

Dwarf War

"Over the roasted cinders of my blessed red beard!" spat Hogan as he charged, helm first, into his war room. His five war chiefs struggled to alertness, shaking off the countless days without sleep.

His xeras, Sweeny and Hawist, woke from their catnaps, both exhausted from another day of hard magic. The confined spaces of the dwarven tunnels prohibited the use of simpler fire spells. They had to snake their columns of fire through passageways, avoiding friends and incinerating foes, leaving the structural integrity of the shafts intact. The strain of the difficult magic took its toll.

"Dento carddon leads to the heart of the whole vein, and I won't give it up. I want Rockred and Ironmelt, out of Greco and sent there. I want you to hold, hold, hold! Never forget that every boulder is a precious bone in the body of yer barrow!" He thrust a grimy finger first at the respective commanders, and then at a marvellously detailed three-dimensional granite miniaturization of the entire barrow that occupied the room.

Hogan's three thousand dwarves lay under a brutal siege by a horde of Glonards, a degenerate - rotten in the local vernacular - form of the dwarf direction. They swarmed out of the countless natural caves and tunnels that honeycombed the mountains. Hogan's tacticians found it impossible to mount any effective offence against them in the maze of passages, and they consequently adopted an entirely defensive posture.

Right before Cet's visit to collect his axes a few days before, they had defeated or otherwise chased off the first wave. The situation seemed under control. Instead, the encounter had only proven a portent of the engagement to come. The Glonards returned with a much larger force, supported by several xeras that did not have the same compunction about the use of explosive force or friendly kills as his own sorcerers.

The uncharted underground caverns made it difficult to judge the enemy's real number, and the horde had Hogan's troops at their limits. Although, Hogan's dwarves killed Glonards three or four to one, there seemed no end to the creatures.

For the first time in the stormy history of his little dwarven country, Hogan felt a real fear for their survival.

The barrow consisted of eight caverns or carddons, which the dwarves shaped into living spaces, workshops, and foundries. Honwee sat in the centre like the hub of a wheel; four carddons, above, below, east and west, surrounded it. The other three, the earthmost, ran in a line level with the lowest of the central caverns. A wide underground avenue connected each to its nearest neighbour. Hundreds of exploratory and mining tunnels spawned out from these main passageways, penetrating like roots into the various veins of ores, either precious or useful.

The dwarves maintained a thirty-foot high model of the entire barrow in the war room. An excellent piece of dwarven stone craft powered by a large red ruby in its centre, it faithfully recorded the position of the carddons, tunnels and natural caverns. They constantly enlarged and embellished the miniature as the barrow grew. The sturdy construction allowed Hogan and his war masters to scurry around on it like monkeys on mad juice. This they did - beards trailing as they swung from shaft to shaft - swearing, cursing, and shouting orders at underlings.

Attendants communicated with forward observers using Kartha's signal stones. They gestured at, and continually rearranged, the various small glowing figurines that represented their own and enemy

troops. Occasionally they adjusted the model itself when they received reports of new tunnels dug by one or the other sides in the conflict.

In the war room Hogan felt like the fiery mind of a mighty dwarven body. During the battle, the king spent the majority of his time here. His troops had fought other battles, but never before had so much blood, their own and the enemy's stained the floors of the barrow. Hogan would only join the battle firsthand if Honwee itself came under attack and he found the itch in his axe arm disturbing.

Hogan's tactical mind grasped the complexities of the three-dimensional world below the surface. To fight effectively underground you had to know the lay of the labyrinth, and remain mobile enough to out manoeuvre your opponent in the tunnels; and he commanded his squads through the mines like blood through arteries carrying the cure for the disease of Glonard infestation.

The centre of Hogan's current concerns lay in Dento, the earthmost of the carddons in the barrow; a large rectangular space, hundreds of yards long, bifurcated vertically by a ten-foot wide mantle that ran around the perimeter.

The dwarves had recently (just under four hundred moons) fashioned the ceilings, walls, and floors of a natural cavern into the Dento carddon. They did not yet use it as living space so the walls had few embellishments. The intricate stonework associated with dwarven architecture would come later.

The bridge that once crossed at the centre had collapsed into a pile of rubble on the vast floor.

The rock heartward of Dento contained the richest veins so far discovered, and they had latticed the space with the five-by-five foot mining tunnels favoured by Hogan's engineers. Two natural passages from the carddon led to the caverns deeper in the mountains, and the Glonards now controlled these wild caves completely.

"...but that will leave our east flanks without guard! They'll take the entrance hall!" protested Paranda, commander of the Rockred brigade.

"The entrance hall leads to nothing but daylight. Glonards can't abide it. By the hell of the swamps, they're terrified of it," Hogan snorted. "By my beard, if they get a nose full of the veins near Dento, they will not be stopped. Once they're in the main mine works we'll never get 'em out!" After a quiet pause he added, "Besides, I don't intend to let them get as far as the entrance."

The commanders of the GraniteFace and BadBeard brigades currently defending the beleaguered Dento, nodded their agreement with Hogan's assessment. Garand Heavyvein, commander of Cinder melt, who would sound the retreat and give up the Greco cavern his troops had held for days at great cost, had less enthusiasm.

Each of the five brigades consisted at full strength of about five hundred dwarves. Cinder melt had lost more than half their number, and their position had become untenable.

Garand acquiesced, his pain shared.

Hogan knew what was what.

"Sweeny! Hawist! Cover the retreat...Then prepare to collapse Greco."

This last order shocked the battle-hardened hearts in the room. The entire concept of the collapse of a carddon offended a proper dwarf - akin to a captain scuttling a ship. Worse even, because to a dwarf the carddons and tunnels of his barrow felt like living things, lovingly carved and decorated, built to last

and last. Dwarves preferred to keep their options open, even sacrificing a tunnel for the best of tactical reasons had no appeal. To order the destruction of an entire carddon indicated to the commanders Hogan's desperate view of the situation. The xeras groaned in unison, loathing the stress the magic would require. It would also require a significant amount of their gem reserves.

Hogan considered calling on Cet for assistance. But, the Citadel's human troops would have little value down in the tunnels - maybe for open combat in the carddons. The real battle flowed through the tiny passages, and that required a diminutive stature. Maybe they would lend him Finch's Hornets, and he could always find use for another xera, regardless of size.