Part I

Preceding Doom

The Orc Wars

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# Chapter 1 - Wind on Eisenhowl

Ah, when I remember the good old times, when the waves crashed against solid rocks, when the great peaks of the mountains lashed through the sky, when the beautiful forests stretched among the land, ah, and those halls, halls of stone, copper, silver, gold, mithral and platinum, ah, these halls, they stretched among the mountains, aye, bringing Arabor to life.

And in the midst of all these mines was a great hall. No, not just a great hall, aye, it was the greatest hall of the realm, with columns of raw gold 60 feet wide, doors made of pure electrum, statues of diamond, and a great, majestic throne.

This throne was no ordinary one: No, it was made of ruby, gold, and emerald. Over it was a great banner, a banner made of red silk and gold. Aye, it certainly was a great banner, the banner of Lorn Fireforge, greatest king of Eisenhowl, and of the dwarven empire.

Fireforge once was the clan of the clans, the kingdom of the dwarves. Great numbers of clans were united under the flag of Fireforge, some of them being so loyal that they would give their whole treasure to the banner if need would arise.

Lorn was a good king. He did his best to let the dwarven clans flourish. The most loyal clans to the banner were those of Darin Battlehammer and Björn Greataxe, who were great friends of Lorn.

And there, by the great mountains of Arabor, was my favorite place: a little stone terrace showing down the cliff straight to the great ocean. I loved to peer down onto the sea and look at the tiny ships that travelled over the water.

-’Aye, Dain! Are you up there?’, said a familiar voice.

-’I may be, or I may not be’, I called down.

-’Ar, you’re not funny at all’, he said. ’I will come up. ’

A short time later, a head appeared over the ledge. The great body of the Dwarf heaved itself up.

-’Lookin at the seagulls, eh?’, said Darin Battlehammer as a swarm of them swept over our heads.

-’Sometimes’, I said to my uncle.

-’So, uh. . . My brother sent me to bring you into his demeure. But. . . I find it a lot better to look at ships than going into that stinking throne room. You know, it smells like somebody had polished the candles with an orc’s loincloth! Aye, I hate that place. Love mountain-air, though. ’

The burly mountain Dwarf enjoyed the fresh air coming from the ocean. For some time, we just let the cool morning breeze purify our lungs.

-’Hey, you two up there! Will you pass the whole morning sitting here? There’s a heap of things to do that don’t include looking at the horizon and catching a good pneumonia!’, called up Björn. Seconds later, the full-bearded hill Dwarf poked his head over the ledge.

-’So, who do we have here? A little Dain Fireforge, aged only a hundred and five years, and a great mountain Dwarf of full three-hundred-and-ninety-eight years, showing a very bad example. Sitting on a ledge, catching cold, and doing nothing! You mountain dwarves might be strong, but complete dumbnuts! Nothing wise in them, I tell you. I have already assigned the work-passes for the woodcutters, mined three rubies, made five audiences, lighted the great Earthheart forge and…’

-’Yeah, yeah, this sure was great. Shut up, for Silvanus’ sake!’, cried Darin. ’Sit a moment and enjoy the dwarven wiseness. ’

Björn reluctantly sat down. After he had sat some time, he began to toy with Norma, his favorite gemstone. He had carved so many letters on it that it was hard to read them. He said that these were elven runes who could make magic. He had learned how to light candles, make sounds and wind with it. He lit a little, violet fire in the middle of the ledge.

-’Darn wind’, he called out, ’disappear!’

Immediately, the strong wind became a light, warm breeze. I enjoyed this little moment of silence.

-’Look, there’s fog coming up. That’s wierd, the sky was completely clear this morning! And the weather service didn’t anticipate it.’

-’Ah, it’s probably some other inexplicable, or otherwise extremely complicated, process of nature’, said Darin. ‘And it’s not the first time the weather service is wrong.’

-’Yes, but…’

He was interrupted by a great fanfare. Trumpets sounded, drums beat. A great ship was coming into port. It was dark red and had a green flag flapping over the blue sails.

-’The mail is coming!’, cried out Darin.

30 seamiles behind the mailship, I could distinguish the white sails of the ferries. They were only fifteen. . . one of them was missing.

-’Let’s see what’s going on!’, cried Björn.

-’I hope the ship didn’t forget my donkey’, said Darin.

We climbed down the ladder and followed down the endless stairs.

-’Why on earth did you want a donkey?’, I asked Darin.

We went into the dinner hall and continued down the straight stairs.

-’Why I want a donkey? To carry my mithral. It’s darn heavy. ’

We walked into the welcome-hall and marched to the docks at the end of it. High up, I could see the ledge where we had sat not long ago.

-’But my donkey is nothing in comparison of what your father asked as portage animal. ’

Darin said this as we pushed through the crowd to arrive at the terrace where Lorn Fireforge already stood.

-’Why, what did Lorn, my father, command at the mailship?’, I asked.

The ship entered the dock of Arabor. It was well beneath its usual waterline, and it was pretty unstable. Strange sounds and odors originated from it. As the ship was docked, most sailors fell off the ship.

-’What your father wanted? Ah, you will see soon enough’, replied Darin.

Sacks of mail were unloaded and heaved onto a wagon. Then, the bigger things were brought out with a crane. First, sailors hauled gigantic containers out of the ship. Then, accompanied by a loud ‘Iii-aaah!’, came the mule of Darin.

-’This thing stinks’, said a sailor to his companion. ’I wonder who asked for this stubborn beast. ’

-’Who?’, asked the other. ’Probably one of these stubborn mountain dwarves. Wait, you’ll see… Hello! How asked for a donkey?’

Darin advanced to receive his order.

-’See? There it is, the mule! Stubborn as a mountain Dwarf you must be to convince the captain to bring such a thing on board! Wait, I’ll try to keep the donkey…’

He didn’t come any further. Darin smashed him down into the water, not liking at all being treated as stubborn. Aye, he really was as stubborn as any mountain Dwarf could be.

He took the mule and brought it away. A strange sound came out of the ship. It wasn’t alike anything I had heard before. Even a howling orc wasn’t so strange as this sound.

Darin came back, having given his donkey temporarily to a saddler.

-’You will see the command of your father, and aye, you’ll laugh darn hard!’, he said.

-’What can the king of Eisenhowl order that could be so strange?’, asked Björn Greataxe.

-’Two camels’, said Darin.

And aye, was he right! The sailors pulled out three curious animals. They were revolting hardly against the workers, crying braaas and rööööhs in one direction and the other.

-’My dear Darin Battlehammer, you were wrong, ’said Björn. ’Those aren’t two camels: those are four dromedaries. See? They have only one bump on their back, not two. ’

But still, the hirelings weren’t finished. A great animal remained in the ship.

-’And. . . What’s the last creature in this ship?’, I asked. ’A red dragon? A Kraken? The Tarrasque?’

-’Ah, don’t be stupid, Dain Fireforge!’, he cried. ’No, this isn’t a mystical beast. . . It’s a wondrous creature named elephant. ’

The crane creaked loudly as a great gray animal was hieved out of the ship. The elephant had no resemblance with anything I knew. My father must have wanted the creatures to enlarge his bestiary. At last, the ship was unloaded and brought to the loading port to be charged with stones from the great mines.

Great drums beat as the great king of Eisenhowl advanced with his royal guard. He was here to welcome the ferries. The fifteen vessels entered majestically the port. Trumpets blasted, the drums faded away. The first vessels docked in.

-’Where is the missing ship, the “Holimion”?’, asked Lorn, the king, to the captain of the first ship, the “San Andreas”.

-’I do not know’, answered this one. ’It went near the great Waterfront city. But since Waterfront is just at the limit of the goblinoid tribe Trensandor’s territory, we fear that they have been sunk. You know, the goblins are revolting against the armies of Denise, allying with the orcs. . . They are pretty busy. We have searched in vain for the vessel. We have lost all hope of finding it. ’

-’Morrigan shall smite those goblins, for a Dwarf’s sake! Khàzad-olina-Gbolin!’, cried the king.

-’But, aye, we have a lot of newcomers!’, he continued. ’Humans, dwarves, gnomes, dragonborn. . . and even noble Elves! Five sunlight elves, or high elves, if I still know their look! How does Corellon, the god of yours?’

-’He is in a good mood’, said the first of the elves. ’If he weren’t, we wouldn’t be on this barren island in the search to buy ore, but on good Silur, singing and laughing on the green hills. ’

-’The ever-joyful elves as always, eh, Hermond?’

-’We may want to go to the banquet instead of listening to jokes. ’

Hermond and his elves stepped away.

-’Ah, just how could Corellon create such naughty heads as an elf? But this shall not disturb our feast, by the beard of Dunatis!’

Lorn welcomed the rest of the visitors having come to Arabor. After a while, he turned to me.

-’Go put on some respectable clothes that belong to the clan of Fireforge, for Thor’s sake! Join me at the banquet, aye, at the great banquet, afterwards. ’

I went to see Daran Endermath, the royal tailor. He dressed me rapidly and effectively into fine red garments with golden chains stitched into it, the robe of Fireforge.

I was guided by Balin, my lieutenant, to the banquet hall. Aye, it was great, white tables following one after the other. Pork, swan, cow and griffon were prepared in delicious sauces of onions and ale. I joined my father at the end of the greatest table.

He sat left to me, and at my right was seated Björn. I could see a lot of dwarves, mostly Battlehammer mountain dwarves. Sure, Darin had the biggest clan of Eisenhowl. But not the wisest: the Greataxe hill-dwarves were also numerous, to the delight of Björn. He hated to be seated alone next to ‘mindless mountain brutes’, as he called Darin’s clan.

After the main clans, there were the warriors of Balderk from Balderkhome, as well as some members of the Brawnanvil from Anvilshire on the island, Lancespike of the Greataxe chain’s southern end Glockham, Frostbeard from the frozen hills at Frostward and Warsword by the iron mountain’s Warcastle, and other clans.

There were not only dwarves at the tables: the human logisticians of the import/export mines, the gnomish firelighters, the elven healers as well as the newly arriven people were present.

But least of all were the proud dwarves of Fireforge. There were only twelve warriors seated at the tables, and even less minors.

Even if it was the mightiest clan of the whole realm, the clan of the Fireforge mountain dwarves was falling apart. In the old ages, before the Baldik wars, its army was the mightiest, totaling forty thousand and dominating the world. But as time went on, and the Baldrik wars demanded their tribute, our numbers were ever reduced, also by mingling their blood with other clans, especially Battlehammer. As a mine sacked in during a big Fireforge-only party, we lost twenty thousand relatives. It was a disaster. Now, our clanmates were going to other lands, becoming solitary and dissolving our clan slowly. Fireforge was receding, and Battlehammer getting larger every day. But we weren’t in war with them or whatever, so only the king really cared.

I was eating my duck when Balin entered.

-’Sir, will you please come to the docks?’, he asked, out of breath.

-’I will first finish my meat. Then, we will see. ’

So I answered.

-’Sir’, said Balin. ’You must come immediately. ’

-’For Heimdall’s sake, what could be so important?’

-’Aye, come and see yourself. ’

Sure, Balin was stubborn. I abandoned my duck, wept my fingers on the napkin, and followed Balin out of the hall.

We passed the selling mines. Out of the great halls came the voice of the elf newcomers, arguing with Nuder, the storage master.

-’And we need five pounds of mithral, ’said an elf.

-’Five pounds?!!’, cried the old Nuder. ’Again? Your friends have already been here with the last ferry, and my stock is emptying fastly! Why do you need so much mithral?’

-’To smith into swords for our Lords’, replied the elf.

-’By Goibhniu, god of the smiths, even our greatest forges demand less metal!’

-’Yes, maybe, but we do. ’

-’Why don’t you move your butts into a mine?!’

-’We have no interest in mining ore.’

-’But it is a great feeling to work, sweat, see the precious bits of gold one took hours to unhinge from a slab of granite…’

-’We have other races to work for us.’

-’Like dwarves! You lousy rascals, i’ll add a hundred gold pieces to every ounce of mithral to the price!’

-’Then we will see the gnomes at Trolltown, I heard they have a very good price. Or the goblinoids on Colupan, I heard they just successfully raided a dwarven naval convoy. Or the giants at peak stormin, they found a huge store of mithraI in a warehouse. Or the Zazzarins, my scouts told me they bred a mithral dragon.’

-’Alright, you win. Five pounds to the usual price, plus a bonus of a thousand electrum pieces per pound for service time.’

-’Five hundred.’

-’OK, nine hundred.’

I wanted to listen some more to this funny dialog, but Balin urged me to go on. I followed him through the beautifully decorated halls, fresques about mines and dwarves hewn into the ceiling, into the fresh air of the sea. On the docks was a dozen of guards. They were looking at the water, obscured by a thick fog.

-’So. . . What?’, I asked Balin.

-’Hush’, said he. ’The wind is coming back. ’

My lieutenant was right, as only a hill Dwarf could be. A fresh breeze came up. Some miles away, I could see a dark shadow enveloped by the fog. Strange howls, very thin but very perceptible, broke through the air.

-’Sound the horns’, said a sergeant of the guard.

-’Aye, Sir’, answered the caporal standing next to him.

-’Sound the horns!’, cried a guard.

Immediately, trumpets blasted from the outposts, and aye, their howling echoed on the entire sea. Shouts could be heard from the guardrooms, and warships were being rowed out of their hangars.

-’Wait. What the hell is going on?’, I asked Balin.

-’See, there. On the water, at twelve o’clock.

The dark form of the ship was still in sight.

-’Well. . . There’s a ship. But why is the general alarm sounded? This is just a vessel, navigating close to the shore, ’I said.

-’No ship of ours, though. It hasn’t responded to our warning signal and isn’t flying any known flags, ’ responded Balin. ’It’s not in our records. ’

Heavily armed dwarves went into the warships. They were mostly galleys, but included two stormvessels, too. These ships of dwarven construction are especially tough, aye, so tough that a Troll would bite its teeth out on the hull. Usually, they were only put into sea in a great emergency or a grave threat. What was so dangerous about the ship?

Just at this moment, a strong wind blew up and dispersed the fog for miles. And there, not so far away, was a great vessel. It was pitch black, except for its blood red sails. It had three decks and was heavily armed. Aye, it was easy 300 feet long!

The wind went down, and the fog returned.

-’Hoist the mainsail! Light the anchors!’, cried a sailor.

Five galleys had left dock when I ran to the nearest stormvessel. I was heaved on board just after Balin.

-’Hoist the backsail! Place the oars!’, cried the captain.

-’Wait for me!’, cried a familiar voice.

Björn appeared out of the fog and ran through the dock to our ship. He jumped just far enough to land on the deck.

-’Happy to see you, Dain, ’said Björn Greataxe. ’Ye didn’t want to leave me in this hall alone, I hope?’

I changed the subject quickly, because having Björn next to you when he is upset isn’t a good experience.

-’Uh. . . How did you notice I slipped away?’, I asked.

-’Ye know’, he said, ’you were sitting right next to me at the table and Balin isn’t very low when he talks. ’

Balin looked a bit disturbed at the hill Dwarf as he continued.

-’So, I thought that trouble was brewing. I followed you out of the hall to the docks. But since it seemed that mister lieutenant wanted to talk with the weather about you, I went back to the hall. I was only halfway through the mines when I heard the horns. I came back as fast as I could. ’

The Dwarf interrupted his report and fingered his magical Talisman. It twitched curiously, as it did when Björn cast spells. He frowned over it.

The ship left the harbour, its wooden docks reaching far into the sea, and sailed into the open waters, past the wave breakers. The ship was immediately rocked back and forth a lot stronger than before. After a while, an echoing call was heard.

-’Disperse the ships! Search the area!’, it called.

Our stormvessel turned sharp left, following the course that the black ship had taken. The other warships dispersed to find the enemy if it had turned direction to flee, spreading into a long line slowly closing up on them.

Suddenly, a sharp breeze cut through the clouds. The whole ocean was covered in wisps of rolling fog. And, only a few miles before us, we could see the great black hull of the fleeing ship. It was heading straight to the cliffs of Nàmbenia.

-’Turn 50° left!’, cried the first sailor.

-’50° left!’, answered the steersman.

We followed the ship in a straight line. It was a very easy thing to do, since the enemy vessel was heavy and advanced slowly.

-’Mine short right!’, cried the first sailor.

He was right: a wooden ball, with spikes emerging from it, was swimming on the water. A mine is a sphere filled with oil and gunpowder. When one of the spikes was touched, the gunpowder is lighted, causing the mine to explode. Burning oil is dispersed everywhere, causing ships to light like dry straw in an oven, burning to a charred mass in minutes.

-’More mines ahead!’, cried the first sailor.

-’Bar right 90°!’, cried the captain.

-’Bar full right!’, answered the steersman.

The ship made a U-turn and sailed away. We had escaped the mines, but the black vessel was still free.

-’Circle the bay of Buknil!’, cried the fleet leader from a galley. ’The ship cannot escape!

He turned to the captain of a light vessel waiting next to him.

-’Go alert the mine guard. They must send patrols from the land’, he said.

-’Wait for us!’, cried Björn.

The little ship maneuvered in a tight turn, quickly docking right next to ours. I would have to find that driver and give him some sort of award.

Björn jumped of the stormvessel and climbed upon the galley. I followed, then Balin. We sat together on the captain’s bench.

-’Who’s that driver?’, I asked.

-’Oh, it’s Tommy. He was first sailor in the hunting fleet after the Baldrik wars. Why do you ask?’, answered a sailor, golden anchor or the dwarven navy on his light blue beret.

-’Because I wanted to give him some sort of award’, I answered.

-’Oh, he already got all of them. Tommy Battlehammer was the first fleet admiral for a century. He retired, and driver’s his new job.’

-’Oh.’

I was surprised at this. I figured commanders would score victory after victory and one day, die to the hands of an enemy. Not that they retire. Well, I would have to have a little chat with him someday, asking him how that change felt.

The ship hoisted sails and sailed to the port of Arabor. Just then, the wind dispersed, and the fog came back. It was as if it emerged from the waves, a living creature hiding from the wind, and rising as soon as it was gone.

-’Aye, that’s no fog’, said Björn, looking at his Talisman.

-’Then what for Sobek’s sake is this?’, asked Balin. ’A cloud?’

-’Aye, no, not a cloud’, said Björn. ’Aye, that’s magic. ’

# Chapter 2 - Dark Shadows

We sailed back to the port.

-’Lower the mainsail!’, shouted the first sailor. ’Port right ahead!’

The ship advanced slowly in the fog-filled port.

-’Dock on the right! Turn starboard!’, cried the first sailor.

But it was too late: the great hull of the warship crashed against the planks of the dark dock. Accompanied by a sharp creaking, the ship tore through the wood.

-’Let down the anchors! ‘, cried the captain.

Just in time: The ship was just about to bump against the cold stone walls of Arabor.

-’Aye, are you alright?’, asked Björn.

I responded that I felt pretty well and that the 25th cohorte must be called together.

-’That’s good. I won’t have to explain to the king why the heir of the dwarven empire was on a boat hunting a random ship’, he said.

-’Aye, thanks. You really do care for me’, I said.

-’I’ll take care of the soldiers’, said Balin. ’Where should they go, second lord of Arabor?’

-’To the front room of the western portal number five. You know, the one on the top of the side tunnel XVI. Make it as soon as possible, will you please’, I answered.

-’Aye aye, Sir!’

Balin put on his helmet, jumped out of the ship and ran out in the fog, disappearing in its folds.

With Björn, we descended from the ship and went directly to the side tunnel labeled XVI on a little basalt stone plate, undoubtedly mined on Trangir, known for its volcanic mines. I gently stroke its hard surface, wondering how those Endermath miners managed to hack such hard stone from the volcano’s foundation, and work it into such a fine plate. The little details, such as tiny waves decorating the sides, always surprised me anew.

The weird fog outside seemed very penetrating. It had entered some twenty feet into the hallway. Björn, seemingly irritated by it, held his talisman up and broke the fog into fine white strands of mist, that rested floating in the air. Björn surely knew how to manipulate nature and magic, always doing little things I could not have deemed possible. It made me remember the time he changed the feel in our classroom from dank to a delicious dryness.

We walked up the long. Perfectly straight tunnel.

-’So’, I asked, ’this fog is magic?’

-’Aye, and pretty powerful, too’, answered Björn. ’Do you remember the surface that the mist covered? The spellcaster who cast this spell, even thought of it, must be very powerful. Ye know, this spell, I didn’t know that it existed. ’

-’Well. . . What do you think we should do?’

I didn’t feel very well about the idea that a great sorcerer had cast a spell on the waters of my home Arabor.

-’What I think we should do?’, said Björn. ’Well, aye, I think you’re just right with your idea of sending soldiers on foot to the shore. But though…’

-’What, though?’, I asked, pretty on the end of my nerves.

-’Though’, said Björn, ’it isn’t a good idea to let only the patrol-ships at sea. ’

-’Why?’, I asked. ’What’s the problem? They are numerous enough to spot the enemy ship when it leaves and tries to set sail. ’

-’Spot it, yep, ’said Björn. ’But stop it? Aye, it’s no good having the vessel seen but letting it sail away. ’

We walked the rest of the way up in silence. Firstly, because I was thinking, and secondly, because we had nothing more to say.

I thought about why we could send naval combat ships out there, but it would be a huge amount of work to even take them out of their docks, and the bonus for battle action paid to the soldiers would be enormous, which would once more largen the taxes. All the work definitely didn’t weigh over having higher chances to stop that enemy. And anyway, our battleships probably wouldn’t even get a shot at them. But still, the probability of this vessel escaping, leaving a trail of burning dwarven ships behind it, was horrible.

At last, we came out of the endless tunnel and arrived at the room just in front of the eastern portal. It was built out of pure electrum, while the great room before us had walls of cobblestone sheathed with lead.

And aye, it was great to see the dwarven cohorte positioned just before the portal, weapons and armor bristling with the light of the great lamps. Their gold-ringed helmets reflected the light, spears piercing through sparkling air, the great banners showing the might of Fireforge.

-’Soldiers!’, I cried. ’Do you know what for Hephaestus’s sake we are doing now? No? You’re right, Balin didn’t get the time to instruct you. Where’s that good fellow, anyway? Aye, has he gone to search for more help, or, perhaps, alert my father of the new events?’

-’Uh…’, said a major. ’I’m the commander of this garrison and we’re about to go on patrol by the fields of Wazerla. Always ready to help one of our lords, but…’

‘I’m here’, said a familiar voice.

Balin appeared, choking, on the end of the tunnel.

-’I slipped and fell into a side mine. You passed me, I tried to catch up, but…’

-’As always!’, interrupted a laughing Björn Balin. ’Aye, just as I say! Mountain dwarves are clumsy brutes!’

Then, catching a side look of me, he added:

-’Except the dwarves of the Fireforge clan, naturally. ’

-’Sooo. . . What should I do?’, asked the major commanding the garrison. ’Continue on my patrol?’

-’No, don’t!’, I said. ’You shall replace the cohort that Balin wanted to call. ’

-’Ye mean that I should go on my patrol?’, asked the major.

-’No, I mean you to come with us to the cliffs of Nàmbenia to look out for a possible enemy ship.’

-’But the cliffs are not on my way towards Ronbar.’

-’Oh, I mean you to come with me to the cliffs to look for an enemy ship in the bay of Buknil!’

-’OK then, I’ll just send the soldiers off, and then I’ll come with you.’

Oh my, how this stubborn Dwarf loved his duty! It was nearly impossible to convince him to come and secure the cliffs, but, after a while, we could request half his garrison for our needs. I probably had talked too much with him, because the soldiers were looking very bored, and Björn spelled desperation on his face.

-’Aye, come on!’, cried Balin, bringing some action up. ’Open this door!’

Great pistons creaked as the great doors slowly opened.

-’Run to the cliffs! And hurry up!’, cried my lieutenant.

Björn found the commanding manner of Balin very disappointing and was in a bad mood.

I went to arm myself with a longbow and a quiver. When I was ready, the guards were already rushing out of the door. I had to run pretty fast to catch up.

A stone road led out of the doors. It winded down the lower slopes of Arabor, finishing in a great copper road. It was the west road, made of stone and covered with copper. The setting sun reflected in the road, shedding beautiful red light into the forest, and projecting dark shadows on the ground of the forest.

-’Faster!’, cried Balin to the troop.

Just then, he slipped over the coppered surface. This amused Björn and heightened his mood.

-’Aye, you Dwarf are funny!’, he cried.

We continued down the road for a mile. After some while, the navigator of the garrison said:

-’The ship has arrived here against the cliffs. They are easy to climb in this region. ’

We turned away from the road and rushed to the sea, 500 feet before us.

-’Light the torches!’, cried our navigator.

The light was getting dim, the sun having disappeared behind the great peak of Arabor.

-’The cliffs!’, cried our watcher.

In the dim light of the torches, we could see the dark form of the great enemy vessel on the water. And, additionally, there was a group of humanoids bigger than normal climbing on the cliff to our left, attached together by a fairly long rope that they had attached to their waists.

-‘Arm the crossbows!’, cried the captain second-in-command of the garrison.

-’Who are you?’, asked our speaker.

We had no response, except a faint call that sounded pretty offensive.

-’Prepare to shoot!’, shouted the captain.

-’Will you answer?’, cried the speaker.

The climbers did not answer.

-’Narobir’, said the captain to a young chief-lieutenant, ’go to the top of the cliffs and welcome our climbers. ’

‘Aye aye Sir’, said the lieutenant.

He took a group of soldiers, each armed with a hand crossbow, a longsword, and a greataxe, the typical equipment of Fireforge soldiers. They went for the top where the climbers would come up out of the cliffs.

-’Will you respond to our demands? If you refuse, you will be shot’, said the speaker.

But still, the dark shadows on the stone wall didn’t answer.

Then, suddenly, the shadow in the middle of the climbers shouted a war cry. The other forms immediately took knives from their belts and separated from each other.

Most of the shadowy forms went rapidly up, probably because they hadn’t seen the group of warriors placing itself over them. The rest tried to climb down. The last one, probably the leader of the group, went neither down nor up: He went sideways, trying to tuck himself behind an overhang.

-’Shoot the ones going down!’, shouted the captain.

A rain of arrows fell on them, killing most of the group. The desperate survivors clinged themselves against the wall, most of them gravely wounded by the arrows that hit them. The second wave would finish those, too.

Meanwhile, the other group of climbers had nearly touched the ledge. A second volley was shot, killing the survivors of the first one.

-’Aye, the smart guy is getting away’, said Björn.

He was perfectly right: The leader was almost behind the ledge. And, in addition, he was near a crevasse in which he could duck away. He was already out of the range of the archers, who could not shoot with their heavy crossbows behind the escarpment.

-’The only shooting place is right above him’, said Björn.

Maybe mountain dwarves were strong, good miners and great warriors, but hill dwarves impressed me ever more: They weren’t only biologists, wise men, knowers of lore and agile, they also were great strategists. Well, maybe I was exaggerating, as he had simply observed we could only shoot him from above, but it was true. Fireforge one many battles with hill Dwarf generals.

I took my longbow out of its quiver, tucked a red-feathered arrow under my arm, and ran to the overhang, loading my bow as I ran. I felt how it stretched, its thin rope placing itself right into the dent in my arrow.

Longbows may be easy to reload and less clumsy to carry than crossbows, but they were definitely harder to target something than with crossbows. I breathed slowly in and out, pointing my arrow at the dark form 60 feet under me.

-’Die!’, I cried.

I let the arrow fly.

For seconds, the form down there didn’t move. I had missed, and the shadow would hide in the crevasse. I had lost.

But, just then, the shadow stirred. One foot slipped from the wall, than the other. One hand fell off, the other slipped slowly. The great body of the creature below held on one finger. It slipped.

The creature left the wall and fell into the dark. I had hit the shadow.

I had won.

Then, suddenly, I heard a great crash. The corpse of my shadow had hit something. What had it hit? Easy to know: It had crashed against the planks of the enemy ship.

I ran to Björn and told him of my prey and the ship. The old Dwarf fell into a great frenzy of thoughts, mixing them up and combining them. Since you should not interrupt hill dwarves while they think, I left him and went to see what Narobir’s group was doing.

They were all lying behind bushes around the point where the shadows would emerge. I loaded my longbow, just in case.

Soon, we heard groans and injuries and a clawed hand emerged from the pitch black. A great creature heaved itself onto the solid ground. I had never seen something similar to this.

It was a large being, 10 feet tall. It was furrry and had a copperish- brown color. It had sharp ears, a flat nose, piercing eyes, and black teeth. It had short skirts with a greatsword and a morningstar attached to his belt.

He helped the others to come up. There were at least a dozen of them, as I remembered of when I observed them, a while ago, as they were climbing up. We could not vanquish all these beasts in close combat, there were too many, so I decided to attack our assailants now rather than just look at them.

I let my arrow fly loose. It hit my monster just on the head, killing him instantly and bringing him to fall down the cliff’s edge. The fellow archers next to us moved themselves and did the same.

But the terrible monsters weren’t slow or clumsy. With incredible flexibility, they ducked under the hail of arrows and ran to the forest.

-’Charge!’, cried our dwarvish captain.

The warriors that were hiding next to me swung their greataxes over their heads as they ran against the creatures.

-’Khàzad-ai Korné!’, cried the dwarves as they ran.

The evening sun sent rays spraying everywhere, sparkling off their armor, transforming them into living sparks rushing towards the enemy. The orange sky gave a perfect setting for such an epic battle, and we rushed down towards our foes. We were a beautiful pack of great, shining dwarves.

The first they hit was gravely wounded, but the monsters rapidly made up defense. They swung their greatswords before them as they charged. Two others climbed into the trees to drop down their morningstars on the soldiers under them. The last five ducked into the bushes to sneak away. These creatures surely were intelligent and just as strong.

I armed my longbow to deal more damage to a particularly great monster that was about to kill a wounded Dwarf lying on the ground. Then, I shot onto the feet of one of the shadows stalking in the trees. It yelped and fell to the ground, holding its right leg.

Then, I saw one of the creatures walking around the battleground and trying to stalk away unnoticed. But no, it wasn’t alone: Two other ones followed it silently. I loaded my bow and shot one of them in the back. I reloaded it as I ran for them. I shot on the right arm of another one, trying to make it drop its weapon.

I threw away my bow and took the dagger from my belt. It wasn’t the only weapon I had, but the only one I could use. A longbow in melee combat isn’t very effective. Maybe I had less chances of surviving if I made close combat, but it was better than letting them escape with a few arrows in the back.

I fingered the fine blade and threw it onto the head of the still unwounded monster. I hit him square in one of his eyes, making him roar mightily. I jumped onto his shoulders, removing the dagger from one eye and planting it into the other.

The guy roared in pain, but he was now inoffensive. I grabbed the branch from a tree and climbed up, leaving the creature fall. I climbed to my next target: the monstrosity I hit in the back. I held onto my dagger, engraved in the banner of Fireforge.

The creature was rolling on the ground, trying to remove the arrow from its back.

-’A simple target’, I thought.

But it wasn’t: The colossus stood up and swung its greatsword at me. I ducked underneath it and hacked at its right knee with my small dagger.

The tactic worked: It fell. Right onto me. I reacted quickly and planted my knife into its heart. It made a little gulp and crushed on the ground, letting me just the time to roll away from the mighty body.

I turned to the last one. It was gigantic, towering good 15 feet above me. It had its morningstar in his hands and grinned unnaturally.

I was lost. My dagger was stuck under the great carcass of one creature and its companion was about to crush me with its great weapon.

I ducked under the first few hits that the monster gave me, but it couldn’t go on like this. It would touch me, crush me, and kill me. The clan of Fireforge was about to lose one of its most precious members.

Aye, but no, this wouldn’t end that way! The great blood of my ancestors was boiling in my veins, and it was about to spill over.

-’Khàzad ai-menü!’, I cried, throwing myself against my attacker.

I didn’t duck away under the next swing of the terrible morningstar, but smashed myself against it.

It was a terrible shock, even with my great mithral armor around my body. I managed to grip the big spiked ball on myself. It was three feet wide, helping me to do this.

As the killer saw this, it tore the ball back to him with the chain. This pulled me to him, helping me to jump on its belly. I took an arrow out of its quiver and began piercing on the giant who cried terrible cries and fell prone. I worked my way to its heart and sticked the arrow into the fur of the beast. It cried out terrible suffering, but still, it wasn’t beaten.

I took another arrow out of my quiver to continue to kill it. But, soon, the cries of pain were replaced by a growling of anger. It smashed me away and stood up.

It was bleeding gravely, clutching the arm on which I had shot my arrow minutes ago. It roared again, picked up its morningstar, and advanced straight at me.

I clutched my arrow tightly and threw it on the head of the monster. I missed ever so slightly, tearing its ear off instead.

The shadow howled in pain and began smashing its morningstar about.

I climbed fast into the trees to flee from the enraged beast. It ravaged the branches in the search for me. What it didn’t know was that I had climbed down immediately and was sneaking up behind it. I jumped, landing on its shoulders. I pushed the arrow deep into its throat, until I had planted it so deep that it would be impossible to remove it.

The colossus began moving so much that I preferred to go down and away. It tried first to follow me, but fell down dead moments later.

I had won.

I turned over the carcass of the monster I had killed earlier and took out my dagger. It was red with blood, but still, the hammered electrum on the blade and the banner of Fireforge made with ruby shone clearly in the dim light of the torches. I wiped out the blood and went to see the others, picking up my longbow as I went.

By the sound of clashing weapons, I heard that battle still was going on.

I loaded my bow and went behind a bush. As I peered through, I saw a great battle going on. My battered-down fellows were trying to survive the last two monsters. Seven half-dead bodies of the climbers littered the ground, as well as good two dozens dwarven dead.

I let my arrow loose, killing the battered monster instantly. My second arrow didn’t kill the other one, but drained enough of its resources to let a warrior kill him with his greataxe.

The battle was finished, but it was a sad victory. A lot of our soldiers had died, as well as our captain that threw himself heroically against a creature to make it fall down the cliff and die. Tragically, he had slipped and followed his prey to death.

-’We should go to sleep’, said Balin, who was heavily wounded on one arm. A morningstar had hit him there as he was fighting off one of the many monsters.

The soldiers set up camp and a campfire. The chief-lieutenant ordered the sentinels and their positions, which I referred to as hiding places, before going into the chief's tent. Balin followed in, and they began talking. I saw Björn and invited him to sit next to the fire with me and the guard on watch.

-’Aye, those were hard guys’, said the watcher. ’I wonder who they were. ’

-’Those were goblinoids’, said Björn in an affirmative voice.

-’Goblins? Aye, you’re wrong!’, laughed the warrior. ’I was in the front lines in the Baldrik wars, 120 years ago. The orcs had goblins in their ranks. Those were fierce, naughty little guys. No great monsters as these. ’

-’I am not wrong, ’said Björn. ’Goblins belong to a family of creatures named goblinoids. There also exists races named hobgoblins. ’

-’So. . . These are hobgoblins, eh? Well, they evolved a lot. The orcs had them hobgoblins in their first lines during their assault in the Baldriks, and they were far smaller and, like, more human. I wonder what mutated them so much’, remarked the guard.

-’Neither hobgoblins nor goblins’, said the wise hill Dwarf. ’Those were bugbears, greatest and stealthiest of their race. The orcs never got them to cooperate with them.’

-’They sound and look terrible’, I said. ’But. . the ship that we followed this morning and that is now hiding here, wasn’t that of orc construction? And the colors, blood and black, aren’t these the banner of the Bonebreaker orc tribe?’

-’Aye, I see, you remember well the lessons I gave you on our greatest enemies’, said Björn. ’You are perfectly right. But, as I saw the bugbears, I thought that the goblinoids of some tribe had looted the orc ship and used it to try to plunder Arabor. But I remember the terrible howls that we had heard on the sea: those were definitely those of orcs. ’

His looks darkened.

‘You fear something’, I said.

You are right, as always’, said Björn Greataxe. ’But what I fear is of great importance: I suspect the same disaster as at Baldrik’s battle. I fear that the goblinoid tribes have allied with orcs. Those have sent strong scouts-the bugbears, whom they seem to have allied with now-to spy on us and gather information about Eisenhowl and Arabor, probably preparing an assault on our lands. We have a great problem rising up, my friends, and it may very well end terribly. ’

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# Chapter 3 - Many Dead

I stood up, excused myself by the guard, and followed Björn to a little tent. He closed the entrance behind me and we went to sleep.

I usually liked sleeping out, but this night, I had a strange feeling. I asked myself why, and found as answer that so many dead were lying near or that the horrifying words of Björn were still sounding in my head.

After a while, I could sleep. I slept very well and had great dreams.

-’Stand up, sleepyhead! I have already located the enemy ship, changed the guards, collected wood…’

Björn loved to wake me up like this, even if it was only 6: 30 before midday. And aye, the worst part was that, mostly, all the activities he named were true, but only a little part of all that he had done.

-’Aye, I’ll come’, I said.

Björn’s head disappeared out of the tent and left, probably going to join a hunting band to search for breakfast.

I stood up and put on my leather hunting armor instead of my clumsy mithral plate armor that had saved my life yesterday. Then, I decided to do something very adventurous. I had to start right now! So, what could step one be? I thought real hard. Then decided to start by stepping out of the tent. Just in time: The hunters were leaving the camp. They disappeared in the bushes just before I could call them, so I decided to follow them silently instead rather than accompanying them.

They walked along the cliffs, hoping there would be more prey there than near the beautiful coppered road, created with centuries of mining ore. It was a perfect example for the ancient culture of the dwarves. Just then, Björn held up his crossbow.

-’See this moose up there, on the hill?’, he asked the others. ’Well, he’s for me to shoot. ’

I rapidly loaded my longbow. Björn was still aiming his crossbow when I shot. The arrow flew in the air and hit the moose squarely in the head. The crossbow of Björn fired just after mine, sending a bolt into the air.

Nobody had seen my arrow fly, so they suspected nothing as the moose fell just before the bolt touched its target. Björn stood up and ran for his hunt.

-’Aye, I have never shot better’, he shouted to the others as he ran.

They arrived at the dead corpse of the great animal.

-’See?’, said Björn. ’I’ve hit him in the head!’

-’Well. . ’, said one hunter, ’I don’t think so. See? It’s an arrow that’s stuck in its head, not a bolt. ’

Björn was stunned over this remark.

-’And here’s the bolt!’, cried another hunter.

Aye, he was right: Björn’s bolt was stuck in a tree, 5 feet away from the moose.

-’But. . . but. . . ’, said the surprised Björn. ’Wait! This arrow, I know to whom it belongs. A naughty little creature in leather garments, always here to destroy one’s humour. ’

-’Who do you mean?’, asked a suspicious hunter.

-’I mean that darn little kid!’, cried Björn. Then, in a louder voice, he cried: ’Aye, you darn monster! I know you’re out there, so come out of your hiding place, Dain of Fireforge! I’ll teach you what it means to kill my own hunt! I’ll getcha, better right now!’

Björn wasn’t happy at all over my good shot, so I prefered to come out before he got angry. A mad hill Dwarf is worse than the most raging orc.

-’Hullo there, you guys!’, I said with a false smile.

I walked out of my hiding place to greet them. All were astonished of how Björn treated the son of Lorn, their king. We returned to the camp, heavily loaded with three deers, six bunnies, two boars and my moose.

We were all happy of our good hunt, but our minds darkened as we saw the faces of the others.

-’How much have we lost?’, I asked Balin, worried by what he would say.

-’Uh. . . The other side has lost 13 bugbears, in addition to the 20 we shot on the cliff, so we should be happy.’

-’How much have we lost, I asked. There’s no use in avoiding this question. Just how much? Please say it now, ’I said, sternly.

-’Hum, well, if we haven’t made a mistake, and if we count the captain that threw himself into death’, said Balin reluctantly, ’we have lost. . . ninety-eight men. ’

This was terrible news. Our fellow companions that thought they were going on peaceful patrol, but they had died under hideous enemy hands to protect their land.

-’Prepare the meat’, said the chief-lieutenant.

Five dwarves began working on our hunt, while two others made the fire grow and prepared the sticks. While they were working, the lieutenant assigned a group that should assemble all the fallen dwarves, during which time the last five built two carts, which they painted black with charcoal.

-’Eating time!’, cried a cook.

Everyone came and went to the fireplace. The meat was delicious, cooked just enough and lightly salted. I loved the bunnies most.

We all enjoyed the morning meal, heightening our moods and filling our bellies. The dark jobs could continue, for we had the strength to swipe away the sadness. At some time during the day, a field doctor and some Dwarven Security officer came and examined them, drawing them on papers and noting all they could find out about them.

The Dwarven Security guy called a wagon, and they went back to Arabor with one of the corpses in their armored cart. We continued doing our jobs. The part we enjoyed most was throwing the corpses of the bugbear monsters into the sea.

-’And. . . The ship?’, I asked Balin.

-’Aye, it’s hiding in a cave. A stormvessel saw it. The guy that has hit it must have surprised them, causing them to retreat ’, he said. ’The entire of Dwarven Empire Navy royal division are out for attack. ’

But, just then, the mist that had hidden the ship before came up again. No doubt, they were causing it.

-’It will flee’, I thought, ’and we can do nothing about it. ’

I thought for a long time, that seemed short to me, trying to do as Björn always did.

And suddenly, it worked! I knew what I had to do. I ran to the fireplace, where the soldiers were about to burn the rests of the feast.

-’Stop!’, I cried. ’Where have have you put the fat of the animals?’

-’Uh. . . In the casks back there, sir’, said a surprised, fatty guy. ’We planned to bring them back to the stronghold. ’

-’Thanks’, I said.

I went to the heap of casks that was piled up next to a lone tree. I opened one: In it was a sort of yellowish, fatty liquor. Great! I took a torch, lighted it, and stuck it in the ground near to the place where the cliffs were.

-’Hey, wattcha doin’?’, asked a sentinel. ’It’s bright day out!’

-’Oh, shut up’, I answered. ’Better help me, though. ’

He was pleased to help me carrying the heavy casks next to the torch. I preferred to think while he was dragging the heavy containers.

-’You may retire’, I told him as he had carried all the fat.

Then, I called Balin, who had an exceptionally good sight, to watch the entrance of the lair of our researched ship.

We waited only a few minutes when Balin cried:

-’Ship leaves harbour!’

I immediately opened the first cask and held it over the drop. Then, I took the torch and held it just under the receptacle. Suddenly, the fat within the container began to burn brightly. I threw it over the ledge. It landed with a dull crash, the clay splitting into little pieces splattering into the water around it, while the burning mass would spread over the humid planks, enlightening them like dry straw. I saw fierce flames strike up. I had hit the ship.

-’Bring reinforcements!’, I cried to Balin.

Meanwhile, I had opened the second flask and was setting it on fire. The burning light below gave me a good target on which to throw a second hit.

Balin arrived with six other warriors, and we had a good time throwing burning bottles into the mist. In addition, the warships patrolling not far away also shot onto the mist, their shots seen as streaks of light flashing into the beacon of the burning ship. As the ship sank, the mist lightened. Soon, we could see the burning form of a black hull disappearing in the water.

-’Well aye, I think that we have finished our stay here’, said the lieutenant.

-’Yes, we have’, I said. ‘Do you think it was worthy of setting out to here?’

-’Well, um…’

-’Just tell me.’

-’Well...In the military, we don’t think if something was worthy of doing or not. All that matters if we won or, if we lost, why that is so. Um… Aye, I would say, since we won, it was worthy of coming here. We beat them bugbears, after all!’

-’Even if we lost so many of our fellows, more dwarves than we lost on Eisenhowl since the Baldrik wars?’

-’Well, yes… We killed the enemy!’

-’Wouldn’t it have been better to have let them just walk around and not lose our people?’

-’No, of course not! They would have killed our people, innocent civilians, probably spying on sensitive military targets, helping an enemy invasion on Eisenhowl…’

-’Do you seriously think they might have been scouting an invasion of Eisenhowl?’

This was not helping my mood at all.

-’No, no, that’s not what I meant. You know, as a soldier, you have to think of all the possibilities, um… What do you think about breaking up camp?’

I half-heartedly accepted. We packed our tents and left the camp.

The two black wagons followed us. They were covered in a magnificent silver-black cloth. Each was pulled by one white oxen and accompanied by one soldier. Our column was totally silent as we entered the coppered road. Everyone that saw us pass went on the side and took off their hats, helmets, and other appendages, and even those who had bare heads did as if they had, gripping empty air and standing like everybody else. Respect to dead was great on Arabor, as we didn’t face many, and everyone cared about everyone.

After a fairly long trek, we arrived before the great mountain that was our home.

-’Arabor’, said Björn, taking off his helmet, ’forever you shall be lord of our humble lives.’

We climbed the road and arrived at the eastern portal. The straight-standing guards stood straighter as the battants opened and we marched inside. In the interior of our great halls, there was a dark gloom. Every head was lowered, the face of the guards before the king’s room, although they were as unemotional as they always seemed, looked like they were very sorrowful. Everything was gloomy. Even the fire burned lower. I went immediately to see my father in the throne room.

-’Father, king Lorn!’, I cried. ’What so terrible sorrow darkens our halls?’

My father was in a sad mood, but he answered, happy to see me in perfect health.

-’Ah, terrible news darken us’, he said. ’We have lost great numbers because of these black devil’s ships. ’

-’Why, my king?’, I asked. ’We have sunk the ship and killed most of its inhabitants. Compared to our losses, it can be named a victory. ’

-’Not much have won’, he said. ’Actually, only we have had something near victory. You must know that more than one ship has appeared. Many ports have been attacked after having tried to capture one of the ships. We have lost over thousand men, and only a few ships have been vanquished. And still, we haven’t seen all. Many patrols all over Eisenhowl say having seen dark ships docked in dark corners. And still more patrols haven’t returned. Many outposts are bathed in blood and burning, our people killed without mercy by these unseeming bugbear scouts. Reports on kills keep pouring in. ’

I was sad over the terrible news. After a while of strenuous thinking, I decided it was time for lunch. Our voyage to Arabor had taken a good few hours. I decided to go eat at the mariner’s bar, the eating hall near the docks where Darin liked to go.

It was lodged in an outcropping and a sturdy timber-and-stone construction. The low windows looked out onto a large grotto and the docks beyond. Through its many fissures emerged a constant odor of fried beef and seafood. Its interior was low, dim and smoky. Pretty waitresses walked around, trays filled with huge lobsters and filled pig with maple syrup.

I had guessed right: As I entered, I saw Darin at a little table, eating chips and a giant lobster. I maneuvered around a dish filled with tiny sugared cherry salmons, around a fat warsword Dwarf eating fried potatoes, over a drunk Lancespike warrior and to the greasy wooden chair next to Darin.

-’Where were you this night?’, he asked.

-’Battling bugbears and sinking ships’, I said.

-’I see’, he said. ’I’ll call for lunch. ’

He ordered chips and salmon, my favourite. I ate so fast that I easily caught up with Darin’s lobster. We made a bet: The first who had finished would have a wish over the other. A carnage ensued. I devoured a chip after the other, while the impressive dental apparatus of Darin crunched through the entire lobster, ignoring what one normally doesn’t eat. He began shoveling chips into his mouth while spitting out parts of lobster, so I gave up using hands altogether and chomped away in the bowl of salmon.

Darin won by one chip. It had been a close run, my last salmon about to get crunched when he yelled he was through. It had been a good battle. We wiped our hands on the tablecloth and congratulated the other about the good engagement. He didn’t know yet what to wish for, so he decided to save it for later.

-’Mister, could I seat at your table?’, a handsome young half-elf asked Darin. ’I am starving, and there is no other place where I could sit. ’

-’Aye, but of course! Just sit down, I’ll order you something!’, laughed Darin. ’Just give us company!’

The half-elf really was starving; she devoured the octopus in onions that Darin had ordered so fast that even I couldn’t do better. She would be a terrible enemy in a banquet-challenge.

-’May I introduce myself?’, asked the handsome lady, wiping her hands on the tablecloth.

-’Of course, go ahead!’, said Darin.

-’My name is Lauradolean mu Lingodecanas, but friends call me Laura. I am captain of my merchant ship and am here to take custody of dwarven weapons for the armies of Denise, battling against goblinoids of the Trensandor tribes north. I was also told that I should bring a Dwarf with me who will sell the weapons at destination. His name is... ’

-’Darin Battlehammer, eh?’, interrupted her Darin.

-’Yes, exactly. You know him?’

-’Aye, that’s me!’, laughed Darin.

-’Happy I found you so quick’, she said. ’Will you please come to the loading docks to supervise the loading? If you have finished eating, of course.’

-’Wait a moment, I’ll be at the docks in three minutes. Hope you don’t mind, mylady. ’

-’Well, see you later.’

Laura stood up and graciously got out of the way of two sweating waitresses carrying a huge pork and walked out of the door. The light of the momentarily open door almost blinded me.

-’Didn’t I have a wish over you?’, asked Darin, smiling.

-’You have’, I said, knowing very well what it would be.

-’I wish that you would come with me to this famous Denise’, he said.

-’Your wish is granted’, I said.

We burst out laughing, clapping hands and being happy.

I licked my plate out, leaving the delicious grease on the dish would be a terrible waste, and went out of the bar. Darin followed a bit later, because he had bitten on some sort of hard thing. I tried not to look back when I exited the stuffy locale, but I did, and I saw him pulling a lobster’s head out of his mouth.

We walked along the docks, talking together and making comments over everything we saw. We talked over the sea, the wood, the birds, and mostly over the rocks. Darin knew incredibly much over stone, and I loved to hear him talk.

After a while, we arrived at the loading docks. Eight ships were tied to them, and many men were being occupied on and around them.

A loading dock is a long bar on which ships are attached. A slide in the middle of the dock helps moving the heavy containers around. Big cranes all around the docks heave the containers on the ships.

-’Ah, Darin, here you are!’, called Laura, coming up from behind a great catapult wrapped in red cloth. ’I looked for you everywhere! We have loaded already loaded half the cargo. ’

We climbed up a ladder to reach the deck. A great hole was in the middle of the half-elf’s ship, in which cranes loaded packs of weapons. There were spears, swords, ballistas, bows, axes, catapults. . . Every weapon from light to siege. There surely was something going on by the famed Denise, probably being related to the alliance of the orcs and the goblinoids.

-’We will leave in an hour’, said Laura. ’You better prepare your cabin for departure, young Dwarf. Darin,I would like you to supervise loading. ’

I went to ask a patrol to bring me my stuff. They went to the living mines, the dwarven habitacle, to get all the useless stuff a royal Dwarf always carries with him. Just as they disappeared from view, Laura cried:

-’Take up the anchors, will you please? Also hoist the sails, while you’re there, if it doesn’t bother you!’

She was surely polite, for a captain. Slowly, the ship left harbour.

-’Wait!’, I cried. ’You said we would have one hour until we leave!’

-’Of course’, she said. ’We will have a good hour until we leave the waters of Eisenhowl. ’

Laura surely was a fine maiden, but her words never meant what others understood. But it didn’t bother me that I didn’t have all the junk with me, so I turned away.

I went to see Darin in his cabin. He was making his bed, not knowing that we were already on the sea.

-’May you come on the main deck?’, I asked politely.

-’Aye, of course, Dain my gremlin!’, he answered.

We went up the lean stairs to the fresh air of the sea that I had so many times felt, up on my ledge.

Darin seemed surprised that there was only sea in front of our ship.

-’Turn around’, I told him.

He turned and looked. He was very surprised to see the massive rocks of Eisenhowl this far away.

-’Bb But. . . we have already left harbour? What is going on?’, he asked, not very happy over the sight that was presented to him.

‘Yup’, I said. ’And we are about to leave the waters of Eisenhowl, our beloved island and the home of all dwarvenkind. ’

Darin loved to look at the mountain of Arabor and its surroundings, for he had never seen his royal mountain from this point of view. He might be an adventurer and know every small mine of the Arabor complex, but he wasn’t a sailor at all. It was only by chance that king Lorn had picked him to deliver the weapons, because he decided the usual sellers were too weak to encounter the combat that was supposed to rage on Colupan.

‘Look at the sea’, I heard a sailor say next to me. ’This gloomy color isn’t good news. ’

He was pretty right. The ocean was almost pitch black, gloom hanging all over it, darkness flowing on its waves.

It also had, at some spots, a crimson color covering the blackness. It wasn’t a natural color, made by plants or other: No, it was the dark color of blood.

The whole dark mass was coming from the north and flowing to Eisenhowl. Dark times surely were arriving.

Once, while I was standing at the bow of the ship enjoying the fresh air, Laura came up from behind. I slightly jumped when she talked, surprised at hearing someone. I had imagined to be alone, sailing towards the unknown.

-’I heard the northern orcs are getting dangerous’, she said.

-’Really? Ume, well… Big ships of the Bonebreaker orcs made a mess of our ports. I guess those are northern orcs? If so, I can sure say they can be a problem’, I answered.

-’Of course the Bonebrakers are a northern tribe! In fact, they are the only one left up there. They submitted or killed every other one… And now, they are a big army sailing out and wrecking Ochebana empire’s ships and fortresses.’

-’So, you mean… There aren’t only goblinoids where we’re going? Will there be orcs?’

-’No, of course not. Colupan is just around the equator, no further north. But the Trensandor goblins are said to have allied with the orcs, and that the third Ochebana fleet won’t hold them back for longer than a couple of days.’

-’So we are gonna land, fight some hobgoblin legions, and then get submerged by an orcish army rushing from the north?’

Somehow, the north gave me a bad feel. All of the Dwarven Empire was south of Colupan, and there weren’t many civilized lands in the north. Except bloodthirsty orcs…’

-’No, of course not. Once the Ochebana fleets will be sunk, the orcs will still be held back by a far mightier navy.’

-And that is?’

-’The Denise navy, of course! They will sink every single rotten ship of them orcs, and we will all be sure as long as we are in Denise waters. Their fleet is far superior to Ochebana’s…’

-’And if the orcs break through?’

-’If that happens… Well, Colupan won’t hold long. It will be submerged in foul creatures, the Bonebrakers will use it to launch attacks on the south…’

-’And they will reach the Dwarven Empire.’

After this terrible revelation, I immediately retired to my quarters, wishing myself and my friends the best of luck in fending off the goblinoids and getting back home as soon as possible. It was very risky for the future dwarven king to go walk around in a human kingdom during such troubled times. But I wanted to, so I would do it. I sat down somewhere and waited for the voyage to be over.

After some days of voyage, we arrived at the waters of Colupan. They were even darker and

bloodier than they were before. At last, the grey lands of the human continent came to view. Björn had told me that this was only one of a dozen human Islands and that this one was sort of the capital.

However, their lands were only lightly allied, each sought for power, each had a problem. Humans were the most chaotic people of the world. They were surely numerous, but compared to the dwarves or elves, they were pretty much like nothing. By luck, they had a sort of king that guided them out of the mischief.

This were the people of Denise, who guided their lower ones out of their greatest problems. They also were wiser than most of the other guys. And now, we were bringing weapons to them so they could battle goblinoid tribes. They were the last resistance before the waves.

In this looming land, I felt strangely far from home, in another world. Eisenhowl was a peaceful oasis in the enormous expanse of the enormous turmoil Ochebana was, as it had already been often while terrible wars destroyed the human and elven populations. But now, it was different. Scraps of warfare had reached my home. What if the bigger wars also arrived?

I shrugged this thought off. We were always left untouched by other being’s wars, and so it would stay.

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# Chapter 4 - Goblin Arrows

Our ship sailed slowly into a dark gulf. A little fire was burning on the shore, guiding our vessel safely around the gloomy rocks that lined the black water. The sky was burning bright red when we arrived at last at our destination.

It was a little sandy beach with only a slight slope. The fire was burning in the midst of the beach, men in dark blue cloaks standing all around it. They were probably soldiers of fabled Denise.

-’Break the sails!’, cried Laura. Throw the ropes!’

Her orders were quickly fulfilled. The men pulled the ship to them until half of it was on the beach.

The sailors let down two ramps to unload our rare passengers and most of the crew. While the passengers were brought to a little group of tents, the sailors helped the men of Denise to attach oxen to the ropes. They pulled up the great vessel onto the land.

Laura seemed accustomed to their doings, but I wasn’t at all. Darin seemed as curious as I to discover the meaning of this affair.

When I asked a guy that seemed in command over the group, he said:

-’We are in war, you know. The hobgoblins have scouts everywhere. We have found a bunch of goblins in the midst of our commander’s tent, two weeks ago. If they find this pretty ship here in the water, visible from miles away, they will come in mass, steal it, and find a new way that leads to our capital. This is the reason why we hide our tents and the vessel. ’

The man seemed to be a very good soldier, for he had not mentioned the survival of himself and the rest of his troops if we were to be attacked. He was a good man that cared for others, or at least, that was what I thought he would be after this short encounter.

-’Ah, If only Silanodel was here…’, said the soldier.

-’Eh? Gila. . What? Aye, what are you speaking of?’, I asked.

-’You do not know her’, said the guy.

-’Of course I don’t! I am not from this land, mr. , eh, mr. . . Whom?’

-’My name is Bolivar, lieutenant of Denise. ’

Bolivar did not talk anymore. He whispered in a low tone to himself. Darkness. . one hope. . moonwhisper. .

He stopped mumbling and looked out to the lands beyond us, his eyes lost in the dark. In the pale light of the fire, he looked like a great hero descended from heaven that found himself in darkness, lost in the endless shadows of the night. No light could erase darkness, whatever its strength.

-’Hey, Dain! Come here and give us a hand!, cried a well-known voice.

Darin, for he had called, was trying to move an oxen to let it bring help to the others. Darin knew very well that, thanks to the hours spent with Björn, I had a little hand for animals.

-’Come, come, nice little ox!’, I called to it.

It lifted its head over the heap of stinking seaweed it was eating. I held up the little handful of fresh green grass I had picked up moments before. First, it was curious, then, it trotted to me. As it felt that the rope was holding it back, it gave a strong pull on it. The vessel attached to the rope slid forward, at such a rate that it surprised the others greatly.

Men, animals, dwarves and gnomes looked up, surprised, as they saw the vessel advancing at such a rate that a fast-walking Dwarf would had problems to keep up with it.

I sprang to my feet and began to run. I ran to the small bunch of trees that was standing apart from the forest for which the ship was heading before. A soldier carrying a lantern was surprised to see me coming along with the vessel just behind. The oxen surely were great animals.

The soldier guided our ship into a little ditch that was just high enough to conceal our vessel. We put a couple of huge bushy branches over it, adding little trees around it, until it looked like a little thicket. Laura would not sail again, nor come with us to Denise: I believe she planned to go sell material at Brimgor to the west, or something else involving merchandising.

The sky darkened, and a thousand tiny lights started appearing in the darkened sky. The red horizon changed to black, torches were lit. Their fire revealed the surroundings in flickering orange light.

I returned to the beach, my eyes half closed. I hadn’t slept very well during my voyage over the sea, so I immediately demanded a resting place. Darin guided me to the little group of tents and showed me ours. It was shared with a group of gnomish smiths that were here to aid Denise. I went into a little bedroll and immediately fell asleep.

I woke up on a bright, sunny day. Birds sang, the sun shone, and a little breeze that was very similar to that on Eisenhowl rushed over the branches. Slowly, the rest of the camp rose to the rising sun. Soldiers began removing the tents while others loaded carts with the goods from the ship. Bolivar was already up and heaving a heavy trebuchet onto a specially constructed cart.

Since there was nothing interesting to do, I went hunting. Tragically, I discovered that there wasn’t much game in the area. Once I saw a deer far off in a thick patch of bushes that I tried to shoot. I didn’t even bother to get the bolts back, they were so far. I continued walkking. I filled my tummy with beetroots found by an old oak. They were pretty fine, since I always loved veggies as much as meat. On my way back, I also ate two papayas found on a little tree that was growing on the ledge of a little cliff.

As I arrived at last, the camp was already broken up, and the wagons were on a line, ready for departure.

-’Dain!’, cried my good friend of the Battlehammer clan. ’Dain Fireforge! I’ve searched for you everywhere! Come join me!’

He was placed on the back of a little cart stuffed full of spears. He had a great fear for horses, every mountain Dwarf had, because they were “uncomfortable and dangerous”.

I went to sit right next to him. After waving goodbye to the nice Laura and her crew, the caravan began to roll on its way. The road was a mosaic of stones, fitted together and held only by the straight border stones. It had many turns, so it wasn’t easy to see the distance that we rode.

Rapidly, we came under the shadows of a great forest. It was a good feeling to ride under the green branches while summerbirds sang their unending song. Everything seemed peaceful. It was impossible to think that war was raging near us.

We ate our lunch on the wagons, not willing to lose any time for the armies of Denise.

-’Before us is the black forest, or Mirkwood’, called out Bolivar.

He seemed uneasy at the thought of driving through this part of the great forest. Redwood, for so was named the forest in which we had ridden till now, changed not much as we entered Mirkwood. The forest was simply a bit overgrown, and the typical red color of the trunks had turned to dark brown, but there was nothing to fear about.

As we came into a larger turn, our foreman, the guy riding in front to discover eventual danger, called out.

-’Path blocked!’, he cried.

-’What?’, asked Bolivar. ’What the hell…’

The corpses of three great white steeds barred the way. They were completely saddled, including longswords that were still in their sheaths. The huddled corpses of three riders in chain mail and blue cloaks were near the steed.

Black red-feathered arrows were sticking in their corpses. It was easy to discover that no battle had taken place here: These riders had been murdered from far away. The soldiers near the corpses hadn’t just repugnance on their faces, they also had sadness and fear, as if they all knew the dead.

-’We all know them’, declared Bolivar. ’This is the special guard of our dear marshall Liorrick. ’

-’Liorrick?’, I asked Darin. ’You know him?’

-’Aye, I don’t’, he answered, grime on his face from the long voyage we had made.

-’I hope’, continued the lieutenant of Denise’, that Liorrick, our dear third marshall of Denise, has well survived this attack. If he is dead, he will forever stay in our memories. ’

There was a dead silence for a good while. Then, Bolivar announced:

-’Soldiers, free the path! We shall continue our way, finding the marshall, even if we have to pay with our lives for this!’

Sadly, the soldiers with their dark blue cloaks began pulling away the dead men in these beautiful light blue capes. The horses were moved with the same care.

-’We shall go!’, cried the lieutenant of Denise.

The carts moved and rumbled on. This didn’t last long, for after a short while riding down the road, our foreman cried out:

-’Sir, there’s a blood trail on this path!’

-’Where?’, asked Bolivar.

Our foreman was right: A shining red trail of blood drops was leading down the road. Following them were also muddy little footprints.

-’Goblins’, hushed the soldier driving the cart on which we sat.

It was pretty easy to discover what happened: goblins had shot the guys from far, but the marshall had fled from the arrows. The goblins had rushed forward to finish him, and he had run away.

Aye, I must have been pretty right: Here and there, we could find scattered goblin corpses. At one place, Liorrick had even stopped to give battle: A good heap of goblin carcasses were stretched on the road, including three bigger ones that were in scale mail. These must have been hobgoblins.

-’Hurry up!’, cried Bolivar, unable to doubt any more about the fate of the marshall.

We went on. After a little while, the footprints stopped by a heap of little corpses. The bloodtrail turned to the left into the bushes.

All soldiers ran to the place where the trace disappeared. Just behind a bush of dead twigs was a bloody corpse. It was clothed in shining silver plate armor, a light blue cape furled around it. The human was half dead, arrows sticking from his back and sword marks all over his bloody armor. His sword was black with goblin blood. As a man turned him around, he moaned terribly.

Bolivar cried out as he saw the face of the man.

-’Liorrick!’

Bolivar was filled in terrible sadness as he saw the poor state of the marshall’s body.

-’Liorrick, say something!’, he cried. ’Don’t let us without our marshall!’

The marshall of Denise was having great difficulties to try to speak.

-’D. . . d. . . don't. . . stay. . . hereeeaaa…’, he muffled out.

He began suffering terribly because of the efforts he had made to say this.

-’What?’, asked Bolivar. ’Why should we go?’

-’Aaah…’, moaned Liorrick, ’n. . nnot saf. . fe. . . not dead. Enemy. . . here!’

He shrieked the last words. He finally expired, letting death reach him, its fingers creeping up from his feet and ensnaring him, before crushing his soul to death.

-’We should go’, said a wise forest gnome. ’This person seemed to try to warn us of danger. ’

But Bolivar did not listen. He was filled with sadness and would not leave the marshall. Darin began mumbling that the lieutenant would lose us all by not listening to the warning of the marshall, but I didn’t even try to listen. I simply took out my greatsword and prepared to combat. Slowly, the red wave won over the light blue, before letting the darkness flow over the trees of mirkwood, only the stars left to pierce through the black vault, in a constant clash against darkness.

All was so silent that we could think that there actually was no danger and that Liorrick had killed every enemy.

It didn’t last: A terrible howl sounded through the night, and dark shadows began rushing out of the darkness.

-’Stay together!’, cried a sergeant.

-’Khàzad ai-mènu!’, I cried, rushing towards a group of a dozen massed goblins that had spawned out of the seemingly empty forest. Only that it was not empty any more, but full of howling goblinoids.

My sword smote them, crushing one foe after the other. Others came as reinforcements to be destroyed at their turn. To our great distress, not only goblins were rushing forward to submerge us, but also hobgoblins in creaking scale mail advanced, the red feathers on their pointed helmets waving like menacing eagles.

They were not only stronger and tougher than their goblin kin, they also had none of their chaotic attitude. They were lawful and martial, advancing in rows as well as the trees permitted, their bristling red and black shields before them. Their martial skills in combat made them tougher than any goblinoid.

My sword caught many dents because of the various blows from their black longswords I had to parry that day. As I fought one in deep black plate mail, I broke my sword against its head.

Only my dagger of Fireforge and my bow were still useful as weapons. It was out of question to use any of them against the masses of little rascals these goblins were.

I did not think long: I took the black longsword of the hobgoblin that had broken my sword and decided it was not wise to stay alone any longer, with ranks of hobgoblins almost surrounding me, so I looked around. The other people who were traveling had grouped up further away, using a cart as defense, so I ran to join my companions. I removed three hobgoblins from the list of living foes, killed six goblins, nearly broke the new sword against a wicked hobgoblin’s plate armor, and joined my group. Together, we made a little Island resisting heroically to the waves of goblinoids that came crashing against our shields.

We were holding bravely against our foes when we heard a terrible howl that froze the blood in our veins. The massed goblins looked around, fearfully, while the hobgoblins stopped bashing their swords against us and looked up.

The sky was black, in the exception of the little stars and a great, white full moon. Not very far away, in the darkness of the woods, we could discover little dancing lights of torches.

-’Lamik! Lamik!’, cried the goblinoids.

-’Who the hell is Lamik?’, I asked a soldier next to me who was wielding a pike.

-’I think I know. This must be this great orc general who has destroyed so many of our camps. A veteran I knew once openly disliked him. Never saw him again’, he said.

-’Ah, a bigger orc. Would love to smash his head’, I thought.

I was completely wrong, except for the head smashing thing. The torchlights grew bigger, and out of the darkness came orcs holding the torches. Tragically, they were only the escort of the terrible monster that followed.

It was just a bit bigger than the other orcs, but it didn’t resemble them a bit. It was hulking, walking in such a way that it resembled a duck. Its head swung as it walked. It had a lot of slingstones placed in a pouch, but no sling. It held its hands behind its back, so that it resembled a teacher bringing us naughty soldiers a lesson.

-’Yaaahahaa!’, he cried. ’Whoo doo wee haavee heeree? Youu will be kiiiled!’, he said.

Then, he broke out in a hideous laughter. He took a stone from his pouch and threw it at Bolivar. It broke his helmet and brought out a trail of blood on his head.

-’Die, Lamik!’, cried the lieutenant.

He crushed a bunch of goblins, three orcs and a hobgoblin as he ran to smite the creature that had ordered the kill of Liorrick, second marshall of Denise.

The monster reacted fast: He threw another stone at Bolivar. But this time, the lieutenant was ready, for the stone banged off his shield. Bolivar charged him, his shield holding out every attack that other foes gave him.

He let descend his silver sword onto Lamik, bringing out gushes of black blood. Lamik howled. Sadly, Bolivar’s attack had brought nothing. The monster showed the long claws of his hands and slashed a good hit onto the lieutenant’s armor. Just after it, he began tearing his half-living corpse into pieces. The goblinoids howled up and the attack pressed on with double fury. One man fell after the other, being teared apart by Lamik after the goblins had weakened him enough.

I managed to slash my hobgoblin longsword onto the face of Lamik as he passed near. As he howled, he decided that I would be his next kill. I could barely hold his claw attacks as I ducked under the assaillants that helped the monster.

We were about to succumb over the hordes that assaulted. Just then, the hobgoblin longsword that I wielded broke against the shoulder of Lamik.

It was a horrid sight: his left arm was dangling loosely, shards of the dead hobgoblin’s sword I was using still sticking in him. He howled up, not in pain, but in rage. With no defense, I would die by this monster that had just one goal: tear me into pieces.

But then, rescue arrived at last. I saw it first as a star that descended onto us, then disappeared as it hit the ground. It released a shadow that spun around the woods, its blade killing goblinoids close and far. The moon shone stronger and brighter, dipping the landscape in dim white light. Whispers sneaked through the trees, making goblinoid and orc howl in pain, running from its source.

The small pack of orcs howled as they fled, followed by the crying Lamik. The few goblinoid survivors made their best to follow them as quickly as they could. Soon, we were alone.

The shadow of the moon came up out of the darkness, standing between the trees some ten feet away. Since I was the only member of the caravan able to stand, I went to see it.

The sight that came to my eyes was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen before. It was a calm elf. No, not the type of grumpy man-saving mage you would expect in such a situation. It was the beauty of the forest.

A slender, pretty elf was dimly shining under the shadows of the trees. She had pretty little cheeks, ears rounder than most other elves and a fine smile on her lips. Her golden-brown hairs shone under the stars, its locks brushing her face and shoulders. She was wearing a magnificent leather suit, a white fur cloak hanging from her shoulders.

I could not help but fall immediately in love of her.

-’My name is Silanodel’, she said. ’The moonwhisper. ’

Her name suited her perfectly. Her shining smile gave me the force to respond.

-’Mine is Dain, Dain Fireforge’, I said, ’son of Lorn Fireforge, king of Eisenhowl. ’

She smiled even more.

-’Nice to meet you, Dain’, she said.

The night under the stars that followed was the most enjoyable thing I had done since mining a rich gold vein. I had a great time with Silanodel, talking, listening to her perfect songs, and walking. We both enjoyed it, and I loved her afterwards even more for her always-present smile. She was what every living being would wish for, the gem of the king’s collection, the moon under stars.

We stood up early to continue our voyage to Denise. Silanodel the moonwhisper had taught me to ride horses a day after we had met. Darin contented himself by riding a pony. While riding, I discussed with Darin why I had never before heard about this Lamik in my extensive studies, and he told me the subject was censored by the Dwarven Security since him killing Baldrik in the Baldrik wars.

Three days had passed since I had found my moonwhisper, and still, the love we had for one another was getting bigger. We couldn’t separate for more than an hour, and we talked for hours in a day.

We had taken the corpses of Liorrick and Bolivar, as well as those of the other fallen, onto a cart that had been coloured pitch black with charcoal from our campfires.

Our new leader was a senior chief-sergeant. His dark blue cape was almost black as it was weathered. He was some sort of veteran from the aeon-long war against the hobgoblin legions of Trensandor, and his humor was very harsh and efficient. We made good progress under his leadership.

-’Denise’, called out our foreman.

He was on top of a little hill. The rest of the caravan rushed up to see its homeland I was curious to see the fabled city that was said to be the capital of the numerous human empires that stretched over the world.

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# Chapter 5 - Golden Roofs

We beheld such a beauty that it appeared as the halls of Arabor. The magnificent artistry surpassed the best elven works, its strength seemingly higher than that of draconic fortresses, its stonework worthy of that of gods, aye, even dwarven gods.

The great city stretched before us. Its buildings were of white marble, and their roofs were of solid gold. Blue flags blew in the gusts of wind, darker banners hanged against walls, and gigantic light blue flags crowned huge white palace in the middle of Denise.

To the south, from whence we were coming, were great cliffs falling down onto a great green plain. White-shining gray stones and boulders emerged from it, seemingly placed there on a natural way, such as by the immense force of a mighty glacier, forming, with some white marble walls built into them, the ramparts of the city. Green trees grew on those trees, moss distributed in patches, all giving the wall an impression of being natural, while giving defenders an as good cover, passage, defence, and position as any fortification could, while mingling into nature.

To the west was an unending forest, named Greenwood for its particularly healthy trees, as Silanodel had told me. The crowns of its green trees moved in the winds, waving as if they were a sea of leaves.

To the north, as good as I could see over the golden roofs and mighty walls, were a good lot of sandy red hills. Withered bushes were scattered loosely on it, giving it the appearance of a hellish intermediary between our world and fiery darkness. It had no resemblance with the shining cliffs or the green forest.

To the west was a great, tumultuous sea. Salty water smashed against lines of gray docks made of granite, creating a safe port for the ships that dared to sail on it. The sea was mostly separated from the ocean, being surrounded by the lands of Colupan. Its humorous name was “pear sea”, due to its topographical resemblance to a pear.

The beauty of the white and gold city was breathtaking. To the south, where the ramparts were built into the natural stone, to the center, where the beautiful white palace crowned the city, everything was beautiful.

We descended the road that was carved into the cliffs. Due to its perfect stonework, it must have been constructed by mountain dwarves in the service of Denise. At times, the road tunnelled through an escarpment, while arching bridges crossed dark ravines falling far below.

As the soldiers of Denise touched the stone roads, and saw the totally preserved fortifications below, they seemed to relieve themselves of the great fear that they had all the way since the attack of Lamik.

Our way made a gracing turn over the greenwood below after a mile of travel or so and returned to the city. We could see several outposts and watchtowers from the road, one located on every major hill or landmark. We even crossed a small watch-house, constructed overhanging over a cliff face.

The few watchmen that inhabited the house contented themselves by simply saying hello to us. Even in wartime, it seemed that many caravans passed this way.

We continued our descent for a little while until we came to a gate spanning the road. It consisted of a ten-foot wide white crenelated marble wall, with a passage blocked by a chrome portcullis. A high watchtower originated left of the wall. It went straight up, attached to the cliff face. A pointed golden roof covered it, making out of the 200 feet high tower a majestic impression.

The wall spanned down from the guard tower down and down to the ground, becoming ever more level as the cliff face ebbed until it reached flat grass and a big square tower, built from the same white marble as seemingly every construction in Denise was made. It was topped by a round golden roof. The wall’s steep descent at the start gave it an almost towerlike look, while at the end it seemed almost like one of those mighty walls that guarded the city.

Another wall, as high as the one that descended from the cliff, jutted out of the square tower far below in a right angle, following the foot of the cliff until it reached a big oval tower capped by two golden gones under which the so small-seeming road led.

-’We need them to secure the road, so that if the city is taken, the people can flee through the fortified road’, said a soldier as I asked him about the meaning of the fortifications. ’Just after the guard tower, determined hostiles could climb up the cliff. Before it, it’s just to steep. We couldn’t build the wall next to the road because of the unstable rubble that spans from the road all the way down to the plain, so we could only build it down there. We used a lot of stone and manpower, but one can never be to sure.’

These guys’ security sense impressed me. We dwarves just built a big fortress and that’s that, but they looked for escape routes and secured them, and they probably invested just as much in blocking attack routes and destroying good attack positions. That seemed like a lot of work.

At the gate, a officer questioned us about our destination and why we wanted to pass here, if we had an armed forces or civilian pass, from where we came, what we were transporting, to what army division the soldiers who escorted us belonged, and plenty other information. In addition, they asked the sergeant some trick questions over the current troop positions, to check if he was really an army noncommissioned officer.

After he had answered all questions flawlessly, the portcullis slowly opened. We rode through the arch under the watchful eyes of the guards and pointed arrows, ready to launch at the slightest suspicion we were not what we seemed to be. As soon as our last wagon had passed, the chrome bars banged down, blocking once more the passage to the greatest human city.

Our way continued for a good while, coming ever nearer to the white wall below. As we came lower and lower, a wall emerged from the cliffs above and joined the road. The rubble at this height must have not been so loose as before.

Our way made a sharp turn and arrived at the foot of the oval tower. Soldiers named it “the Bastillon”, because it could act as an independent fortress.

The gates were open. The few watchmen present by the passage contented themselves to say hello, as had those from the watchhouse far above.

The road passed under an arching vault built into the stone and marble of the Bastillon. Three portcullises and two bronze gates could secure the passage in case of attack, but all were pulled up or opened to let pass travelers.

The road led out of the gloomy passage of the Bastillon. As we walked out in the sun, I expected that we would see the green grass of the plain, but was again wrong. The road became a large paved highway, bordered by a ditch and flanked by two white marble walls. Every 50 feet was a tower capped with gold.

-’Aye, those guys surely love fortifications and security’, said Darin.

He wasn’t amused at all over these great fortifications. His home, counting as “Brawnamar, the strong mountains”, was known to be the strongest fortress of the world. But all these precautions outside the place itself definitely helped more than huge walls. We dwarves could learn something from this.

Of course, as much as mountain dwarves are stubborn, they are full of pride. Seeing such walls outmatch his in a couple of ways, he was very unhappy.

We continued down the road for two miles, crossing many people on our way. Most were going away of the citadel because of the imminent danger near them.

We arrived before the great ramparts. Soldiers were walking to and fro on them, with a gigantic gate just before us. On its sides, the walls flanking the road merged into two great stone boulders, giving the gate an appearance of being enclosed between two rocks.

The majestic gateway was ten feet higher than the of the walls. The walls themselves were the nature-human mix I had observed from above, but as I soon learned, this sort of wall could be found only in the southern section: to the north, ninety feet high giants of walls protected the town, looking onto the dead expanse: to the east, it was mostly docks and low walls, while to the west, bordering on forest, the walls were thirty feet high, many wooden towers and battlements attached on top like random warts pasted on.

We walked to the entrance. It was blocked by an electrum portcullis with 1 foot thick bars. Two guards with lances were posted before it.

A corporal of Denise controlled every person that wanted to pass. Each time he authorized someone to come into the citadel, three dozen soldiers hieved up the portcullis and let it bang down just after their passage.

On the other side of the gate was a passage identical to ours for men leaving the city. Many people rushed through it, creating a massive wave that threatened anybody who pull with it the unwary who would try pass through. A handful of soldiers watched over them, helping the encumbered, and looking out for attempts of somebody who tried to get into the city by the wrong road.

A long file of humanoid creatures, mostly human and gnomish, waited for their turn to come into the walls.

We passed a good hour waiting and being let in. As the portcullis at last opened, we could just sigh in relief.

-’We shall go to the city hall’, shouted the sergeant to be heard by his men over the noise made by people around us. The streets, the walls, everything was made of marble or something else that was white, such as birchwood. The only exceptions were golden decorations and blue banners.

The sergeant guided us through the bustling city to a great palace. Constantly, we had to step aside to let a cart of groceries pass, or try to protect ourselves from the hooves of a division of cavalrymen riding the other direction. People shouted, horses neighed, carts broke, and in a whole, Denise gave me an impression of being very busy, while being surprisingly clean compared to other human places of equal size.

At last, we arrived at the temple. It had white columns all around, golden stairs leading up to it, and blue banners flapping in the wind.

A man descended the stairs to meet us. He was fatty, with little brown eyes and brown-golden skin.

-’The townmaster’, told me a nearby soldier.

-’My dear Rudolf, good sergeant!’, cried the townmaster. ’Happy to see you again! Was a good while since you departed to take possession of our new weapons! But, my, you don’t seem very fit. . . ‘

He looked at us all.

-’Wait!’, he cried. ’Where’s gone your lieutenant, Bolivar?

The sergeant became embarrassed at this question. He almost became like a little girl being questioned over a thing that she lied about.

-’Well, uh. . . Um…’, said Rudolf.

-’Do not continue’, said the mayor.

Silanodel my laughing heart-flower was amused by the perspicacity of our sergeant.

-’He is dead’, told the townmaster.

He seemed not very surprised as Rudolf approved.

-’And. . . ‘, continued the sergeant.

-’Stop!’, interrupted him the mayor. ’You also have crossed Liorrick and his company. ’

-’Well. . . ’, moaned the sergeant.

-’Ah!’, called the townmaster. ’You shall not continue. Something harmful also happened to our second lieutenant. ’

-’Well. . . ‘, said the sergeant.

-’Someone shall come and tell me the whole story’, said the mayor.

Nobody dared to tell the story to the townmaster. First, no one wanted to tell the terrible news. Second, and most important, nobody wanted to engage in conversation with someone speaking so much.

Nobody except my beloved Moonwhisper. She stepped forward, her black boots making a clunking sound on the ground. The townmaster looked up and smiled.

-’Ah, my dear lady, uhm, lady… Would you like to…’, started the mayor.

But she interrupted him, having so less interest in knowing his request than I.

-’My name is Silanodel, the moonwhisper. I think I should tell you the story’, she said.

She began to tell everything that had occurred during our voyage, or the parts she knew. She hushed the mayor so that she could tell everything she knew without being interrupted even only one time.

As she had finished, the townmaster found nothing more to say. A part of him was filled of sadness over what had happened to third marshall Liorrick, and he struggled not to show his feelings.

He just clicked his fingers and stepped away.

We were left to stand there while he went away. I profited of this little moment to observe Silanodel as she was there, and be enthralled by her beauty. As I was deeply submerged in my observations, two soldiers passed by, pulling me out of my half-trance.

They were talking about happenings at Porto Pueblo, an important port-city to the direct west of Denise, some 31 miles to the west.

-’You heard about the elven peace bringers?’

-’Yeah, what about them?’

-’Well, a dozen of them arrived the day we burned the wine brewery, ye see? They were coming directly from Bethynna or something, ready to purify people’s hearts and make them lay down swords, eh, and they started their holy mission off with, eh, getting into a fight with the squad chief, you see, so we had to fight them, and they’re dirty fighters, eh... They almost got Frederick, and…’

-’Wait, was that the day I was put to latrine service by the sergeant-major?’

-’Yeh, you missed something.’

-’I sure did. But, go on.’

-’Well, we were in a fierce battle, you see, and very occupied, and, eh, this Dwarf of some weird caravan asked for the way...I told him to go left, eh, no idea of what he was doing, and when they were gone, some people of wherever, I bet from one of the lands under the control of Ochebana, well, they started fighting us, and they killed Jaoldi, and we were in a very bad position, so the squad leader called reinforcements, and a regiment of Ochebana army soldiers appeared from nowhere, so they called upon the whole Denise army division in Porto Pueblo, and the emergency platoon, and assault barges from Ochebana appeared, and it was a great clash….They called upon every soldier in the region to give them Ochebanas a lesson...You see, just because the world is named after their organization doesn’t mean they can just assault us, ye know.’

-’Well, they didn’t get me and that damn sergeant-major to the fight…’

-’Yeah, he isn’t the one to give up on a guy in latrine duties…. Oh, I heard the new lieutenant-colonel is one of the bad types…’

-’Hey, let’s put vinegar in his cheddiethings…’

They got out of the reach of my ears just then, and I can tell now that listening to soldiers talking to one another is a very good source of information.

As I was digesting that Ochebana, whom I had always presumed is the name of the world, is also a human armed force, and that it is in a bad relationship with the Denise armed forces, a little man in violet robes with a pale yellow skin and fine grey eyes appeared out of seemingly nowhere. He offered us his services.

-’Come that way, please, noble strangers. I hope our little cottage will be enough for you misters… and madam!’, he said.

He caught a little look from Silanodel.. She slowly put her head a bit back, slit her eyes, and stood there a bit more stiffly, small signs of her displeasure that were very hard to discern, but which I had learned to know for the sake of survival.

Ignoring the signs of the moonwhisper, or not recognizing them, the man introduced himself as Liang and led us away to a “little cart”, as he named the pompous great birch and gold wagon that waited for us. As soon as Darin, Silanodel and I were seated on the great red silken benches, Liang took out a whip and got the cart going.

We bumped through the great white paved streets of Denise, laughing and singing all around this fabled city of mankind. We rode from the temple to a quartier near the giant forest, to the west. He brought us to a great blue-painted house standing against the city ramparts, which were pretty much a boring white wall at this height.

Liang bade us to enter, gave us a bunch of copper keys and rode off to familiarize with the rest of our party. Seen from far, the fast wagon of Liang looked pretty funny, with the little man jumping around on his seat.

-’Well’, said Silanodel, ’I’ll take the initiative for my two stout little dwarves.’

She took the bunch of keys and walked gracefully to the house, followed by Darin. I was a little behind, observing these great walls that I had never seen, so many times more graceful and higher that any dwarven house.

The fine white carvings on the walls of buildings were made in harmony with the many plants that decorated the mansions. There was a lot of space between houses for the trees, bushes, flowers, grass, men and carts.

Beautiful blue, white and gold columns decorated the gardens while curving branches crossed the road, giving the whole surroundings an impression of being built in the deepest forest. Only the well kept trees, flowers and grassy meadows, as well as the wall, showed that this was nature in the city, not the other way round.

-’Hey, slowy, com’ere!’, called Darin out of the doorway.

He interrupted fully my train of thoughts. I went to join him and Silanodel as fast as I could. As soon as I entered the great blue house, a fine odor of tulips came to my nostrils and surrounded me.

The whole house was beautiful. Red tapestries covered the white walls, while gold and white flagstones covered the floor. Here and there, blue banners hung by the tapestries.

-’Well, aye’, said Darin, ’I couldn’t imagine a life in here, but for some time…’

Darin Battlehammer was completely right. We passed the rest of our day exploring the large halls of the mansion. Everyone had a bed for himself or herself, as well as a little box for our clothes and a great cellar to store all the material for which we were actually here.

I had almost forgotten that we were in the front lines here to accompany weapons from Eisenhowl to Denise. Darin hadn’t at all forgotten, and even less the fact that we had left the weapons and war machines with the others as we had left the caravan.

-’I’ll not let them get away with it’, he mumbled.

As the sun began to set, he decided that he would get his material back. Really, sometimes, Battlehammer dwarves can be very concerned by things that others don’t find so important. They just stick to something and never let go.

Since we didn’t have horses, he walked around a bit, and while we waited, Silanodel and I hugged and kissed, and I appreciated the warmth of her body against mine. Unluckily, Darin soon reappeared, and led us to a little shed a couple of houses away from our mansion.

Five great brown steeds were eating a foul corn mix that repugned me. We took three of the horses, while I gave the prettiest to Silanodel, earning a little smile. When I asked Darin if we had the right to take those horses, and he assured me they belonged to our house.

We rode off in the direction opposite to the house at which the shed was attached to, and turned at a little intersection to regain the mansion and all the landmarks we knew. We crossed an old woman clad all in grey humping the other direction.

We galloped away into the direction from which we had came with the white wagon and Liang.

-’Aye, which way did we come from already?’, asked Darin at a crossing.

Silanodel, who always had a good sense of orientation in the wilderness, knew exactly how to navigate in the city. She had that good ability to adapt her various skills to the environment, one of the man reasons for which I admired her.

-’We should turn left’, she said.

Darin thanked her and galloped away in that direction. After some time of riding, we at last arrived by the city’s central square. In front of the city hall (which had the appearance of a temple), to Darin’s great delight, was a heap of dwarven weapons.

Men were loading them on carts. Darin immediately went to Liang, who was supervising the work under the diminishing light of this autumn evening, by the red glow of the setting sun.

-’Hey, you, yellowskin!’, called out Darin. ’What are you doing with my weapons?Where are you bringing them? Not into one of the city cellars of yours, I hope!’

-’Uh, noble mister…’, said Liang, ’well, you are quite right. Their destination is the big red house you see over there…’

Darin almost turned bright red at these news.

-’And…’, he asked, ’why is there this great cellar under my house?’

-’Oh, uh…’, said the little man, ’we thought you would want to store your wine in the room. ’

-’You think I drink so much?!!’

-’Well. . . There are some rumors flowing in town…’

Liang became a black eye this day. Darin took over, giving orders to complete the loading and to bring the cargo to his mansion instead to the hall owned by the city.

The men were labourers of the city and followed the mountain Dwarf’s instructions as much as any other orders.

The weapons were loaded quickly. The caravan began her slow trot to the mansion. Liang humped back to the city hall, the “small Templae”, as the men of Denise called their mayor’s house. The pale yellow-skinned man became almost invisible in the darkness thanks or more because of his dark purple robes. As we arrived in front of the mansion, it was 21 o’ clock, and I was getting tired of all this..

Darin decided to find an entrance from the road to enter into the cellar by it instead of trailing the carts through the house to the little door from which we had a passageway led to the big cellars.

Soon, a man carrying a torch came back from a reconnaissance trip.

-’I found a pair of big doors, over there!’, he called.

Darin went seeing behind the wall, then called:

-’Hey, you guys! Bring the carts over here!’

All the wagons went under way.

And I was left completely alone, with nothing much to do.

-’Go to sleep’, said Silanodel softly to me. ’Tomorrow’s another day.’

I didn’t let her say this a second time to me, since I had nothing else to do. I immediately opened the door and slowly walked to my chamber with the great, soft red bed.

Taking off my travel clothes and scale-chain-leather armor of Fireforge that I hadn’t taken off for good ten days in the fear of waylays and attacks on the camp by Lamik and his grim troop of minions proved difficult, as dust, grime, sweat, body hair, and armor had mingled into a single mass.

As I had finally stripped off all my clothes, I put on the very last piece of underwear I still had that wasn’t dirty. It was bright red with the blazon of Fireforge stitched on the front of it. I didn’t bother to put on any sleeping clothes, since even if we were in autumn, it was a hot and stuffy night. I was relieved at feeling so light, and I thought I could fly.

I didn’t even bother to take a bath, even though a skunk must have been a rose next to me. I just crept into the bed. Under the heavy red blankets, I fell asleep in no time. I had a great night, dreaming of beautiful dreams I cannot recall.

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# Chapter 6 - War Horns

-’Wake up, my sweet little grumpy Dwarf!’, cried a familiar voice.

It was my dear Silanodel, of course! I slowly woke up and went find my clothes. I put on a large white robe. I had found it placed on my bed, probably because some city guy had passed to bring me clothes.

The thing was really too wide. It was twice my width! To cushion the thing (There were golden brooches everywhere that bore into my skin) I put on my chain-leather armor, the one with the blazon of Fireforge made of pure mithral formed as a breastplate sewn to the leather padding. It felt a lot more comfortable like that.

Iput on that big white tunic over my chain mail. My eyes falling on my Greatsword, I hesitated putting it on, but it would be a bit much for a simple breakfast, so I attached my dagger, the one I had used against bugbears back on lovely Eisenhowl, on a big leather belt.

Silanodel was long there as I arrived at last by the dining room. Next to her was Darin, clad in the typical Battlehammer plate and chain armor, with a crossbow slung over his back and a shortsword fastened to his large war-belt.

Silanodel still carried her snow-white coat, but had put on a heavier leather armor than the one in which I had first seen her. Winter was nearing, and although it changed the weather only by a few degrees, it did feel colder than in summer. She had fastened her longsword to her fine belt. She had also attached a light crossbow and a quiver full of bolts to her back.

-’Aye, uh…’, I said, ’are we going on a war party?’

-’Of course not!’, called out Darin. ’Aye, you have the brains of an orc. Don’t you remember the speech of the announcer, last night?’

-’He was in bed’, said Silanodel.

-’Oh’, he said. ’Well. . . Guess I’ll tell you, Dain of Fireforge, son of Lorn of Fireforge, king of Eisenhowl. So… A guy came last night, at XI past meridiem. He told us that some sort of “enemy troops” was in the vicinity of Denise and that we should always have weapons at hand. It isn’t law, but…’

-’I’ll take my sword, thanks’, I said.

Darin decided to accompany me to my room to help me pick my weapons.

-’Aye, stinks like an orc’s loincloth in here!’called out Darin as we entered the room.

-’Well, my travel clothes are over there…’, I said.

-’Ugh’, answered Darin.

We looked at my weapons and decided I should carry my Greatsword on my back and my longbow with a full quiver under my white tunic.

-’Now you’re dwarven!’, called out Darin as he looked at me.

-’Thanks’, I said.

We returned to our finely decorated eating table, just after I had put my old clothes into the washing room. Darin Battlehammer had said it was necessary because “the whole world would suffocate”, as he told me.

We went back to the eating table. The moonwhisper had eaten more than it whispered under the moon at night, and was still going, so we were forced to eat not so slow as before. We loved to stuff us full with this delicate food.

Since sauted shrimps at fine basilisk sauce with bamboo splinters refined with rice wasn’t really my thing, I took a lot of the good corn bread and the red cheese that was a speciality of Denise and its country.

The cheese was pretty good and named “cheddie”. The little sandwiches on a silver plate, being made with crackers, a sort of sweet butter and cheddie, were named “cheddiethings”.

Humans surely had a great imagination. I wondered what salad sandwiches would be called. “Saddie- things”, surely.

Well, we had a menu. As I glanced at it, my theory was proven. There were “fishfings” (they must have written it wrong, I thought), as well as veggiethings, baconthings, tomatothings, smallthings and littlethings.

I didn’t know what the two last ones were, and I had no intention or even the slightest urge that I would want to try knowing.

I was just starting to eat my second chicken when a great howl made our dishes vibrate. Not a howl, actually, but some sort of a horn. It was taken up by other horns, until the whole city was vibrating under the low tone.

I ran, just like the others, to the edge of the terrace and looked over the balcony on the long rows of shimmering golden roofs.

I tried to make out from where all the blowing came. I then discovered that one man was blowing, using some sort of hunting horn, on each tower that lined the city wall, against which our house had been built.

In addition, there were some 100 feet tall white marble towers that were scattered all over the city of Denise. A great horn had been built on top of each, in which three men blew through three pipes that originated from the end of the horns.

-’Well, they ought to tell us soon enough what this fanfare is about, or I’ll tell them what it means to interrupt my meal’, muffled Darin.

-’Well, it seems to be important’, said Silanodel. ’Look at all these people running out of those houses!’

She was perfectly right. Everywhere, people ran out of their houses, rich and poor, high and low. Men, women, children, everyone was running out of their doors, some even taking fire exits or jumping out of windows.

Some tried to heap goods onto carts or stuff as much as they could carry into their pockets. What the hell was going on?!!

And still, the unceasing drone of the horns covered the city. Here and there, shouting could be heard. There was suddenly the sound of little brass trumpets and neighing behind a corner. Out came a pretty large group of riders, all dressed in the same white outfit and blue coats.

Those were soldiers of the Denise city guards! At least, the troops had arrived. But they didn’t seem to try to protect the citizenry: they stripped the fleeing people of all the goods they were carrying.

However, I was sure this wasn’t just a bunch of looting gangsters, for they were very orderly. Some of the cavaliers went to block all the side streets so the civilians only streamed on the main road, while others stopped all the citizens that were obstructing the passage.

Many men were led out of the rushing peasants so they could park their vehicles in little roads to be kicked back into the mass once they had done this. With the three dozen men of the city guard that controlled the traffic, the slowly moving mass became fast flowing rows of men, all running in the same direction.

To the gate through which we had entered, the day before.

-’Let’s see what’s going on¨’, called Darin.

He had no need to say this two times. We rushed down the stairs and into the streets. Just then, I saw something that I hadn’t seen from above.

All the grass was torn, muddy. The trees were heavily scarred by passing wagons, one had even broke. Dead flowers were crumpled in their roots. All the nature around us had became a battlefield or something similar.

Darin didn’t let himself be depressed by the dying plants, but rushed forth straight to the soldiers of the city guard. They were mounting their horses and about to ride away.

Silanodel, inversely, was very touched, especially as she saw a tree that had fallen. The cart that had done it still stuck on top of the split trunk. She hurried away, trying to save some dying flowers. She had no hope of succeeding at this, she knew it as well as I, but it didn’t let her down.

-’Hey, who are you?’, called out a haughty voice.

We probably were in trouble. One of the riders had seen us. The soldier had a great red feather sticking out of his helmet, golden bars on the shoulders of his white outfit. He seemed to be the boss of the little group that surrounded him.

As he turned his horse and advanced to me, I discovered that I had been wrong. The he was a she. Many men might have long blond-black hair, but there was another point that showed her real gender.

She had that typical face of egotistical female humans. Her uniform was decorated by many golden strings that that the typical city guard’s uniform only had in sparse quantities.

All of the guards present must have fought at least one or two battles, because their uniforms were pretty battered. They should have been in heavy combat not long ago. By the damage, I deemed the enemies seemed to have mostly clubs and spears as weapons. The lieutenant didn’t have a scratch.

-’I asked a question, and questions from the senior lieutenant of a city patrol are to be obeyed’, said the miss.

-’I was asking myself what all the fuss was about’, I answered rapidly.

-’You don’t know? Stupid! Those were our war horns. The enemy is at our walls, we are in war!’

-’Huh?’, I asked.

Darin could think faster. He scrubbed his chin a little, then cried:

-’Hey! Aye, my weapons! ‘Need to sell my weapons!’

There was some silence for a little while. At least, the horning from the towers had stopped a little time before. After some time, the lieutenant of the guard had finished her train of thought.

-’Your weapons will be taken care of. Where are they?’

-’In the cellar of my house…’, said Darin.

The woman didn’t answer, but simply held up her hand. She signaled her soldiers, then rode in front of them to our house. They found the big doors that led down to the cellar pretty soon. They rattled the locks, then began banging on the wood.

-’Hey, m’am, what are you doing?’, called out Darin.

-’Confiscating war facilities to the benefit of Denise’, she called.

At the manner with which she said this, you could easily think she was lecturing from the laws

-’They wanna steal our weapons!’, cried Darin. Then:

-’Follow me!’

He rushed into the house. He didn’t seem so concerned over the fact that enemy troops were at the walls of the city as he was over the guards taking away his weapons.

We rushed pass the halls of our mansion to the trapdoor that led to the cellar. Darin opened it in a rush and hurried down the wooden stairs to the floor of the cellar, 20 feet below. Seen from above, the massed heap of weapons and war machines were the more impressive. They were all ducked in one of the corners of this gigantic cellar, the one nearest to the doors.

Darin hit the floor and ran to the double doors that faced the street. Heavy things beat against them. The wood of the armored door already received splinters.

Darin rushed to the door and threw the five bolts that could secure the door. He began heaving the heavy iron bars that could be stuck in grooves worked into the stone around the door to make it impossible for it to break. I slid down the ladder in my rush to help him, collecting some nice splinters in my hands.

I didn’t care. I rushed over to him and we heaved the heavy bars together. We pushed one far into a groove, then back to fit it into the one parallel to it. After two other bars, the door was almost impossible to break.

-’Nice work’, said Darin.

There was a terrible shock against the door as a new attack was given against it. The woman lieutenant surely wasn’t dumb, for she hit exactly a the place where the fixations of a bolt must have been seen out there.

The bolt flew away, making a high arc and landing somewhere in a dark corner.

-’Fine, fine…’, mumbled Darin. Then: ’Wait! The entrance door! And. . . Where’s that moonwhisper of yours?’

-’Taking care of the entrance’, I answered.

Darin started to open his mouth when a terrible stroke almost tore our door in two.

-’My Dain, it looks like we will have to use drastic material’, said Darin.

He went directly to the place where the war machines were kept. He looked at them during a very short time, then went to the newer models from which our prototypes had just authorized construction by the dwarven weapons league.

You must know, the Battlehammer and Fireforge clans work together in a great weapon factory, our organization named “ Royal Dwarven Alliance of Weapons Constructing , Inc ” . We created numerous weapons in addition to complicated war machines.

Fireforge men brought science and unknown energy to our machines, while Battlehammer brought strength to build.

Well, anyway, we now had three special weapons of the Alliance, short RDAWC.

There was the old typical acidulate, which propels giant acid balls at enemies, more effective than a thousand archers. The ball was created by a balderik generator, which assembles the always-present acid in the air into a bucket. The bucket empties into a pipe system and formed by static electricity into balls of about 500 liters. The electricity energy comes from a typical energy creator, class I, form XIX. The balls were then hurled by a rope system, which a spring coiled. The whole machine reloaded automatically in about 10 to 20 seconds, depending on the acid present in the air. The minimum ever recorded was a range of 6.38 seconds between shots.

The whole thing cost only about 45’000 swan-kings, which were about 63’000 gold pieces in human money. That was about the price of a little army of 1’000 men for two years, and was guaranteed to have a lifetime longer than any of the men. Maybe not dwarves, but men. The cost is relatively small, compared to the other machines of the RDAWC.

There were also a Flametongue and a Shocker III. Both nasty and big weapons.

-’Pull out the firewheel, will ye?’, said Darin.

I was happy he hadn’t asked for the Shocker, since I was a bit humane.

Shockers are the worst weapon I know, and they are small and easy to handle. They could easily kill, especially this third model. The other two had only been known as prototypes, because they were judged “too lethal”. They killed too slow and in too much suffers, had declared the dwarven Security League, the DSL.

It consisted of a simple platinum-sheathed cart with a brass case mounted onto it. There was only a little stick that emerged from the top of it.

Of course, the thing was a lot more dangerous than it looked. The metal casing was only to protect its innards. At the back of a brass cube, a man could enter through a door. Inside, there was a motor fueled by worked hydrocarbons. We dwarves name it “Nàkbor”. By simply burning the thick liquid, which resembles peat, you can bring gas to the wheels. The gas powered each of the wheels separately, so there would be a lot more traction.

The gas, after having propelled a wheel, would then escape by a hole, giving the cart the appearance to be burning from the inside. Each wheel could be turned separately, and a lever could regulate the speed of the armed war wagon.

This was fine, but wasn’t a weapon. The weapon was, as one can imagine, the little stick that could be seen from outside. It was powered by a generator, which was a fifth wheel in the back. The generator was very similar to the one of the acidulate, since it also was class I. However, it was a lot more high-powered. Electricity, about 1’300 volts, came through a copper cable to the stick.

It was brought over in waves, one a second. When it erupted, it would search for a target. A beam would strike out of the stick, would hit something standing above the ground, and the something would be electrocuted to death.

How the current finds its target, don’t ask me: I am no employee of the RDAWC.

-’Hey, Dain! Get cracking!’

Darin had pulled me not very softly out of my thoughts. I rapidly heaved up the Firewheel that was leaning against a wall and rushed to the Flametongue, which Darin had already set up near the door. We pulled up the large stone together, and he fitted it into the slot destined for it. The Flametongue was a big cart, with a little turret and something resembling a trumpet on top of it. The whole thing could rotate on itself.

How the thing worked, no need to tell: the door crashed open, bits of wood and iron flying everywhere.

Men from the city guard-and some soldiers, too!-let a tree that they had used as battering ram fall, pulled out their swords and ran to us. The mean attractive lieutenant must have called some reinforcements, for there were two times more city guards than before. A little group of soldiers had arrived, too, their mail-clad uniforms impressive over the bunch of men clad in the white leather of the guard.

They all rushed forward into the cellar, weapons bristling and armor shining. I thought we were lost.

-’Turn the crank!’, called Darin.

I saw it, so I jumped over to it and began turning. The sight was impressive. Gears brought the Firewheel turning. Though some complex and smoking processus, fire came out of the trumpet and gushed at our attackers.

Most of them could run away before the flames hit, but some ran out, clothes burning, while a couple of charred corpses fell to the floor. I found it to be a disgusting sight, but was still impressed by the incredible weapon.

As I looked, I saw a living body that was by the door. It had bad burns in the back. Blond hair with some black stripes covered the face that was looking down at a burnt patch on the uniform.

Could it be? Since the enemy wasn’t showing himself, I jumped off the cart and ran to the person. As she, for it was the lieutenant, put up her face, I could see cold hatred in those blue eyes. She picked up her longsword and rushed at me.

Chapter 7 - City Guard

A dumb idea, because I was martially trained and still had plate armor on me. To show off a bit, I pulled out my dagger, disarmed her as she rushed, that lacerated the whole leather suit.

She swooped by, and fell. She stayed where she had fallen. The burn was too bad, she had already fallen unconscious of blood loss. I ran to the body and observed the wound.

She had several holes of fire on her back. I cut off the upper uniform with my dagger and began making bandages out of my white tunic that I had put on that morning.

The bandages didn’t work too well, but it stopped her from losing blood. The infection, however, would be very bad. It tied up the hands and feet of the lady and ducked her behind a pile of boxes. I didn’t know why, but I had the feeling that I had to take her with me until she would be healed.

-’Dain!’, called Darin. ’They're charging!’

I asked myself why I thought that I should keep her. I deemed that she could somehow hypnotize me, but couldn’t work on that idea.

-’Hey, Dain, what the hell are you doing? They are charging!’

Darin was on the Flametongue, turning the handle furiously. Tons of attackers-mostly soldiers-were rushing forth. I wondered how this had happened, but decided this would be too complicated to find out.

Flames shot out of the horn, hitting squarely a lot of enemies. But it wasn’t pointed: Flames were actually gushing in all directions. I looked back at the dying body, then rushed to the Flametongue to help Darin.

As I jumped onto it, some guys in chain mail were already dangerously near. I grabbed the hilt of the trumpet-which seemed surprisingly cool-and roasted them. It was quite fun, firing all those troops off.

Darin put on some motor and we rolled forwards to the door. Burning everything as we advanced. When we arrived at last before the opening, most of the enemy had retreated.

Some couple of soldiers were holding line against us, bolstered by rare city guards, but rapidly showed us their turned backs as they fled. Probably searching security from our flames.

-’We gotta get out of here’, said Darin. ’Those guys will surely search reinforcements, so we will have the Denise troops on our backs, not on those of the enemy hordes. ’

-’Wait-Why do we actually fight the soldiers?’, I asked.

-’Because they wanna steal our weapons!’, shouted Darin.

Oh, right, it was because of these things that we were risking our lives.

-’Sooo. . . What are we going to do?’

-’We'll propose our services to the mayor and fight off the enemies. ’

-’We’re going to surrender?’

-’Of course not! They would steal our weapons, and that’s that!’

-’Uh? Aye, I don’t think I can follow. ’

-’We will sell our weapons and enlist on the side of Denise. ’

Oh! Well, Darin surely wasn’t a dumbnut. Except that we had just burned a couple of them, which I said to him.

-’We will arrange ourselves, maybe give them a five percent reduction on our weapons’,said Dain.

All right, cold mountain Dwarf logic is always an answer. I let it lie. But there were other problems, like:

-’How will we get there?’

-’As city guards. ’

The uniform to go with us wasn’t hard to find. There were many which littered the floor. We took the ones that weren’t too damaged and put them on. They were both too big, but a few cuts arranged this.

-’Ready to go?’, asked Darin.

-’Ready to go!’, I said.

-’Aren’t you forgetting somebody?’, a voice called out.

Silanodel! She had appeared out of apparently thin air and was now standing just behind my back. I sighed and quickly explained the situation. She then declared:

-’I am coming with you. ’

I tried to tell her that there was no uniform fitting her, but she decided that a too big leather suit would still fill in her needs.

She walked away and finally found a still-intact city guard uniform. But from where she stood, she saw the tied up lieutenant behind the boxes.

-’Dain, who’s that?’, she asked.

-’Well, aye’, I said, ’it’s a lieutenant of the Denise city guard. She’s actually the only one who survived our fire. I’ve bandaged her, but she will…’

-’Die of infection’, said the elf, finishing my phrase. ’Let’s see what I can do for her. ’

She walked to the lieutenant, followed by me and Darin. She bent over her and looked at my bandages and the wounds.

-’She has no lethal or mortal wounds’, she said, ’except for that burn on the back. I will try to fix it. ’

But, as she bent to untie the bandages, the lieutenant began giggling in her binds and saying words in a language I happily didn’t understood.

But Silanodel did. She made a very unhappy face. Then, she pointed her finger to the head of the lieutenant and said:

-’Amàlonir!’

The lieutenant immediately stopped and seemed in a trance.

-’I have cast the spell of obedience on her’, she said. ’She will now follow my command. So, woman, what is your name?’

-’Juju meem’, said the lieutenant with a toneless voice.

-’Good’, said Silanodel. ’Now, sleep. ’

The lieutenant seemed to sleep. Silanodel opened her bandages and bindings, then began passing her fingers over the burns of Juju Meem.

-’Now, leave’, she said to us. ’This is highly secret elven healing magic, and only elves can know it. Wait outside the house for me.

We went and sat by a nearly dead tree. We heard a few bribes of elvish chants, then nothing. Silanodel appeared about twenty minutes later and said:

-’I did what I could’, she said. ’My trance will keep her asleep for good two weeks, so we must not look for her until that time is passed. ’

-’Well, let’s ride off!’, said Darin.

-’No. I have to do something first’, said Silanodel. Put the Flametongue back while I walk with Dain, will you, Darin?’

With a few complaints, Darin went to the great form of the Flametongue.

-’Aye, it will be evening when we will go!’, I heard him say.

-’Come, beloved one’, said Silanodel.

With no further remarks, she walked off in the direction of a little house. Just before its entrance, she stopped.

-’See those dead flowers over there?’she asked.

-’Well, aye, I think so’, I said.

-’This shall not be’, she continued.

-’Huh?’

-’Ever heard of magic?The thing I did back there to Juju?’

-’Björn Greataxe over on Arabor has a little magic amulet. He is very wise. Where is yours?’

-’Oh, a talisman. Well, I can do magic without it. See the little flower here?’

She began waving her hands over it and mumbling an elven chant. Nothing happened. Oh, it did! The dead flower became bigger and bigger, then began to become full of life once again.

-’Wow’, I said.

-’That’s not all’, she answered. ’Amönàlonian!’

She outstretched her arms and a wave of yellow force swept over the whole flower bed, which instantly popped up into a thousand flowers.

-’Now the trees’, she said.

The same scenario repeated itself. Trees went out of their dead trunks, grass grew a meter high, nowhere was a bare spot. Well, I think the beloved wood elf Silanodel mine had achieved what she wanted.

-’Well, aye, incredible’, I said.

-’Yes’, she answered softly.

She passed her arm over my shoulder-I was too short to do the same-and we observed the newly made nature.

-’Hey, guys, let’s go!’, called Darin from behind somewhere.

-’Yes, let’s!’, said Silanodel.

But suddenly, Darin thought that maybe he should lock the door to the weapons cellar, because it would not be wise to leave the weapons that we had defended for so long lying there with the door wide open, so he locked it and heaped a pile of stuff in front of it. Then, finally, he said:

-’Now we shall go.’

We rode off in a great hurry, or actually Darin was in a great hurry, a good business in mind, and we did our best to follow. As we galloped through the streets, we passed many patrols which were mostly soldiers that didn’t even bothered looking our way. We were more than happy to have put on the uniforms.

The few riders that we passed all were of the city guard. We ignored them as they ignored us. We swiftly came to the great building that served as city hall.

Darin was already on the stairs when the door opened. The servants of Denise surely were fast on their feet. The guy that had opened the door had the same clothes as Liang, but they didn’t resemble each other, for this one had pitch black skin.

-’Lwog, at your service’, said the guy in violet robes. ’How can I help you?’

-’Get us to the mayor’, said Darin.

-’I’m sorry, but he isn’t here. ’

-’Then I want your foreseer, your boss’, said the only slightly irritated mountain Dwarf.

-’Sorry, but my foremaster is the mayor and this one isn’t present. ’

-’Then I want his second-in-command!’

-’I am incredibly sorry, but his secretary, god bless his soul, is absent, accompanying the mayor. ’

-’Then I want the secretary of the secretary! Who damn is it?’

-’So sorry, but Liang, the secretary, has no vice-secretary. ’

-’I want your highest boss that is present now and here!’

-’I am sorry, but…’

-’Shut up, nigger’, said a deep voice from behind the door.

Whoever this was, I would be sure to burn his innards. Dwarven Empire law had dictated that any racism would be forbidden, which had been accepted by all of the Empire. This decadent world of men would not ignore the laws of our glorious empire!

Only the decoration of the men that opened the door completely restrained my attack. He also wore the uniform of the city guard, except that he had a lot more bolden braid and buttons on than anyone I had seen so far. Some of the pieces of his uniform resembled to those of someone I knew…

But I couldn’t think of anyone, so I said nothing.

-’Three soldiers of your district…’, said Lwog.

The big guy pushed the poor servant away an said:

-’Who dares knocking at the door of Liorred the mean, second marshall of Denise and chief of all police and guard forces?’

Liorrick! Of course! Bolivar had said something like “third marshall of Denise”. . . At this time, I didn’t understand the system of these marshalls and the army of Denise. Now I did!

There must be two security forces: The army and the police, into which the city guard must be included. The two corps were ruled by three marshalls. The army seemed to be the less important corps, since only the third marshall (lowest of the three) was in charge of it.

Then, the police was under the command of the second marshall. Security in the cities seemed to be more important than security outdoors. At last, one marshall was named to rule over the two others, to maintain balance. This was the role of the first marshall.

If Denise had a democratic government, I didn’t know, but this famous first marshall very probably wielded all the power with his two lower colleagues.

-’I asked a question!’, boomed the marshall.

-’We are three persons’, said Silanodel. ’One elf and two dwarves. I am originary of Silur, the elvenhome. My dwarven companions come from Eisenhowl, the dwarven island. I am 365 years old, while Darin-here-has 398 years and our joung Dain has only 29 years. We are named Silanodel the moonwhisper, Darin Battlehammer, chief of his clan, and Dain Fireforge, prince of …’

-’Shut up!’, cried the second marshall.

He seemed not very interested in our titles. Well, I would teach him someday what it meant to ignore the successor of the throne of Eisenhowl! But not now, for we needed to make a success out of this not-too well going conversation.

-’Whaddayawant?’, said the short-of-words Liorred.

-’We want to sell you weapons’, said Darin Battlehammer in full pride.

-’Eh? Why must I buy my weapons from my policemen?’

Liorred fell out into a hideous roar that probably meant laughter in the language “Segund- marshallis”.

Darin, letting nobody laugh at him, began an agitated conversation with mister police chief. After some while, the marshall let him into the city hall. But not Silanodel and I!

-’Go, prepare the weapons’, had said Darin as he had passed me.

We rode away our two steeds. I found out that the patrols somewhat had lessened, for we only crossed an occasional soldier. Far away, we could hear the sound of crashing stones and other warfare.

After some while, we at least arrived at our mansion. On this side, no battle was fought: It seemed to concentrate on the north side, where the red desert was located.

As we walked to the double doors, Silanodel said that she would bring the horses back. I just nodded the head in agreement without real background thoughts. I was very preoccupied over our future.

All I wanted to do now was to climb with my companions over this wall and disappear in the woods. But no, there was this lieutenant. I don’t know why, but I somehow just couldn’t leave her there to die. I also certainly didn’t love her, because my heart was fully devoted to Silanodel.

But I didn’t want her to stay on the floor, so I said:

-’Get into the Shocker and sleep until awakened. ’

She didn’t react. Oh, yes, Silanodel had taken off the spell of obedience. So I packed Juju on my back and carried her to the Shocker. I installed her nicely, then stepped out and locked the Shocker just as Silanodel reappeared.

-’You seem sad’, she said.

-’I am’, I said.

Silanodel was a good healer, but not only of the body, also of the soul. We went out, hand in hand. We walked happily through the nature before our house and had an almost as good time as we had had the night of the orc attack. We were both very, very happy.

Marching sounds and shouts disturbed us. They came from the road and seemed to be proceeding to our mansion.

-’Let’s go and see’, said Silanodel.

When Silanodel and I came back to the battered door, a lot of troops were coming in. There were mostly city guards, but also some army troops. About two dozen soldiers were running to have some weapons.

Darin came up behind, a bag of money slung over his shoulder. When he saw us, he waved and shouted.

-’Greet them merrily’, he said. ’For we are their new and only allies. ’