ore we have. Only by taking the land where such metal is made will we be able to match the quality of the grey-steel clad stumpies," a Blood Hand officer growled, still in the saddle watching the others work. "Now get back to work. If I wanted your opinion on things, I would have told you ahead of time what to say."

There were six other men within sight of the two speakers, diligently moving around the bodies of the dead, removing armor, setting it aside into a large pile. Once that was done, each body was placed on an already burning pyre. There wasn't any kind of special ceremony or anything except for a low murmur, which Harry couldn't make out.

The first speaker seemed to protest, and the Blood Hand officer reacted with the brutality that Harry had come to expect from the Easterlings. Like everything else about them, their discipline was harsh, and now the officer reached over and smashed the speaker with a blow from a heavy club that had been previously hanging from his waist.

It wasn't the heavy mace with its quartet of spikes the heavy infantry of the Easterlings favored, but was clearly made to be used in moments like this. It worked too, as the previous speaker was smashed to his knees with a groan.

Slipping out of the saddle, the Blood Hand officer, who Harry judged to be a Sacrificar, a Blood Hand officer whose job was to keep order, stalked over to the speaker. *Although I still wonder about the translation of some of those ranks. Sacrificar, Skinner, and Banner Bearers.*

Pushing the club back into its holding ring, the Sacrificar pulled out a dagger. "Your arm, fool."

The man who had, in Harry's opinion, just been asking logical questions, groaned again, but willingly rolled up the arm of the gambeson he was wearing. Harry thought it was of good quality, nothing like the chainmail that the Blood Hand officer wore, but good, possibly showing he was from a wealthy clan. *It's better than most of the armor I saw in the first two battles with the Easterlings up north for certain.*

As he watched, the Sacrificar cut slowly into the other man's arm, making a shallow cut there as he spoke. "Repeat the Cantic of Obedience with me."

The other man replied, trying to keep the pain from the cut from his voice. Soon, the voices of the others in the area rose to join his, as if they were having an impromptu religious moment. "Through obedience, we serve the Great Warlord. Through obedience and duty we show our worth to the Eye. Through the sublimation of self to the greater purpose, through our pain and loss of self, we scour our souls and give them to He Who is Beyond. All is for He Who is Beyond, all thought, all action, all duty to the Eye that Serves in turn."

The words made Harry shiver under his invisibility cloak, and he quickly pulled himself further under it, watching as the Sacrificar finally finished his cut, leaving a long, jagged mark on the other Easterling's arm. "Good." He reached into another pouch at his

side, one that Harry knew from previous investigations contained a kind of paste. The smell, which was like moldy meat, and the look of it, which was of watered-down yogurt, had made Harry unwilling to examine it closely, although it didn't give off the **foul** feeling as some of the other tinctures had.

As he watched, the paste was put on a bandage, which was wrapped around the man's arm. "Report to your clan's Skinner when you return. He will deem if your wound, and the lesson with it, is worth being kept."

"Aye, Sacrificar," the other man grunted.

Both the answer and the lack of names made Harry shudder again. *Damn, their entire culture is really about the removal of self to an extent that is truly horrifying. All in the name of Morgoth and Sauron.*

As he watched, the Blood Hand began to pitch in with the work going on. "Let's finish this off quickly and return to the army. With the fortifications the stumpies have thrown up to the southwest, and how close the other stumpy army is to linking up with them, they'll need all the maces they can get soon enough."

As the work sped up, Harry wondered if he should take the chance to kill this group. While he was still a little confused about why all of the metal the Easterlings used had that dark black finish to it, he certainly didn't want them to experiment on Ereboran metal to see if they could better their own. Yet there were too many horsemen within sight, torches moving out in the darkness beyond his spell or arrow range. If not for that, Harry might've taken the chance, but he decided to move on quickly.

Traveling as swiftly as he could with his invisibility cloak, Harry raced across the land once more, heading further southwest as the Blood Hand had mentioned.

In doing so, he slipped through a few small patrols. It being nighttime, and with his invisibility cloak, this was child's play for Harry, but it was interesting to note that the Easterlings patrol, in contrast to their work teams, didn't use torches like many would have, ruining their night vision. Rather, they trusted to the stars and the moon above to allow them to see. Out here, with so little cover, it was actually a good move, even if the moon wasn't in the sky any longer.

Eventually, near three or four in the morning, he saw something in the distance. Numerous smoke trails rose into the night, and then the telltale signs of fires on the horizon. Debating for a moment, Harry decided to investigate the camps, having shifted so far away from the last time he'd seen evidence of the passage of Thorin's army that he knew finding them again would be difficult.

Soon after, the fires began to resolve themselves in the distance, along with small shapes and walls facing towards where Harry stood, obscuring much beyond it. They weren't very tall, but they didn't have to, as there also looked to be ditches in front of them. *Fast work, but good and well organized. Crap. Once more, the Easterlings' discipline and professionalism make them more dangerous than otherwise.*

Harry also began to hear the noise of combat, very distant, but there. For a moment, Harry thought about moving towards it, but he couldn't figure out where the noise was coming from, as closer, there was still a lot of noise from the work going on the defenses.

Coming closer, Harry was able to see straight across the outer wall to the scattered camps between what turned out to be two lines of siegeworks. The works on the side facing Harry were still being put up, but the opposite, the internal segment facing what looked like a defensive position manned by dwarves in the distance, was finished.

Well, Harry honestly couldn't see any of the dwarves from where he was, only faint silhouettes moving in the darkness above what he assumed was a wall that... was very strangely constructed and contorted in places. Still, considering there were no other enemies within this territory, that wasn't exactly a bold supposition.

The only other detail he could make out was the cliff face that rose at least six stories above the fortification beyond. *I wonder why they didn't set up on top of that? Or did they, and also at the bottom? Why?*

Much like the camps set up around Spider's Bane, the commander here had spread out his host into different camps, each of them with a different clan symbol flapping in the breeze above them, the specifics impossible to see in the dark. Only a few of them were even visible at all from where Harry was.

There, the similarities ended as Harry crept closer. The High Militant who had been in charge of that campaign and had led the army besieging Spider's Bane personally had been arrogant. The officer here, either the High Militant of this campaign or a Lord General, wasn't. The men moved with purpose, the work ongoing to the defenses at the back of their siegeworks, along with a lot of other areas within. Even at night, Harry could also see what looked like training, or at least troop movements going on within, with hundreds of men moving between the various camps. *More energetic, and forcing the various clans to work together, whereas that man allowed more clan-based organization.*

For a moment, he debated getting close enough to use his Rosetta Calx spell again on the nearest group of workers or to completely infiltrate these camps. Then, as the sounds of combat rose to his right, Harry saw the marker that he had previously seen only once before. The marker that signified where a Lord Militant had made camp.

That did it for Harry. As much as he wanted to try and find where Thorin was, or try to get into contact with Foldorin at least, this was more important. *At the very least, I will overhear their plans. At most... well, cut off the head, and the body might not die, but it will certainly lose a lot of its ability.*

For anyone else, sneaking past the group of guards around that camp would have been practically impossible. They were situated with every two men out beyond the already completed siegeworks with an archer on the wall behind them, staring out into the darkness, well away from the fires within the camp, so that their night vision wasn't ruined. No one but an elf or Harry could sneak by the first outermost security guards, and even then, they would have been seen by the archers within the moment they tried to climb out of the ditch or over the wall.

Harry, however, with his invisibility cloak, was able to do so, slipping past the archers on the wall with a yard to spare on either side. Slipping into the camp itself, he began moving in between several tents. He saw where someone was beginning to cook something, and paused, tempted to reproduce what he had done to the army around Spider's Bane, then saw several officers, Blood Hand officers all, moving deeper into the camp.

Moving in that direction, Harry came out from behind one tent, then was forced to shift sideways and around a racing man, who paused, as if he felt something brush his leg for a second where nothing had been. After a moment, though, he continued on his way quickly, and Harry followed, soon coming within sight of a raised platform in the center of the camp. This matched some of the ones he had seen again around Spider's Bane, and there were already numerous runners around the area, along with dozens of men on horns, others with long, wide scraps of cloth on their belts and others.

I suppose the signal callers would be more useful during a battle or during the day. At night, you have to rely on runners and horns, and runners can give more information.

Glancing around, Harry saw that the Blood Hand was here in strength. The last individual he'd seen since beginning his infiltration that didn't have the mark of a Blood Hand was the outermost guards around the perimeter and the workers working elsewhere along the siegeworks to dig ditches and put up berms. Everyone within this camp had the mark of a Blood Hand and was disciplined besides.

There was no shouting and jocularly here, not even for what passed for such among Easterlings as Harry had seen before when he infiltrated the camps around Spiders Bane and poisoned their food. Instead, there was simply the thrum of commands, not conversation.

The center of all of this soon became visible to Harry as he shifted to the flank of the raised platform and saw an individual among several other members of the Blood Hand. There, the Lord Militant stood. The man was pacing in place while his junior officers created a circle around him, which shifted and moved as one or the other was sent to give out further instructions or returned to his unit.

This man was... well, Harry could only call him impressive from where he crouched between two of the nearest tents, the better to avoid someone simply running into him. To combat that very thing, Harry dropped one of his Notice-Me-Not ward stones, empowering it just a little bit. This tiny zone around him thus disappeared from everyone's mind, and he turned his attention back to the man at the center of this army.

Tall he was, taller than Harry perhaps, and far broader in chest and shoulders. He looked like a wrestler or a bodybuilder who, although old enough to develop a slight paunch visible under his form-fitting armor, still kept himself fit and as trim as possible. He wore lamellar armor, much like the rest of the Blood Hand and officers always did, with nothing about it to denote his high status other than how much attention was being given to him.

He moved with the kind of energy that drew the eye as he paced in a circle then back and forth across the raised platform, sending officers this way and that with every gesture and barked order. His legs were bow-legged a bit, which Harry had seen before in several of the Easterling cavalymen. Yet for all his girth, he moved lightly on his feet.

Similar to his armor, his helmet was the same as everyone else, although perhaps the quality of it and the Army armor was a little better? Harry wasn't as familiar with metalwork and smithing as Thorin was but had spent enough time around his friend to know quality when he saw it.

The Lord Militant didn't have any kind of shield on him, but in a loop on his belt he carried one of the Easterling maces, while a dagger sat on his other side, and a spear was thrust into the wood of the raised platform.

He paused for a moment as a barked report came from nearby, and Harry cursed himself. *Cock, I haven't used Rosetta Calx yet.* This he did so now, not on the High Militant himself, but the runner who had just given a report. The men around the general hadn't shifted enough for him to hit the officer with a spell, or else Harry would have been tempted to kill him then and there. He spread the spell around but still couldn't aim at the High Militant himself.

He moved too late to hear what the runner had said at first, but whatever it was, it seemed to be good news as the Easterling General let out a sharp crack of what might've

been laughter, clapping the man on the shoulder, to the younger man's pleasure, judging by his body language.

He then barked an order, which the younger man repeated, and which Harry understood thanks to having hit the runner with his Rosetta Calx spell. "I am to tell Second Banner Bearer Horstock to continue to work on his defenses against the stumpies. I am then to continue on to Senior Banner Bearer Goruda and order him and the clans of Irontree, Stonewheel, and Flamefoot to pick up the pace of their work under threat of being removed from command."

The general nodded, saying a single word, and the runner was off once more, racing into the darkness. The Lord Militant watched him go, murmuring something to one of his fellows, who made note of it on a piece of parchment. Then the officer was again growling out specific orders, pointing out into the darkness with a thrusting finger in different directions around the distant sound of battle. That noise was somewhat desultory to Harry's ears, but that could just be distance.

Two others came and went quickly, their bodies obscured by others, so Harry couldn't hit them with his translation spell. They didn't stay for long. With firm nods and hand waves, they were on their way once more. There followed a joke from the High Militant that had many of his men laughing.

Watching the man, Harry wondered for a moment if he could see in the dark, to be able to direct a battle at least a league or more away so confidently, but all in all, watching the Easterlings like this, Harry was once more reminded they were, well, human. For all of their efforts to become unfeeling, uncaring machines of war, all the efforts they'd gone to erase their individuality, Harry could still see aspects of humanity within them be far beyond their simple physical forms. No matter how many generations they'd been indoctrinated to Sauron, to Morgoth beyond him, the Easterlings were not born evil.

I cannot forget that again, even if I cannot forgive their actions against the dwarves in this war or others. And I can't allow this man to continue to command this army. Judging by what the two scouts I met said, and what I'm seeing here, he's far too bloody competent. Time for some constructive violence, I think, Harry thought, raising a hand and preparing a spell.

He paused, staring as a bird flew down out of the darkness. It landed on the man's shoulder. Instead of carrying a message, as Harry had been somewhat prepared for, this bird did something the prisoner Harry had mentally dominated back north had only hinted at: he let loose a harsh-sounding caw, which the bird answered, squawking and clacking its

beak at him. *I thought that was mere rumor! Sauron really has figured out how to give his followers the ability to talk to birds?!*

The Lord Militant listened intently, and then barked out further orders to his men. Four runners were quickly set off in one direction, and another in a second, with that later hopping onto a nearby horse, because he had further to go or had to arrive faster? Harry wasn't certain which, but something was happening, and soon, there was a lot more noise in the distance, sounds of violence and screams.

Thankfully, several of these runners had been hit before this by the Rosetta Calx spell.

"I am to tell Second Banner Bearer Horstock to reroute his forces into the camp and provide a strong flanking force to the attacking stumpies. I am to remain and act as a runner for Horstock thereafter."

A grunt followed, and that runner was off. This was followed by a second runner announcing. "Senior Standard Bearer Goruda is to take the clans of Stonewheel and Flamefoot out of camp and behind the attacking stumpies. He is to act as a backstop. The warriors of Irontree are to remain facing the stumpies in the odd fort along their section of the line."

A nod, then some more words, but obviously not an order as it wasn't repeated by the runner who followed. Two more men were then called up, repeating similar orders, and Harry realized that Thorin's army had attacked the camp and was trying to force its way through. *Time to stop listening and start killing then*, he thought grimly. Lining up his shot again. His fingers and hand slipped out from under the invisibility cloak, and a cutting spell slashed out through the night towards the general between two of the officers on the platform, aiming at the Lord Militant, the Notice-Me-Not ward at his feet fizzling out instantly.

Unfortunately, there, Harry's luck failed him. A runner appeared at the bottom of the ramp leading up to the platform, and one of the officers shifted sideways and died without even a whimper, cut in half by Harry's spell.

Blood and viscera burst everywhere as the two men were cut in half, but even as they had been cut in half, the general had already leapt to one side, rolling along the platform. Either the sight of the blood had been enough, or he had already been moving before the spell had struck. Harry couldn't tell. Whatever the reason, the man's reaction time was almost as good as Harry's.

For a moment, all of the officers bar the general stood stunned, and then he hurled his dagger through the crowd of officers towards where he thought the spell had come from. He did so accurately enough that it thumped into Harry's outstretched forearm, bouncing off his armor, and making a clattering sound even as Harry launched another spell. This one exploded the side of the raised dais, but its wood and dirt construction did a decent job of absorbing the spell.

The general rolled off the other side, bellowing "Elf!" in common, for some reason, perhaps because the Easterling tongue had no word for elf? Harry didn't know, but despite still having his Invisibility Cloak on him, the noise of the dagger and the fact he hadn't moved yet meant the Easterlings, even if they couldn't make out his body, knew where Harry was.

Arrows, hurled spears, and daggers came towards him from multiple angles, including directly behind him, as Blood Hand guards raced forward. Harry flinched backwards from one such spear that would've hit him in the face, which was only covered by his invisibility cloak, something Harry realized ruefully he would need to look into in the future. *Helmet, yes, I will need one in the future.*

For now, he ducked aside from that, whirling out of the area he had been in between two tents, only to find several guards had already reached mace-range from behind him towards that position. He twisted around, sword up, blocking one mace from striking at where the enemy guards thought he must be, and had accurately predicted, alas, before a Bombarda spell blew one of them apart with such force that his exploded frame spread everywhere with enough force to knock over several others.

A second later, Harry was forced to duck under another blow from another mace, but his sword stabbed, stabbing through the lamellar armor of the enemy as if it was so much bark rather than metal. Harry then lashed out upwards, a blinding light exploding within the camp, causing every man there to scream and clutch at his eyes over his mask.

Having closed his eyes, Harry twisted around, looking towards where the general had been, only to not see any sight of him there, and, cursing, pulled his hood back up over his face, dodging around several more Easterlings and inward, pausing to figure out where the sound of combat was coming from, far louder than the more distant sound from the encircled dwarves. Harry shifted in that direction, rapidly running from one camp to another, then through it and out the other side, even as his flapping feet became visible underneath his invisibility cloak, causing much consternation, shouts, and even some attacks to come his way.

OOOOOOO

Behind Harry, the Lord Militant Khajigin stared from where he had rolled off of the raised platform and covered himself with the body of one of his runners. The fall had bruised him somewhat despite his armor, but it was better to be bruised than to be dead, and now he pushed himself to his feet, smirking savagely underneath his helmet. *My, but that was exhilarating.*

“Send at least fifty of our Blood Hand after those running feet, preferably those with good eyesight. That wizard will make for the stumpies trying to break through our siege line,” he said almost conversationally, pushing himself to his feet.

None of his officers moved to help him. Loyalty and respect were important, but any sign of weakness was anathema among the Easterlings. If the Lord Militant couldn’t push himself to his feet on his own, he wasn’t worthy of being the general any longer, regardless of his abilities. “Further, let’s see if we can convince the stumpies holed up in their makeshift fortress out to play as well. Have some of the forces working on the defenses facing them between the mobile army and those stumpies gather our special surprises and set them up so they can be seen by the stumpies in that blasted fort. I will want another force ready to move in to take that clan’s place, to bottle them up again.”

“We’ve already sent out orders to attack the mobile stumpy host from the sides and to cut off their retreat. That is a lot of maneuvers, sir, and in the darkness like this, we’re going to start running into trouble coordinating quickly,” One of his advisers cautioned.

Unlike with the Warlord Khamûl, you could get away with a Lord Militant, particularly if he had proven to welcome such, as Khajigin had done since this campaign began. “I know, which is why you will run to Lord General Crosol. He will be personally in charge of the force to move in and make sure they can’t escape through our inner defenses so easily.” The general said, and the officer nodded, racing off to grab a horse and then away through the camps.

The Lord Militant continued, staring out into the darkness. “If that wasn’t the wizard we’ve been warned about, the one with the lowborn name of Potter, I will eat my own fingers. And if he’s able to link up with the steel-clad stumpies, they might well be able to break free. But we’ll bleed them even so! We might not get lucky enough to finish off that force tonight, but we will weaken them. I want Lord General Borman to take several clans worth of heavy cavalry and prepare them to move out into the open between the stumpy fortification and our lines. Even if they get through, the battle won’t be over until we allow it to end!”

OOOOOOO

Moments before Harry began his impromptu infiltration of the Easterling host's command center, Thorin had led his folk through the darkness closes enough to see the makeshift defenses of the cordon around Foldorin's forces facing them. Before this, Nori and his scouts had been able to kill the few scouts and even a cavalry group between them and the enemy's siege lines. Saruman had also done his share, dipping into Gandalf's book of tricks to keep the birds of the enemy away with subtle wind pressure.

However, this close, the enemy could not miss them any longer. Arrows began to fly from the few archers among the Easterlings, but once more, they proved ineffective against the dwarves. Indeed, Thorin felt that the enemy's bows wouldn't have been able to punch through even the gambesons and cloth armor of the Zigûr-khaz, let alone their infantry's shields. *Perhaps that was why they had never developed archery?*

Regardless of the reasoning there, Thorin had developed some changes to his host's order of advance, and now, as he barked out orders, his troops shifted from a marching column into an assault force. While under fire, the dwarves rearranged their formation even as they charged through the night. Soon, the formation presented a hundred-man frontage, three lines deep at the front. Those first three lines were composed of the largest and strongest dwarves in the army, most of whom came from Thorin's personal guard.

The rest of the three dwarven corps were situated on the sides in longer columns facing outward, covering the humans and the boar riders in the center. By this point, all of the crossbows had been handed over to the humans, with many a stern injunction to care for them, along with what their ranges and so forth were. They didn't have as much of that as the longbows the humans favored, but the crossbows were repeating crossbows and so could fire four shots faster than the longbows and struck just as hard within their range.

"Remember, aimed fire only," Thorne reminded the humans nearby, at the back of the frontmost three lines. Normally he'd be at the front, but with what the defenses Saruman had told them about since they started to move, the frontmost line of his formation wasn't there to do any fighting, despite their heavy shields, most of which had come from his own honor guard.

With the chain mail and chest plates they normally wore, most Ereboran warriors disdained the use of a shield. They preferred to wield two-handed weapons instead. But here, shields were going to be needed for a very specific purpose.

While the wall facing outward and a lot of other areas hadn't been finished, the areas closest to where the enemy had lost track of Thorin's host thanks to the Notice-Me-Not wards had been. This meant there was a ditch facing them, as well as a berm as high as a dwarven head, with a small fighting step on the other side for the humans to use while

defending it. Those defenders were also heavy infantry, with long spears and maces along with their archers.

Their armor, the same scale mail as had been seen in heavy infantry and cavalry before, however, didn't stop the humans and their borrowed crossbows from sweeping the men off facing the dwarves of the wall. Seventeen fell quickly, followed by a further eight falling backwards, clutching at arms or shoulders, growling angrily through the pain of their wounds. There were still more than a dozen men facing the dwarves, with more racing to take their fellows' pace, but the dwarves continued to charge forward, the first three rows slowly separating by a few yards.

As they did, the first-line reached the ditch and jumped down into it with Dori leading them. Once he had his feet under him, Dori lifted his overly large shield above his head, roaring out, "Above, hold your shields above your head! Use both arms if you need to but hold them there!"

The dwarves all around him did so, and shields, mostly circular shields from Erebor or the tower shields of the Zigûr-khaz, each large enough to protect a dwarf from head to knee, rose. Not quite up to the top of the ditch, but enough to allow a dwarf to step on and over onto the berm. It wasn't a wall, a flat surface; there hadn't been time or desire for such. It was just a mass of tamped-down dirt. There, the dwarves dug in quickly with hands and booted feet, pulling themselves up and over.

Dirt and mud rained down into the ditch from those dwarves, but the shield bearing dwarves kept their shields in place, holding it in place.

Thorin and Dwalin were part of the first group to move up and onto the berm, and Thorin grunted as a spear stabbed down, slamming into the top of his head. It made his head ring a bit, but the spear shattered rather than penetrate his steel helmet. Likewise, all around him the chest plates and helmets of his fellows defended their wearers well, with only one dwarf knocked backwards, and none injured just yet.

A moment later, Thorin had made himself a handhold, and with another grunt and a raised foot slotted into the handhold, the king of Erebor lifted himself up far enough to hack at one of the defenders with Orcrist. Not glowing in the dark as the Easterlings were not one of the vile created species of Morgoth, there was nothing wrong with Orcrist's blade, as many an Easterling had found out already to his cost. This one too screamed as the blade chopped into his armor as if it was thin wood rather than scale mail.

The Easterling fell back, and Thorin heaved himself up onto the top of the wall, with Dwalin beside him. Two more dwarves soon joined them as the pair cut down three more

Easterlings. Six more joined them before a counter-surge hit them, trying to regain the fighting step.

Heavy infantry, these men were armed with heavy maces with pick-like points meant to puncture through armor. They struck first, the humans' size giving them a bit of added range, but the dwarves of the Lonely Mountain either blocked or simply took those blows, grunting on the impact, their armor not giving way or being punctured through despite the strength of the humans.

Then, stepping down into the countercharge, the dwarves were in their own range. Swords, axes, hammers stabbed, hacked and slashed. Heavy scale mail proved no match for the better weapons and steel of the Sigin-tarâg and dozens of men fell as Thorin bellowed, Orcrist cutting another man down even as he ordered, "Half circle, push out from the wall and form a half circle! Defend this segment until our men are across. We spread out when every hundred men join us."

Moments later, the third line was across and helped to stabilize the defensive area even as more of the Easterlings pushed in. But those attacks now came in small clumps, the enemy having been taken completely by surprise by the speed of their assault. The nearest clan's ready force hadn't been as prepared as they should have been and now wasn't large enough to push the dwarves back over the wall.

Now the dwarfs' foothold began to grow, with eighty to a hundred dwarves shifting up and over the berm. Or even through in some places as dwarves near the edge of the shield-bearers in the ditch began to use their collapsible shovels to tear through the wall faster than any three Easterlings could have. As the battle began to escalate at the front of the half-circle, that work redoubled with Thori ordering forty of his corps to get to work on that.

But more Easterlings were forming up just beyond the front line. As Matias and his men pushed forward and across, firing into the night, downing an Easterling here and there with their borrowed crossbows, they charged in, and the battle became general across the half-circle. Thorin and his corps had fully formed up, however, and that half-circle was now two deep in places.

Saruman came across with the men of Dale, and with a wave of his staff, small shafts of flames lanced out over the heads of the dwarves. Each one smashed into formations of Easterlings, breaking them up before they could engage the defensive line of dwarves. Still more dwarves came across, pushing outward all the while.

Soon nearly the entirety of Thorin's and Khnouk's corps were across. Now, Thorin bellowed a new order, and his troops shifted from a semicircle into a wedge with Thorin,

Dwalin, and his guard at the point. They drove forward instead of pressing forward lightly to gain their fellows more space, and the Easterling forces in front of them stumbled and started to give ground.

As this was going on at the back of the break-in, the boar riders at the end of the column came across. Those boars were nearly the end of the remaining dwarves underneath them, still holding up their shields, but most of those had already been pulled out thanks to Tholi and his thoughtfulness. Then they were across, and a group of dwarves from Tholi's corps tossed down short bits of rope taken from the previously destroyed siege weapons. Groaning, the dwarves that had held those shields up as their fellows passed by were pulled up one after another, with Dori one of the first, turning to help the others.

However, at the front of the wedge, more and more Easterlings were hammering into them, slowing the army's advance, pinning them in place within the two defensive walls even as the inner wall facing Foldorin's troops became visible through the turmoil. More Easterlings were forming up and coming at them in organized groups once more. It would've been worse if they had hit the line directly behind one of the camps, but being in between them was no better, as more and more of the Easterlings advanced.

Then, there was a horn in the distance. A shout barely heard over the tumult of battle from where Thorin stood, slashing and pushing infantrymen off their feet with each blow. "Shathrâk, shathrâk al Zigûr-khaz! Rukhsu bazak thur! (Vengeance, Vengeance for our House! Let their blood feed the land!)"

From that direction, a force moved through the near darkness between the two defenses, Blackbeard forces racing across the intervening distance. They hammered into the defenses on that line, coming up and over a segment of the defense that must not have been finished, given the speed with which they did so, although they still lost a few men doing it to the defenders facing them there.

Thorin hissed as he saw them coming, shaking his head and shouting, "Damn it all!"

Foldorin isn't with them either... there's too many Easterlings for us to try and deal with all at once tonight even with surprise on our side. And it's damn clear that we didn't have that he thought reflectively, seeing still more formed lines slamming into his own men from both sides as they formed what amounted to a blunted spearpoint, striving forward.

The heavy infantry of the Easterlings were a greater match for his own folk than the light infantry or any of the cavalry had been up to this point, and he could see many of his men starting to wince, shifting backwards, exchanging places with their fellows. He hadn't lost many people just yet, bar one or two who had gotten very unlucky and taken Mace

points to the eyeholes or where their neck guards met their beards, but even so, it was still getting nastier with every passing moment.

“The Blacklocks don’t have our armor, it will be an even fight for them, blast it all! What could have caused them to lose all sense like this? That isn’t even a proper formation out there!” He hissed to himself, staring at what he could see over the inner berm.

Despite Thorin’s concerns, the Zigûr-khaz were able to cross the intervening distance well enough, and then the Zigûr-khaz were slamming into and around the defensive force that had moved in to try to stop Thorin’s folk from reaching the other side of the cordon. They spread out, hacking and slashing at the heavy infantry between them and his Sigin-tarâg with their axes, their heavy shields raised in defense, but quickly they started to lose folk. While their weapons were more than up to penetrating the armor of the heavy infantry of the Easterlings, the reverse was also true if they got around the Zigûr-khaz shields, and numbers quickly began to tell as more formed formations shifted to strike at them.

He bellowed orders, trying to shout the dwarves of his wife’s hold into formation, trying to get them to link up with his own folk, but the Blackbeards were lost in their own bloodlust. They simply wanted to kill the enemy, and Thorin could not understand it. Not until, that is, he was able to take a step back and take a look over the battlefield toward the inner berm.

There, in the light of torches, several dead dwarves had been tied or worse onto long stakes at the top of the berm. And it was with a start and a howl of agony that he realized many of those bodies, of which there were at least a hundred or more, were dams and children. Stripped naked, shorn of their beards, and showing the signs of further torture. Then set up there for all to see.

This was a sight calculated to horrify and enrage in equal measure. It was no wonder that the Zigûr-khaz had lost control. Indeed, as Thorin’s own fury boiled up for the first time in all its red wrath since he had overcome the Dragon’s Taint, his last conscious thought was to wonder that Foldorin had kept hold of his own troops and not joined the charge.

“By Mahal, for this outrage I will slay you all!” He roared, his voice so loud several dwarves and Easterlings alike reeled backward away from the King Under the Mountain. “Your folk will scream at the very sight of Durin’s Folk by the time I am through! Bharuk Khazad, Khazad Ai Erebor!”

With that, he charged into the battle again, the Arkenstone blazing with energy under his armor, so hot to the touch it burned where it rested on his chest. Soon, many of his own folk began to see the same thing and also fell into a black rage. Many broke ranks,

hammering into the Easterlings, hacking and slashing, all cohesion and discipline slowly disappearing.

As Thorin and hundreds of his own folk lost themselves to the same wrath that had gripped the warriors of Red Rock, fires in various segments under Saruman's orders suddenly erupted. Torches flared, the fires spreading over their bearers while cook fires exploded in a wide area around the fighting. One such lit up a strangely moving blur on top of a pair of racing feet.

Even as a segment of the dwarven left flank started to crumble as the dwarves there lost themselves, a series of explosions followed Saruman's show of force. The enemy cavalry that had been forming up behind their infantry in an open zone there died, the whinnies of horses ending abruptly, silenced along with their riders.

Saruman appeared from behind Thorin, his staff stabbing forward. While it was a blunt staff, it smashed into one of the Easterlings in front of Thorin with such force that the man was blasted off his feet, slamming into two others behind him and taking all three to the ground. "I do believe that there is someone else out there throwing magic. Magic I have heard of before from Gandalf, even if the only time I saw the wielder of said magic, he was intent on acting the fool at my and Elrond's expense."

Those words didn't register at first, so lost in his madness was Thorin, but then the pain of the Arkenstone on his chest finally registered. Without looking, he knew his skin had been seared to the point he'd need some ointment after, but it at least knocked him out of his rage. Quickly, he stepped back, allowing Dwalin, who hadn't fallen into a berserk fury at the sight ahead of them, to take a moment to stare in the direction of the explosions.

There, he saw Harry's head suddenly appear, then disappear, as he used a few cutting spells to hack apart a group of Easterling horsemen. They didn't break, though, and as Thorin watched, they twisted around, circling Harry and charging in, sabers slashing down, maces raised, hammering.

Harry danced in between them, sword lashing out, spells bursting, taking only a few hits on his armor, which stopped each strike cold, shattering some of their weapons in doing so.

Well, I doubt I need to worry about my friend, not with that armor of his. Shaking his head at that sight, Thorin took in the overall battle and roared out, "Reform!" Once more, powered by the Arkenstone, which had dramatically cooled now, his voice reached every corner of the battle, and the volume of it knocked more than half of his own folk out of their berserk state. "Reform, men of Erebor! Reform, brothers! We will kill of thses scum with discipline and cohesion rather than each warrior working alone!"

His words, taken up by Khnouk and several of their underofficers, started to work. More than thirty of his folk had died, encircled, knocked down, and slain, but their armor had kept the majority of them alive, and now, as they fell back, the training and organization of the army Thorin had spent the past decade building came into its own. Tholi soon joined the efforts, and between his two Nâlbarâk Râdûn and Thorin's own voice, the Sigin-tarâg line stabilized.

With that done, he could turn his attention to the warriors of Red Rock. "We need to re-form the Blacklocks!" He bellowed. "Dwalin, pull back and one of the horn callers. He is to signal the reform, then the signal for the Blacklock irregular infantry. Hopefully some of them will get the message.

"Saruman, can you pick out any Blacklocks out there giving out orders? And can you..." Thorin hesitated. "Can you burn those bodies up there to ash quickly? As long as they are hanging up there, I doubt we'll be able to get through to the Blacklock warriors."

"My senses are not as keen as yours in the darkness without my little birds, and this tumult is too much for them to see much through, let alone hear through," Saruman said, his staff whirling to connect to the side of the face of a Easterling. Armor bent and buckled, and the Easterling stumbled, then fell, his skull crushed alongside his helmet. "If you want your voice to carry to them, however, I can craft a spell to that extent. And..."

Saruman also hesitated then, his eyes becoming a little cold for a moment. It was an act, in his case, yet somehow Saruman did feel a certain amount of affront at the bodies of the dams and children ahead of them. "And I can indeed burn those bodies. Give me a moment."

Thorin nodded, turning back to stab Orcrist into the shoulder of an Easterling about to slam a mace down on top of Dwalin's head. Dori then joined them, having pushed through the board riders and humans clogging up the center of the reformed formation, and for a moment the three of them fought side by side. Bodies started to pile up and then get stomped down, truly starting to get in the way of the Easterlings and dwarves alike now.

Nearby, the noise of Harry's spells petered out, and Saruman glanced his way for a moment, frowning a bit at seeing how much of his body was still invisible. Much of it became visible when he moved and attacked with his blade, which was very visible, but the majority still seemed to be covered with a cloak of some kind that caused his body to disappear from sight.

Fascinating, even if whatever it is isn't perfect when he has to move so much, Saruman thought, before concentrating once more on the spell he had crafted. Reaching to the fire that was always so easy for him to use as a Maia of Aulë, he reached forward for the

torches that had been, in a nice bit of planning, set up to allow the distant dwarves in the odd-looking fort to see their womenfolk and children's bodies so displayed.

With a single thought, those torches burst into life, roaring up onto the bodies above them and the stakes holding them. As the battle raged all around them and a force of cavalry hacked at the dwarves of the Blacklocks, Saruman kept the fire going. He kept it going as that cavalry force found themselves unable to break off, and found themselves hacked to ribbons from the feet upward. He kept it up until the bodies were but ash, while Thorin shouted himself hoarse and the horn caller was finally able to start cutting through the tumult and the Blacklocks' rage to get them to realize how bad the battle had become for them.

"Reform for a bottle line or reach my troops! Reform, blast it, you're playing into their hands!" Thorin bellowed

Several hundred Zigûr-khaz started to come out of their daze now with the source of their fury no longer in sight, and started to indeed come together or press forward towards their Sigin-tarâg cousins. Yet many of them didn't. Still lost in their battle craze, they charged forward, smashing and hacking at their enemies, ignoring the call from Thorin as they continued to fight as individual warriors.

They might even have ignored their own officers, and, indeed, as those worthies also started to regain control of themselves, they did. Yet slowly the surviving Zigûr-khaz began to form into a funnel, connecting to a portion of Thorin's line in places, still hacking and slashing at the Easterling infantry as they came.

It was too late. Even as Harry smashed through one segment of a heavy infantry force that was trying to get in between the interior edge of the siege lines and Thorin's forces, from the other side of Thorin's formation, heavy cavalry charged through the night, trampling over their own dead and tents, formed into a massive line of troopers, their lances raised to stab downward.

They slammed into and through the Zigûr-khaz and their own infantry as if they weren't even there, heedless of their own folk in a way that didn't surprise Thorin after the past few months. Lances pierced, stabbing the Zigûr-khaz into the dirt, crushing heads or bursting through the less capable armor of the Zigûr-khaz. Even the Sigin-tarâg at the front of their wedge were bowled over, their line too thin in places. The piles of dead and the sheer impact made the Easterling heavy cavalry lose all momentum at the same time, but in that moment, Thorin knew with grim certainty he had taken more losses than he had in any single fight up to that point.

The heavy cavalry slowly pulled away under the bellowed orders of their officers. They pulled back as did the infantry on that side, spreading to let the heavy cavalry hit the left flank of Thorin's host cleanly, aiming towards the Sigin-tarâg lines once more, but then, Harry was there, pushing through, ducking underneath and between two dwarves.

"Hello all! We seem to be in a box spot of bother," he said, his droll tone causing several of the dwarves from Erebor to hoot and holler, their morale, which had been about to take a dip, suddenly surging. He gestured, and a series of Bombarda spells crashed down in front of the incoming heavy cavalry, creating ditches and holes that their horses weren't fast enough to avoid. Horses whinnied and cried as their legs snapped, throwing their riders off, rolling on top of them in many cases, and the dwarves under Khnouk's command charged forwards, hacking and slashing down at the downed heavy cavalry.

"Reform! Reform!" came the shout from Thorin. "We must push through!"

He was immensely happy to see his friend, but now was not the time for that. The enemy was getting more and more organized, with spears, makeshift lances for the most part, being pushed forward alongside their heavy infantry. Harry had already saved his men from facing the enemy's heavy cavalry, but there were just too many Easterlings to beat like this, and they were too blasted organized! Khnouk, pull your troops back into line. We cannot linger!"

Now arrows began to sluice through the night. Only a few Zigûr-khaz fell, along with one of his own men, an arrow through his mouth, as Thorin cut an Easterling down in front of him. "Press forward! Saruman or Harry, plow the road for us. We are almost there."

"Right," Harry answered, nodding his head to Saruman as he raced in between several of the men of Dale. The next instant, a series of Bone exploding spells broke apart the enemy formation holding the dwarves at the front. It had moved into position sometime after the Zigûr-khaz had attacked, but now they and the wall behind them burst in numerous places.

The Easterlings in that formation didn't break. They didn't even run. To Harry's shocked respect, they stood and reformed. A series of horn calls had them reforming around the losses, but that had spread them too far. Instead of being three deep with a berm behind them, there was now only a line of two, with the berm shattered in numerous places.

With a series of barked orders of his own, Thorin's front shifted once more, creating a shape more like the wedge from earlier. With Thorin, Dwalin and Dori being the point, they slammed into and through one of those sections as the dwarves charged. Watching the heavy infantry of the Easterlings be just bowled over by the shorter Longbeards might have

been funny, if not for the hellish lighting, the blood, and the shouts and screams of the wounded, Harry reflected, before he and several hundred Longbeards shifted sideways, taking up a defensive line to the left flank.

“We’re the pivot,” one of the Longbeards growled. “The corner of the square. We hold here, let the others pass us, then shift to the back of the formation as the last of the others go through.”

Unknown to Harry and that line of warriors, the enemy commander had one last trick to try. Another group of heavy cavalry led by Lord General Borman, the same general who had come from the Stonefoot territory, had been sent out with a force of nine thousand heavy cavalry into the area between the dwarven fortification and the interior defensive line. Now, as thousands of dwarves streamed out of a series of breaks in the berm, jumping down into the holes there and raising shields, the heavy cavalry formed up and began to charge in.

Lord Militant Khajigin had not reckoned with the dwarven scorpions. Foldorin had not used them up to this point, husbanding and even hiding them. Indeed, he’d even set two of them afire leagues away, as if his army had burned them to let them go faster. Now, his, Mik’s and Thorin’s original ballistae, all twenty-two of them, fired, aiming at the mass of heavy cavalry.

Previously, the scorpions had only been used once before in this war. Even then, not twenty-two of them at once. That battle had begun before the scorpions of the flanking force could all be put together.

The heavy bolts of the scorpions smashed into and through the heavy cavalry almost directly across their angle of advance, causing unparalleled carnage. Hundreds of men and horses died, reducing the heavy cavalry to mere small groups as they continued to charge forward. Lord General Borman was one of the thousands slain in that first barrage, and even as his Senior Banner bearers tried to reform, tried to bring the host together, the scorpions fired again. And again.

For the first time, the Easterlings couldn’t reform. While the horsemen might have tried, such was the courage of the Easterlings along with the strength of their horrid faith, the horses were not so brave. They broke, streaming in every direction, whinnying in fear, and the assault crumbled. What few of them who neared the dwarves were slain to a man as Duroc led his boar riders out to defend their flank.

Ahead of them, four large rocks were heaved out of place by a series of ingenious levers and pulleys, and the men of Mik and Foldorin’s corps trooped out, spreading out into a defensive line at an angle. Barked commands were issued, and Thorin watched the

battered, mauled remnants of the Zigûr-khaz, Saruman, and several hundred of his own corps stream in. They were followed by dozens of the men of Dale, while Matias stood tall, shouting for his men to pick up the pace.

“Dwalin, Dori, with me. We form the other hinge across from Harry,” Thorin ordered, charging back towards the back of the formation where it was still in the Easterling cordon.

Grumbling about all-too heroic kings who didn’t know their place in battle, Dwalin, smirking even so, followed, while Dori bellowed a chuckle, as Nori joined them, a purloined Easterling mace in one hand. “We’re nearly in the clear, brother mine,” the scout caroled.

Dori slowly shook his head. “If we get out of this battle without further losses. I will shake your hand, Nori. But if anything else happens, you should prepare for a thumping, brother.” The fact he emphasized this by slamming his cudgel into the shield of an Easterling so hard the wood of the shield caved in was not lost on Nori, who thankfully fell silent.

The Easterlings did not let them go easily. The enemy kept on pushing in, trying to cut off the dwarves still in the camp. But Tholi and Khnouk held their men under firm command, and Foldorin and Mik’s provided a defense out in the open against several small probing attacks by light cavalry. The Easterlings, though, seemed to have been somewhat appalled at the losses their heavy cavalry took from the scorpions, and they preferred to attack the dwarves still trying to pull out of their defensive line.

Several more dwarves died, but the Sigin-tarâg’s better armor still made it tough going to put even one of the Sigin-tarâg down.

Soon, the last of Thorin’s men passed through the holes Harry had made in the Easterlings berm, and then, in one of those openings, the torches in the hands of several Easterlings burst into flame. The men screamed, even their vaunted ability to ignore pain overcome, stumbling back into their fellows. The flames came with them, almost hungrily filling the space.

Looking at that, Harry was reminded of a spell in his old world he had never seen or learned, only reading about it in DADA in his fifth year, called upon as a means to deal with Infreri. *Good grief, Saruman’s a little vindictive. That almost looks like the flames are enjoying burning those folk.*

Shaking his head at that, Harry used a cutting spell to slice four Easterlings into pieces as they tried to come through the other hole in the berm. Others were trying to come up and over, only to realize the dwarves hadn’t filled in the ditches, instead using their own bodies and shields to get past it. They fell into the pit, where the last of the dwarves down

there were forced to fight them. Harry helped with pinpoint penetrating type spells, pulling back from the line for a moment, while Matias and several of his folk used purloined spears to attack the Easterlings while others, humans and dwarfs alike, helped them out of the ditch.

Two more dwarves died, struck under their chainmail or with their legs hacked at as they were pulled out, but the move was soon done. The back line started to slowly retreat, with Foldorin and Mik's corps moving forward, enveloping their fellows. Faced with a firm, rested force, the Easterling commander knew to give up the ghost.

There was a horn blast in the distance, and the Easterlings trying to clamber up out of the ditch or over the wall paused. The light cavalry still trying to get past the two-deep dwarven line on the sides in the open also paused, quickly pulling back. Arrows continued to come out of the darkness towards the dwarves, but the Easterlings had enough for one night.

Thorin and Harry were among the last to pull back, followed by Foldorin and Mik's forces pulling back through the holes in the odd-looking defense they had made. As they did, the stones were let loose to crash into their previous position, and Harry allowed himself to slump in place for a moment, staring around him at what looked like a series of strange openings and makeshift alleys around large stones like the ones that had just slammed down behind them.

What am I looking at? What exactly did Foldorin do here? Harry thought muzzily, even as Thorin pushed through his folk to his side, grasping Harry's hand strongly.

"Where in Mahal's name did you come from, Harry? A friend unlooked for is a treasure indeed, but you're about as far from Stonefoot Lands as Elrond's folk are from the edge of Mirkwood."

"Oh, I know. I ran most of that distance," Harry groaned, staring down at his legs as if for the first time. "If not for my training with Tauriel and, admittedly, the changes in my body since becoming a Istari, I doubt I'd have made it. As for why..."

Foldorin joined them, coming down from a small ladder leading up onto a series of rocks where other rocks had been set in such a way as to create a protected redoubt nearby, leading Harry, Thorin and his commanders away from the entryway. Mik, who had gone out with his troops, went another way through the warren. Soon, they passed underground in complete darkness, with only the dwarven ability to see decently in the dark letting them do so without smacking into the wall. Saruman in particular had trouble, his head scraping the top of the tunnel.

Everyone listened intently as Harry spoke about the war to the north, the victories of the Stonefoot House, with Thorin smiling proudly at how well his nephew and his forces had done in the campaign to free Varni's Folly. The news that the Stonefoots were still fighting an enemy reserve army and that the cavalry-based host had come from that front caused much cursing, with Foldorin muttering, "To think on such a large scale... that is worrisome."

More worrisome for everyone was the name of Khamûl. Well, not the name, really, as none had heard it before, not even Saruman. But the idea that a Nazgûl had been sent to command this whole war was disturbing in the extreme.

Saruman spoke of this soon after they came out of the tunnel into an open area between large boulders. The area had numerous small, dwarf-sized tunnels and passages leading into it, with an even larger area separated from it by a short passage to one side. Several other raised platforms were visible above them.

"We are not facing a Nazgûl here on this front. I would know if any such spirit was nearby, whatever the flesh he had been given by his Master. However, if Khamûl was an Easterling from the start, it makes sense how the faith of Morgoth has come to dominate the Easterlings. Sauron used much the same trick on Númenor. Still, if the Nazgûl isn't here, where is he? I rather doubt one that could be called the Great Warlord would remain behind, handling logistics or what-have-you."

"...I wonder if Dain's instincts were right about this war," Thorin murmured. "We dwarves as a whole might be well served by his taking his army to Green Spike in the south."

Foldorin grunted at that, then looked at Harry thoughtfully. They'd gotten to know one another as Thorin created the corps-based armies and chose his Nâlbarâk Râdûn but weren't all that close. "Well, Harry Potter, we thank you for your aid this night. Our enemy has proven not only far more numerous than we ever thought, but also far too capable for my liking."

"Mine as well. The enemy commander was already reacting to our assault even before we fully breached the outer walls," Thorin grumbled, then shuddered. "And then there were those bodies. That, that mental warfare, I suppose you could say, was well-timed, and I am more grateful than ever to have named you one of my Finger Commanders, Foldorin. Your men joining in that charge would have made the battle costlier and harder to pull back from."

"It wasn't easy. But the troops from Red Rock reacted first and started to clog the various passages. That gave my officers and me time to get our own under control. I didn't even try to convince the your wife's folk," Foldorin admitted. "My position with them wasn't the best, and they were just too furious to listen to me at all at that point."

While by written agreement Foldorin, indeed all of Thorin's officers, were made senior over any Zigûr-khaz officer, it would still chaff spectacularly any local officer they interacted with. Save in the case of Thorin, as he had political and social clout too as king. It also had to be said that Foldorin's gruff, brusque demeanor would have rubbed the Zigûr-khaz wrong.

"We are getting off track," Saruman interjected. "While I too am thankful this night's battle wasn't any worse than it already was, it was bad enough. Where have you taken the wounded? I would help your healers see to them, and I know you, Harry, have some measure of healing ability."

Saruman smiled faintly over at the younger man, bowing his head, his voice soothing, respectful and welcoming. "It is also good to see you in person once more. It has been quite some time, even as such as we measure things, and I have heard much of you from Gandalf, and even the Lady Galadriel. I am pleased that she was able to help you."

"I'm pleased by that too, and I am pleased to see you as well, Saruman. Knowing that Thorin had magical help already on hand is a balm to me, considering the size of the enemy hosts and who is truly behind this war," Harry replied, bowing his own head back.

He looked at Saruman for a moment, seeing something of Gandalf in him now, but also remembering his first impressions of the more austere, haughty wizard back in Rivendell more than a decade ago. He seemed more down to earth now, and almost as weary as Harry, but there was still something about the ancient-seeming wizard that reminded him a bit too much of Dumbledore.

Maybe it's just that he sees far more than you want, and doesn't share as much as Gandalf, nor seems as likable as a person, Harry thought, shaking his head internally. *Don't let your first impression of him color your perception, and remember that he went to save Gandalf with the rest of the Council. We don't need to be friends to be allies,* he thought, subconsciously influenced by Saruman's voice, having no real defense against it.

"As for seeing to the wounded, that's a good idea. I've got information about the Easterling's command structure and logistics you might not know about, but your wounded and our planning for this battle should take precedence," Harry agreed, swaying slightly on his feet. His body was really starting to feel it now. He'd kept himself going, getting by with short naps on his run south, but even his new pseudo-Maia endurance had limits, and a massive battle on top of his journey was pushing it.

"Very well. Foldorin, have one of your men show our two Istari allies to the wounded. I think we should all split off and see to our own troopers, and get some food. Until I know what kind of defense you've set up here, though, you remain in overall command. I think I've seen

what you've done here, but frankly, I'd like a full night's rest before taking charge. Although I doubt our enemy is going to let me get that."

"Probably not," was the reply to this, and it came from several throats, causing the King Under the Mountain to sigh theatrically, and wan chuckles went around the group.

He then sobered, shaking his head. "Also, find someone among the warriors of Red Rock who can command them. They... they were mauled this night, but we must know how bad."

With that, the impromptu meeting broke up, and Saruman and Harry were led through a series of open-roofed 'chambers' if such a term was accurate, through a few tunnels and under raised redoubts. The pair remained silent as they walked, bar the odd grunt as their heads struck the roof of a tunnel, which happened often enough to make Harry realize belatedly that it was probably planned that way. *Some kind of defense in depth? Strange.*

Soon they came out of a passageway into a wide, open area at the base of what remained of the cliff above, which rose, with what looked like a series of carefully hidden climbing ropes leading upward. It was obvious it had not always been so, as there were large indents in the ground and ruts to show where stones had been dragged off. Lanterns hung from sconces across the area, providing the best lighting that Harry had yet seen that night, making the area as bright as some portions of the battle had been earlier.

Several hundred wounded had been placed here already, with more, now walking wounded, coming in from a few other passages leading into this area. Eighteen healers were moving around the area, doing what they could, reminding Harry strongly of old Oin, who had acted as the healer for Thorin's company. Yet it was obvious that they were somewhat overwhelmed, and out of their depth. Healing wasn't an art that dwarves excelled in, alas.

Staring around, Saruman took in the scene quickly, then abandoned his long staff on the ground beneath, causing a loud bang. This garnered the attention of most of the healers, as well as many of the wounded, and Saruman spoke crisply.

"Let us get a bit organized here, my good dwarves. Healers, attend. Raise your hand if you are dealing with someone who has a wound that is a life-threatening injury: a blow to the bowels, a head or other kind of wound that refuses to stop bleeding, unfocused eyes or anyone missing limbs beyond the range of fingers. If you got here under your own power, I request that you back away for now. You will be seen to, but your wounds do not require immediate attention."

He gestured to Harry, then used his staff to point at the far end of the open area. "My fellow wizard and I will start from disparate ends of this area and work our way across towards one another, seeing to the worst wounded first. Further, I demand that several of you," he used

his staff once more to point at a group of helpers who had carried in a few of the wounded, “set a fire pit somewhere, and start to boil water. We will also need twine and needles, all of which should also be boiled.”

“We’ve already begun doing that. We’ll be bringing it in as the needles and so forth are ready,” one of the healers said, pointing to a specific passageway. “We didn’t want an open fire near the wounded.”

“Excellent thinking, although I would prefer to be closer at hand. Still, it is good to know that you have some organization at least. Harry, will you require anything?” Saruman turned over the moment of public speaking to Harry, already moving to one of the wounded who we could see had taken a gut wound.

A Blacklock, as shown by his heavily tanned skin and the forearm brace on one arm, his gambeson had been pierced in the side by an Easterling mace tip. It was only the quality of that gambeson that had kept the young dwarf from bleeding out quickly. As it was, the gambeson had acted like a multilayered bandage around the small, but perhaps deep, wound.

“I’ll need needles and twine as well. While I can heal cuts and broken bones to a certain extent, there’s a limit to what I can do with internal injuries,” Harry admitted. “I’d also like to know what kind of poultices and pain-relieving herbs you’ve been able to gather.

“There is a limit to what I can do with internal injuries too. Do not let it get to you. Let us begin.” Saruman answered brusquely, the moment a dwarf moved to Harry’s side, kneeling down next to the wounded dwarf he had targeted.

Saruman normally disdained using his healing knowledge for others, not having devoted any time to becoming better in this field than he had when he first arrived in Middle-earth, but that still put him well above most people in this day and age. He also had spells which could sear any infection or disease from a wound, and others that could help to sooth pain with a touch.

He looked up at the face of the young dwarf he was about to operate on, pressing gently in various places around the ragged edge of the wound, causing him to hiss, even as Saruman’s touch deadened the area underneath. “I will not lie; this will be incredibly painful. You will need something to bite into, as I don’t have any wish for you to bite through your own tongue as I work.”

“I understand,” the dwarf growled, holding in one hand a chunk of wood, which looked as if it had been shattered just above his fist. It looked like the haft of an axe, which it probably had been at one point. “Whatever you are going to do, do it.” With that, the dwarf put the piece of wood into his mouth, and grunted as Saruman began to peel away the layers of his gambeson

A part of Saruman, the craftsman in him, wanted to examine the cloak cloth closely. The multilayered nature of it, the way certain segments were padded, and others were not, as well as how thin, thick fibers of some kind and even metal wires had been woven into it, were fascinating. However, Saruman knew now was not the time, and he finished peeling the cloth away from the wound, examining it closely, before pressing down on a few other segments of the man's stomach, wanting to make certain how deep the wound was.

Luckily, judging by the smell and the angle of the wound, it hadn't punctured his stomach. If it had, there wouldn't have been anything even Saruman would've been able to do. As it was, the dwarf would be saved.

Nearby, Harry had quickly moved to the opposite side of the area, kneeling down next to one warrior who already had something in his mouth to stop him from screaming. His thigh and shoulder had both been pierced through, one with the small hole of an Easterling mace, while the other was wider, as if made by a spear, and had nearly torn off his whole shoulder.

His eyes were wild and despairing, even though several hasty wrappings set around the wounds had created tourniquets, making certain he wouldn't bleed out. Harry tried to soothe him, even as he examined the injury, grimacing. "Well, the good news for you is that I can save your leg easily, and even your shoulder. The bad news, you're probably going to need to spend weeks relearning how to move your arm afterward. I'm far better at dealing with broken bones and even closing gross wounds than I am with nerves."

"What are nerves?" The dwarf moaned around his piece of wood, and Harry chuckled wanly.

It took the two wizards and their helpers well past dawn to see to the wounded, by which time Harry was very much past the point of his own exhaustion. Even Saruman was a bit tired, although he hadn't pushed himself nearly as hard as Harry had over the past few weeks. When the last of the walking wounded had been seen to, his broken wrist wrapped, the two of them were pointed in the direction of where they could find some food and an area where they could lie out to rest, along with profuse thanks for the help.

With the two wizards helping, only four of the wounded had died. After the fighting that night and how many wounded there had been to see to, that was phenomenal work.

Harry fell on the simple stew and hard bread he was given with all the hunger of a wolf, while Saruman simply picked at his. He still finished his meal faster than Harry, and pulled out a pipe, which he began to smoke, staring at the younger wizard. "You have pushed yourself hard these past few weeks, haven't you? And in more ways than physically, I think. There is a... a weight on your shoulders, to your gaze, Harry, which I do not think is normal. A regret, perhaps?"

Harry paused as he finished off his second helping of the stew, staring across at the other wizard from where he lay out against one of the large rocks that seemed to dominate this area. "Given how easily Gandalf and Galadriel could both read me, I suppose I shouldn't be surprised that another one of the wise can do the same. I... I suppose that yes, I, before I started my trek south, I had to do something, something Dark, that I very much did not want to do at the time and regretted doing instantly thereafter. It made sense at the time, and we learned a great deal, but..."

Saruman fell silent for a moment, simply puffing on his pipe for several seconds, before holding out a small pack towards Harry. "Pipeweed? I confess, I quickly became addicted to the stuff when Gandalf introduced it to me. It is one thing that he, I and Radagast all have in common."

"Ah, sad to say, that isn't my particular vice. I'd prefer a good drink, but I know I'm not going to get one here," Harry replied, setting aside the bowl he'd been using.

"Hmm... well, I can't help with that. I've tried my hand at growing a wine grove once, but it went horribly. And I certainly don't travel with such." Saruman mused, puffing on his pipe still, staring thoughtfully at Harry, wanting to become this young man's confidant while they interacted with one another on this campaign.

It would be a slow process he knew, but it was best to begin it now, the better to let Harry convince himself to share his secrets with Saruman. *Although I believe the secrets I will learn from this young wizard will far outweigh what I have learned from the folk of Rohan or even Treebeard in his demesne. Indeed, the runes I learned from looking at that wardstone are worth far more than anything I've ever convinced Radagast or even Gandalf to share over the centuries.*

"Would this dark deed that you are hinting at have occurred around three weeks ago and have involved your magic? I felt a pulse of wrongness from the north at around that time, and I had wondered if perhaps you have something to do with it," Saruman guessed.

Sighing deeply, Harry nodded. Glancing around for a moment as if hoping for another topic of conversation to come to them, Harry found none and reluctantly told Saruman about what he had done to the prisoner that the stone foot's had taken in the battle around spiders' pain. He didn't pull any punches, telling Saruman about how foul it felt, how wrong, and yet at the same time, how much information he had gotten from the man.

As he heard about how vile the spell felt and what it did to the Easterling, Saruman hissed, pulling his pipe out of his mouth for a moment and staring down thoughtfully to hide how his eyes had lit up with interest at the idea of a spell designed to dominate the will of

others. He did so for several minutes, until he could control his expression. Only then did he look up and start to speak.

"I... would say that, since you only had hints that Arda itself would reject such spells, and militarily, it made sense for you to use such a spell, I can understand why you did it. Especially considering that it proved your concerns about what was going down here in Blacklock lands were justified. Tonight's battle would've been far worse without your intervention and perhaps could have even been a complete loss for Thorin and his army. From that angle, your actions were necessary."

His face shifting into a glare that he very much did not feel, Saruman pointed towards Harry with the end of his pipe, continuing to hide his interest in such a spell- the desire to see if he could replicate it - with the ease of centuries of practice at disassembly. "Yet military justification does not mean you were morally correct to do so! You, Harry, used a spell that Sauron or even his master would have approved of, and paid the price. You got away with it once, because you were indeed **ignorant**. Do not do so again. Arda does not forget, even if it will forgive, and nor do the Valar in the West."

"I, I know that already. The moment I stepped out of that tent, Arien contacted me, but I already knew I would never use that spell again even before she spoke. I can't even call that moment a learning experience. It was simply a step down the wrong path, and it is not one I will take again," Harry said, his voice taking on the odd timber of someone making a sacred vow, which he had actually offered to do when the Lady of the Sun had contacted him mind-to-mind.

"Good." Saruman then smiled faintly, shaking his head. "As for the man in question, I think giving him a chance to fight for his freedom was as good a way of making up for what you had done as you could possibly come up with. It doesn't make things even by any means, but I approve of that, and I am certain that in his Halls, Mandos does as well. You are a good man, Harry; anyone can see that. Repent by your actions and deeds going forward for this little misstep, and the regret on your shoulders will ease."

"I hope to continue to do so going forward... though I am not looking forward to what Tauriel will say to me when we meet again. She had warned me against using that spell, and I still went ahead and used it for, as you said, expediency and military need. Neither of which will hold much weight to her."

"Nor should they," Saruman chuckled dryly. "Although I am afraid I cannot help you there. While there was a time when I first came to Middle-earth when womenfolk intrigued me, I am afraid such relationships lost my interest within a few months of my arrival."

"Hah. Sounds like you went through puberty and straight through to old age in record time then," Harry joked.

That caused Saruman to chuckle as well, if a bit forced. Saruman really didn't like to think of his first few years in Middle-earth, the time when he'd been getting his feet under him, getting used to how different Middle-Earth felt, how limiting in terms of his magic and interacting with humans and other mortals rather than the Vanyar, Teleri and Noldor elves he had been used to in Valinor.

There honestly hadn't been a time when women were interesting to him, though. That had just been a flat-out lie. While many Maiar and all the Valar had taken lovers, there were many more of the lesser Maiar who hadn't.

And really, there is only one woman who I would ever deem worthy of my affections in all Middle-earth, and she is already married, Saruman thought, thinking of the Lady Galadriel, whose powers, beauty and vision, even as an elf, allowed her to stand equal to any Maiar in Valinor.

"So even the souls of worshipers of the Greater Darkness go to the Halls of Awaiting?" Harry asked, getting Saruman's attention.

That was the Elvish name for Mandos' Halls rendered into Common. It was where the souls of those elven dead rested, still connected to Arda, but free of the burden of life until they decided to be reborn in the light of the West. Although Harry only knew of a few elves who had ever made that choice, and had learned of only one who had ever done so and returned to Middle-earth: Glorfindel, mightiest elvish warrior alive, and guard of the Havens under Cirdan the Shipwright.

"Oh yes. All human souls do, passing through those halls to elsewhere beyond, released from Arda and the bounds of the world. That was Eru Ilúvatar's gift to Men," Saruman agreed, before cocking his head to one side for a second, stating, "You have a specific question you wish to ask, do you not?"

"The Easterlings are not like orcs, goblins and trolls. They have souls; they pass on to the afterlife; they have families, clans, thoughts... even feelings, despite how hard the Easterlings have gone to suppress such. I'm just, I'm just wondering if that means that as a society, could they be turned back from their vileness?"

Saruman stared at him, and for the second time in this conversation, felt a little uncomfortable, although this time, it came not from his memory of his own weakness when he first arrived, but rather of grief. Grief that was an altogether real emotion within Saruman. Despite the ambitions he had begun to harbor after their disappearance, Saruman still remembered both of the Blue Wizards fondly, and regretted their loss.

“That is a complex question. Tell me, did Saruman ever tell you of the blue wizards, Alatar and Pallando?” Saruman asked almost hesitantly. When Harry shook his head, as if Gandalf ever had, he’d forgotten it, Saruman sighed.

“I suppose that makes sense. Alatar and Pallando were sent to Middle Earth with the three of us, Gandalf, myself, and Radagast. But they were sent into the east, into the east and into the south. We soon lost all contact with them as the centuries passed, and soon after I occupied Orthanc after the Long Winter, we knew they had died. Not passed on as in their physical forms destroyed and their souls returning to the west, to Valinor. No, they had been permanently slain.”

He shook his head again, looking far older for a moment than even Gandalf had ever done in Harry’s presence. “The loss hurt us all, each in our own way. You can tell from this current war that if they made any headway among the Easterlings, it was small, and perhaps rapidly overturned. If you’re asking about the men of the South, the Haradrim, I am afraid there my knowledge fades. Indeed, none of the Wise know much about them. Yet perhaps Pallando and Alatar had better luck there, for they did not wholly join Sauron’s side of the conflict in the War of the Last Alliance. Although they have had numerous wars since with the men of Gondor, so who knows?”

“I realize that is not a complete answer. But it is the only one I can give. Yes, perhaps the Easterlings, perhaps the men of the South could be turned away from her evil and cruelty. But it will not be easy, and will probably bring whoever attempts it to the attention of Sauron.”

Harry nodded, sticking his legs out further from where he had been sitting as his eyes started to close of their own volition. “Perhaps in the decades to come, I might explore those lands then. To find out more, and to find out if perhaps they can be turned aside.”

“Even discovering such would be a most interesting project. If you do, Harry, stop by Orthanc, would you? Sharing the knowledge you gleaned from such would be fascinating,” Saruman said, falling silent as Harry nodded once, then leaned back, his eyes already closed.

Saruman stayed there, still puffing away on his pipe as he stared at the young wizard, his eyes flashing with a not altogether friendly light for a moment. *Well, this seems to be going quite well. I wonder if I will be able to push him on his runic knowledge by the time this is all done. He’s already given me much to think about...*

OOOOOOO

As Saruman and Harry helped see to the wounded, and the lore keepers marked down the dead among both Sigin-tarâg and Zigûr-khaz forces, Thorin brought together his finger

commanders, moving around the defensive fortifications as he got a feel for the very odd defense that Foldorin had thrown up.

It was more warren than real defense, although there were numerous points along the outer edges where dozens of boulders had been pushed together, then hastily hacked to allow them to be used as a makeshift wall. Apparently, the cliff, half of which had eventually collapsed, had been mostly made of stone. And when half of it came apart due to some quake or other in the recent past, it had left a boulder field around two leagues across, with the remaining cliff serving as a backdrop.

It was on that cliff face where the ballista had been set up, hidden before this night and defended by a small wall and ditch on top of the hill. Foldorin had set two hundred of his warriors up there and a force of four hundred Zigûr-khaz archers under the Red Rock officer, Agni's, command.

That, Thorin realized, might have contributed to the disorder among the rest of the force from Red Rock. Removing the one officer who Foldorin had been used to working with meant he had been working with newcomers who didn't know him as well, and might have been more prone to go their own way. Sadly, Thorin estimated that at this point, Agni's troops probably outnumbered the rest of the Zigûr-khaz left alive within the odd, yet very serious defenses at the bottom of the hill.

Within the boulder field, Foldorin had decided to create not a defense so much as a gigantic trap. Thanks to dwarven ingenuity, the science of levers and pulleys, and dwarven strength, they had shifted large boulders around the area. Some were placed on top of others to create small forts, while others were shifted to create a semi-solid wall in many places around the outer edge of the boulder field.

Within, however, was the real trap. Instead of creating very many open areas, like the one where the wounded had been taken, Foldorin and his engineers had created causeways above. They had created passages, side passages, and dead ends. They had dug into the earth underneath the boulder field, creating dozens of short tunnels, leading from different areas within. In a few places there were short walls made to help the defender. In others, what looked like dead ends could instead be shifted from one side to allow dwarves out to attack.

In this way, he created a makeshift fortress not of strong walls and mighty outer works, but of depth, surprise, and misdirection. It didn't help matters that every tunnel, and many of the covered passages through the boulders, were made at head height on a dwarf. Any human would need to bend almost entirely over, as Harry and Saruman had discovered. There was no place inside the boulder field where a human could even stand shoulder to shoulder with another.

Thorin understood the implications quickly and had to shake his head. "This is, this is magnificent. A trap in plain sight. Once the Easterlings force their way past the outer defenses, every single advantage would shift to us."

"Exactly," Foldorin said, his tone both bleak and prideful, pleased his king understood what he had done here. "I'd hoped to bring the enemy into direct battle, drag them into a fight in here and grind them into nothing. I'd have succeeded too, if not for someone higher up, I'm assuming, coming in and taking control from the first general on hand."

The older dwarf gestures out towards where the campfires and torches of the enemy could be seen. "Instead, they settled down for a siege. I'd actually tried a few forays over the past day and a half since the infantry force out there had arrived, but they turned me back and didn't pursue. I admit I didn't think of that shield trick of yours, my King. We simply brought along large bits of tree trunk, and that meant our frontage was never big enough to really cause a breach."

"It's understandable. Even with the number of Zigûr-khaz you brought under your command, you didn't have enough men to fight such a force out in the open. Are we looking at two or three of their raiding hosts out there?" Thorin asked. "In infantry, I mean."

"Three of varying size. One force was far larger than the other two. The first was barely up to our own numbers, but the second force, the much larger one, arrived barely an hour after the first army."

"We might've been able to shatter or scatter that first group, but we'd have still been engaged with them out in the open when the second host arrived," Mik added. "The Zigûr-khaz were still urging us to do that, but after last night, I'm both furious we didn't and glad at the same time. We, we lost so many of them..." he trailed off, tugging at his beard angrily.

"No use worrying about spoiled meat. The mental trick the Easterlings used, we'll need to be ready for that in the future. If they stake our dead up where we can see them, we need to keep control of our men. We can't let them charge so wildly again."

The living among the Zigûr-khaz were still being counted, but none of the Sigin-tarâg officers doubted for a moment that there would be more than six hundred of them alive, if that.

"Aye. With the losses they've sustained in this war and the last, House Blacklock is practically finished as a military power, at least in terms of being able to field armies that can hope to contend with forces the size of which the Easterlings are throwing at us," Foldorin said, shaking his head. "Green Spike's the only one that hasn't fielded its army and been crushed. And we all know that it will take hundreds of years to make up those losses."

"I was honestly prepared for that in a way, but I wasn't prepared for the sheer scale of the Easterling numbers. I know that humans breed faster than us, and I knew the East was vast, but to be able to field such massive armies." Mik shook his head. Surely not even the fabled Gondor could match such numbers."

"That's been an ongoing issue that we have been trying to solve from the first," Thorin agreed. He stared out into the darkness towards the distant lights of the Easterling campfires. "Now, let us speak of our enemy. He, the Lord Militant, as Saruman was able to discover their overlords are called, is a dangerously adaptable, dangerously forward-thinking fellow."

"We've been able to survive our enemy with our ability, our speed on the march, and our equipment, but he knows his strengths and how to use them, and he knows our strengths and how to offset them, I think. A siege right now plays into his hands far more than ours unless his own supply situation is not good, which I doubt we can expect," Foldorin grumbled, unhappy at how his men's efforts might go to waste.

"Agreed on both counts. As to their numbers, that scout we ran into from Parn's Tower said that they had around thirty thousand cavalry. I'd estimate from the fighting that's gone on up till this point, they've lost... Before last night, around ten to eleven thousand trying to bring my host to heel."

"We were able to get a hard count on their infantry. The first to arrive was barely five thousand, but barely an hour after it arrived and started to form up, a group of cavalry arrived, followed by a force of around fourteen thousand, if my count is accurate. A further two thousand joined them soon after that, and then cavalry units started to trickle in," Foldorin explained.

"We fought mostly infantry last night, and I would say we killed at least another four to seven thousand. Then there was the heavy cavalry which the scorpions smashed. I'd say there were at least three thousand in that number, and they were smashed."

The groans from the other officers told the older dwarf that they knew it too, and scowled, shaking his head. "So they still have more cavalry than infantry, but combined... around thirty-three thousand?"

"Around there, aye." Thorin scowled. "We will observe the enemy throughout all day tomorrow. Foldorin, Mik, your forces are more rested than mine in the main. If they attack, you two will need to bear the brunt of it, although I think you're right, Foldorin, they won't."

"A few of my men went out just as we were coming in to drag in a few horses. Apparently, not because supplies are so low, but because they wanted to see how they would taste," Duroc said, rolling his eyes. "To my mind, I think they're quite stringy, but decent. And if

you are thinking we could wait out the enemy, don't. We've seen several times that they've got a pretty decent idea of supply, while on the move, and I doubt they'd be afraid to eat the horses of the dead just as we are."

"The food is comforting, the reminder not so much," Thorin said, shaking his head. "For now, let's all get some sleep."

The rest of the night and all the next day passed in rest and recuperation and, as evening fell, Harry and Saruman joined the discussion. Harry explained what he had seen and tried to do, while reports of the dead able to be seen and counted from the odd fortress were listened to. It was decided that the enemy still numbers at least twenty-eight thousand, with a slight majority in mixed cavalry. What to do with that information was a question, as it very much seemed as if the enemy was more than willing to just starve them out.

"If we could drag them into attacking us, we could probably bleed them white," Foldorin said, scowling angrily, still hung up on the failure of his tactic.

"While I fully agree, there's no way they are going to fall for it. Not the one in charge, and maybe not his top officers. If I could get in close again, assassinate him, maybe his top lieutenants, we could have a better chance of that kind of thing. As it is, no. They're going to try to starve us out," Harry agreed glumly.

"And they have all of that horsemeat we provided them last night and even the battles previously if they want to send out forces for it," Thorin grunted. "Frankly, knowing this enemy commander, that's probably already been happening, along with those groups dealing with the funerary rites you saw, Harry."

"How much of those defenses could you two wizards deal with, do you think?" Tholi asked bluntly.

"If you are talking about a contiguous front, as in smashing large areas of the wall down and into the ditch, rather than scattered smaller apertures... I could perhaps do something, ask Aule to allow me to further change the territory here via magic rather than via sweat as you and the Easterlings have. But the long and short of it is, I don't know. And experimenting with such would simply warn the enemy that we have that ability," Saruman frowned thoughtfully as he stared out toward the distant siege lines.

The command group was situated in one of the raised stone platforms, which almost acted like a tower, placed on top of several other large boulders. It was situated somewhat to the right and around in a quarter circle from where the dwarves and their allies entered the strange fortification the night before, but it allowed them all to see significant swaths of the enemy siege works, if with no detail unless using a spyglass.

“Same. I might be able to flatten large segments of that berm with overpowered Bombarda spells, but the enemy saw what we could do with that kind of thing last night. If they think that they're starving us out well enough, they'll just pull back from the destroyed areas, reform within the siege lines and wait for us to come to them.”

“Perhaps, but it might be our best shot. Because starving us out **will** work eventually. We might have good supply now, and will for nearly six days, more if we start rationing now. But unless you can get in and poison their food supply, Harry, the long game is going to be on their side here,” Foldorin growled, still furious at how much work he'd done that was going to go to waste now.

“I might be able to, but I'd like for them to get a bit complacent first. My recommendation right now is to have a few days of rest. I know that you dwarves don't need all that much rest, and you could probably fight again tonight if you wanted. However, your wounded need some help still, and your equipment needs to be seen to,” Harry reminded Thorin, gesturing over to where Dori stood.

The powerful dwarf's shield was missing a significant chunk, and one of his helmet's cheek flaps had been torn away in the fighting. Even his nose guard was missing, although how he had lost his nose guard, and not the nose underneath, was anyone's guess.

“True. It will also give me time and opportunity to examine the Easterlings and our own lines in greater detail,” Thorin mused. He glanced at Foldorin, then down at the ground thoughtfully, thinking of a tactic the Stonefoots had used around Spider's Bane. “And perhaps to do a bit more, besides.”

Two days later, they came back together by which time, Thorin had a plan. The Easterlings had probed their lines several times, but only lightly. They had also sent out light cavalry to drag the dead horses back into their lines, and seemed to be settling down for a long siege.

The back of the escarpment, in particular, was assayed several times by light infantry and cavalry, but they were repelled every time by the arrows of the remaining Zigûr-khaz. Thorin had ordered two hundred of Matias's archers up there along with fifty of his own troops to bolster the defense behind scorpions, but that was all.

As for the scorpions, they hadn't yet been used again in volley fire, only a few of them firing at any time. They had, however, forced the enemy to pull back their camps further into their siege lines, and one of the spotters had at least seen one officer and a small group of the enemy be wiped out by one scorpion bolt. Better, the actual range of the scorpions at full draw had been kept secret since the enemy had pulled back. They were still within range of the scorpions, but Thorin had ordered the scorpion teams to wait.

“Tell me, can the two of you figure out a spell that can deal with their horses?” Thorin asked.

“Deal with?” Saruman asked, frowning pensively. “Kill or scare off? I could scare off a goodly number of them with a few fire incantations and could even turn a few of them to our side with a few whispered words if I could get close enough. But nothing that would be very helpful on this scale.”

“I can create sounds, sounds of wolves or even dragons,” Harry said. “I even have a spell that can amplify the sound. Doing so over an entire battlefield will take a bit of work, but overpowering the spell like that is straightforward enough. Although, to really get the most out of it, we might want to make it so the sounds come from various different directions. Saruman?”

“That sounds doable, yes,” Saruman said, nodding his head agreeably. Showing Harry how to send sounds elsewhere was nothing too impressive, so he was more than willing to put up with it to learn still a few more spells from Harry, as he had over the past few days. Nothing important, just healing spells, but still, it was a start.

“Good. I think, I think with that, we might have a plan...” Thorin mused, staring up to where the scorpions lay, then pulling up his spyglass to stare at the army before them, noting with a smile one of the main reasons behind his plan. The camp that Harry had attacked, the one where the Lord Militant had resided, had shifted position that morning in a very obvious sign that they had absolutely no plans of storming this area.

Instead, the Lord Militant had shifted his entire command over towards the back of the escarpment, immediately facing the weakest point of the defenses. And within scorpion range he thought, practically gleeful for a moment. “Tell me, Foldorin, how is the ground around here?”

End Chapter

It seems to me that in this fic, it’s almost the opposite of my two SW fics. There the primary enemy is the one hidden, the one acting as if he’s a good guy, while another enemy acts as the big bad. Here, it’s the exact opposite.

Anyway, this isn’t the full chapter I wanted to do. But I had trouble getting that last battle right, and the scene at the end to boot. However, that just means the next chapter won’t end in a nasty cliffhanger, so that’s nice, I guess?

Oh, and concerning the names of the Blue Wizards, they who disappeared into the East. First, yes, I intend to have Harry and Tauriel explore the south and East more after a very short recovery arc. I have plans there. The Easterlings might be impenetrable, but the men of Harad

are not. As for the names I used here, Pallando and Alatar, they are followers of Oromë in the legendarium, chosen as he knows the most about the far reaches of the East. I realize they were given different names by JRR Tolkien later, the names of Morinehtar and Rómestámo. However, I consider these the equivalent of Gandalf and Saruman. That is, the names they were given or assumed in Middle-earth, which would not be known to the other Istari given the lack of communication between them. I mean, can you see a Maia of Valinor being called "Darkness-slayer" and "East-helper" while living there? No, those names will come out later, as will the symbology of the red falcon among the Haradrim...

This work will return in September to the HP poll, but I will also be transferring **Fate** and all my other fanfic.net stories over to A03 in August. I mention that here specifically because I will also be going through the chapters of this work and correcting things. A reader, Shadow Emeralds, went through it for me and sent me some suggestions, and I figure why not kill two birds with one stone? ... Hence why I've put it off to this point...