

Battle of the Ever-Standing

The sun sat in its eternal position above the Northern Peaks, casting a long shadow on half of the desert of Takk'ona. Amongst the sand lay millions of diamonds sparkling in the sun's light. Red splotches stretched along many parts of the desert, serving as a reminder of past battles for the ever so scarce wellsprings of water. These wellsprings appear randomly across the desolate landscape, making the human tribes of the land desperate for the water, then disappear one to two hundred hours after appearing.

D'kannuo, also known as The Wanderer, looked at the lone structure before him. His name specifically means "The One who Wanders" in the Old Words, the discarded human dialect only used for naming and traditions now. The language had since then been replaced in favor of Common, a language all three races of Takk'ona used; and of those three races, only one of them was created to build an edifice such as this, and that was not the humans.

The fort at first glance is small and relatively unimposing, but to the human race it is a powerful symbol of past mistakes. Nothing grand, it was simply a three-storied tower with a small parapet on top. Much of it was a pale crimson, implying it was built largely through dunecasting. A curved archway marked the entrance on the front of the fort, and a jagged hole in the back seemed an odd back entrance. It was created through a mixture of Sandcasting and fennec engineering, and was currently tilted a small degree, for it was built atop softer sand on one side. The place had been abandoned shortly after it was built, and no one in memory has entered in since then, believing it to be cursed by Takk, god of the sand and the human race. No one until D'kuanno. There were still many hidden secrets within its walls for that reason.

One hundred and thirteen years ago, a small, nameless tribe with the help of a single fennec engineer, created the first and only human structure. This did not last, for nearly a year later, they disappeared. It was suspected that Takk banished them from the world entirely. D'kannuo believed otherwise but wasn't entirely sure *what* he believed. And so, he decided to come here and solve the mystery for himself.

He nervously walked beneath the archway inside the sandstone fort. Darkness enveloped him but was soon banished as he lit a torch. The fire illuminated the scratched walls of the chamber.

Curious, The Wanderer thought, approaching the wall to inspect the scratches. As he neared them, he realized they were not just scratches, but glyphs in the Old Words. D'kannuo grinned widely at the discovery, lifting his torch near the ceiling to delve into his finding.

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The sand glimmered brightly as I formed the final brick, meaning that Takk himself was proud of our achievement. Our new home is complete! It only took the dreams of a hopeful tribe, a powerful Sandcaster and chief (who I so humbly admit to be myself), and a curious fennec. I remember standing on the top of the fort, conversing with Tenna, a small, vulpine woman. "The problem with you humans is that you only try to appease your god. You do not try to provoke change, which is precisely why enjoy your tribe's company. You want progress, but you still think like humans."

I replied, admitting that we did not build this for reasons of scientific progression, only as a new method of protecting our people. She laughed but said no further.

I should mention that I am carving this into the walls of this very fortress for the hour my tribe no longer walks these lands, instead lying peacefully beneath the sand.

Peace. It is in short supply for us these hours. The other tribes do not seem happy with our decision, and we would seem outnumbered had Takk not been on our side.

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There was a small break between that phrase and the next. D'kuanno hopped from foot to foot, as if warming up for a coming fight, then continued reading.

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The Takk'khenem tribe, the hands of Takk, approached our fortress two hours ago. Their chieftain, Kett'nek, strode in front of his guards to meet me in front of the fort. He

stopped a few feet in front of me imposingly, and I could not help but want to feel small in front of him. I stood my ground nonetheless, for we are both chieftains, therefore are equals.

“So, this was not built by fennec.” Kett’nek said flatly, seeming entirely uninterested in our fort.

“Not... entirely.” Tenna stepped out into the sunlight with a forced smile. “I assisted out of curiosity.” She motioned to me, continuing with, “He, however, did most of the work, with his... you know...” She held her hands in front of her and wiggled her fingers.

“Sandcasting.” I filled in for her. “Yes, I cast this. I am Pau’dhul, chieftain of my people. I am—”

“You are going to destroy this fort.”

I stiffened as Kett’nek spoke, suddenly, frighteningly, realizing the mistake I had made.

“*What?*” Tenna exclaimed from behind me. “You cannot— shouldn’t— no, will *not* be permitted to do that!”

I turned to her, sighing and trying to hide my dismay, “Unfortunately, my friend, he is. His tribe is stronger than ours.”

“Why? Why does that matter?”

“My army is greater than yours, yes,” Kett’nek interjected, “but that is not the problem. It is against Takk’s will to build on his body. You defy *him*.”

“I mean no offense, but it is not against Takk’s will for a leader to defend his people.”

“Tear down this fort, or I will do so. *By force*.” Kett’nek replied irritably, walking away without another word. I stood there, terrifyingly unsure of my next action.

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My tribe was unnervingly silent in the hours between my initial confrontation with the Takk’khenem, and the next.

It was only a few hours after Kett'nek had threatened me that I saw movement in the map of the desert in my mind (one perk of my dunecasting abilities), about two miles from our position. I could not see what it was, but I knew. Kett'nek was returning with an army. I exploded into action, scrambling down the stairs from my vigil on the top of the keep.

“Defensive positions! We are under attack!” I shouted. The lounging guards jumped to their feet, donning their hide vests of a race long extinct and grabbing their spears, running down and relaying the message below. I returned to my mind, assessing the footsteps in the distant sand. I counted over sixty pairs of feet, and my face paled. My tribe only consisted of thirty-four warriors that could fight, and none had experience. I continued downward, judging my options. The women, non-fighters, and Tenna streamed upstairs, to the floor second to the top. Good, the warriors remembered the defensive procedure.

Then my idea came to me, an idea that may save us. Two of them, in fact. I sprinted down to the bottom floor and outside. The guards stood in three ranks of eleven, except for the front rank, which contained a twelfth. The back two ranks held long-spears, and the front rank held short-spears and shields.

“Everyone put down your weapons, I have a plan! I need everyone to build dunes there, there, there, and there” I pointed to four locations spread along the area in front of our fort. “I need them large enough for at least two of you to crouch behind. And don’t make them obvious! I know it sounds absurd, but it is all we have. Takk save us.” The soldiers nodded, moving to work almost immediately. My soldiers were untrained, but loyal nonetheless.

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D'kuanno paused and stepped outside the fort, noticing four distinct red splotches in the sand outside. He grimaced. It either went very well for those warriors, or quite the opposite.

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I grabbed a pelt from inside and lay it out on the sand in front of me and crouched down, placing my hand in the sand next to it. Letting out a low hum, I channeled the sand's power. In doing so, the sand streamed up between my fingers, now a deep crimson from the magic being drawn from it, coalescing into multiple fist sized chunks, and dropping solidly onto the pelt, its magic expended. I pulled the corners of the pelt up, forming a very rudimentary sack and lifted, but it was slightly too heavy to carry. I called a warrior over to help me with it. I guided us upstairs with the stones.

Reaching the top of the stairs, I found the non-fighters hiding in the upmost floor with a ceiling covering it. The warrior and I set down the sack, revealing its contents. A few of the stones rolled off the sack, and he fetched them as I turned to the people huddled before me. They watched me nervously as I began to speak.

"I do not want to make you do this, but I have no choice. I need you to help me fight, but you will be safe." *Hopefully*, I added mentally. I hefted one of the stones, presenting it to the group. "All I need you to do is, when the enemy arrives, throw these at them when they are in range. If you run out, just stay down here." I began to hand the stones out, and my people took them, some hesitantly. I skipped over those who were too weak to throw.

"What will this do to help us win? We can't kill anyone with these." A woman spoke up, meeting my eyes.

"I am not expecting you to kill, distract at least," I replied, "we can use every edge we have. And you never know what you can do. You may help us win this battle. Takka save us" I repeated. After my final words, my people began to stand straighter than before. It is surprising what one can get others to do with a chance at making a difference knowing they won't die.

I returned outside to create another batch of sandstones. After that, I stood in front of the fort, surveying the land before me. My warriors had completed their task, and two or three were crouched behind each mound of sand. We stood in silence for an hour. I could tell my warriors were frightened, and I wish I could inspire, or at least soothe them, but no words came to mind. Frankly, I was frightened too.

I hope we can win this fight.

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D'kuanno looked to the fourth wall to continue, but he was surprised to find it empty, except for a small, vague phrase carved frantically into the sandstone: *Do not trust the ground you walk on*. D'kuanno squeezed his eyes shut. The tribe likely didn't survive the attack.

The Wanderer walked back into the sunlight, determined to, somehow, give the Takk'khenem what they deserved... or at least inform them of what their ancestors had done. He would continue the true legacy of the forgotten and tell the story of the Ever-Standing.

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Pau'dhul, or Friend of Battle in common, watched as the Takk'khenem crested the final dune before his fort. His sword, the only one in the tribe's possession, scraped out of its scabbard as he pulled it free.

"Battle positions, friends! We will not fall this hour!" he shouted, and the warriors straightened, spears and shields at the ready.

Pau'dhul could make out Kett'nek at the front of the ranks of warriors, his own sword in his hand. As they approached, he pointed his sword at the defending warriors.

"Chieftain of this tribe, step forward! Your continuous defiance of Takk's will has screamed for your death. Plead for mercy now and he may spare you. Do not, and his Hands will crush you in their grip."

After Kett'nek said that, his warriors chanted in unison, "Nis un d'Takk'khenem!" *We are the Hands of Takk*. A silence of motion and voice followed until Pau'dhul stepped forward slowly, deep in thought.

Why should they, the humans of Takk'ona, live according to a god that cannot be seen in body or action? Why should they follow a god that lets only the strongest survive, and not the smartest? Why follow a god that has condemned them to this fate, fighting for water and killing each other over it when he could just give them *more*?

He leaned to a warrior in the back line, whispering in his ear "Prepare the non-fighters for a retreat out the back of the fort if a fight begins. Make sure they throw their stones first." The warrior seemed confused, but before he could reply, Pau'dhul added "Trust me."

He stopped for a moment, squeezing his eyes shut, imagining the empty wall he had not written on, and imagined the glyphs he was going to write, and willed the sandstone to change, scrawling a likely jagged and messy phrase on the wall.

Do not trust the ground you walk on.

He did not want to name Takk specifically, so only the smartest will understand, for it is the smartest who will save the people of Takk'ona from a tyrannous, heartless god. Pau'dhul opened his eyes and continued forward. Both sides had not moved.

"Praying to Takk for mercy?" Kett'nek taunted, brandishing his sword.

"No." Pau'dhul said forcefully, meeting his eyes and stopping a spear-length away from him. "I denounce Takk."

The sentence seemed to physically shock Kett'nek, as he stumbled back, eyes wide. No one has ever spoke those words before on Takk'ona. His eyes quickly turned from surprise to fury.

"How... *how DARE you!*" Kett'nek seethed. He moved into an attack stance, but Pau'dhul was prepared. He willed the sand between them to rise. A wall of sand burst up between Kett'nek and Pau'dhul. He pushed the sand forward and released it. The wall crashed into his opponent, turning a deep red as it did, now useless to dunecasters. As he was disoriented, Pau'dhul lightly shifted the sand in a large circle around them, using its magic, making it useless to any other dunecasters, even himself. He ducked as Kett'nek took a blind swing at him, then turned and used his dunecasting a final time to blast a hole in the empty wall inside the fort. The blown-off pieces of the fort disintegrated, no longer held together by his magic. He mentally decided to cease his use of magic, for it was taxing on his physical strength.

He turned out his attention back after the mere second of casting, returning to his practiced stance. Kett'nek wiped most of the sand out of his eyes and ignored the rest. He replicated his stance, and they began to exchange a flurry of blows. No one from outside dared interfere when two chieftains fought. Dents began forming in the swords that barely met another blade in their lives. Pau'dhul was slightly outmatched, staying mostly on the defensive as Kett'nek relentlessly attacked.

He didn't even notice his first wound. He continued swinging with gritted teeth, then realized how heavily he was losing as another wound appeared. In a longer lapse between blows, Pau'dhul struck out with his foot, colliding it with Kett'nek's knee. He stumbled back and involuntarily doubled over. Taking his opportunity, he struck down, managing to make a large wound on his opponent's right shoulder, his sword arm. Kett'nek let out a bark of pain, and Pau'dhul mentally cheered. Then Kett'nek stood up straight, tossed his sword to his left hand, and continued fighting as easily as he had before. Kett'nek was caught off guard that he was fighting an ambidextrous opponent, and had no practice fighting one.

The switch made the fight more difficult for both fighters, as more wounds quickly began appearing on each of them. Pau'dhul noticed he had to now focus on keeping his consciousness. Sweat seemed to seep out of his body like a wellspring. His wounds stung, but he would not let that tear away his focus from him.

Kett'nek tried to pull one of Pau'dhul's tricks from him and tried to throw out a kick. Pau'dhul, surprisingly prepared, lashed his sword down at the outstretched leg, cutting a large gash. The kick landed weakly, and Kett'nek shouted in pain. As he tried to put weight on his leg, it buckled, and he fell on his side.

Pau'dhul grinned in a smug, grim manner, and said "I win. You die now for your crimes against *me and my people*" He raised his sword, reveling in the look of terror on Kett'nek's face, being beaten for the first time in hand-to-hand combat. Just before he brought the sword down, Pau'dhul noticed a spear jutting between two of his own ribs, the point sticking out of his chest.

Then he felt the pain. Pain so great he could not bear to scream. He dropped his sword and collapsed on the ground beneath him, beside Kett'nek. His cheek burned as it contacted the sand, but it was nothing aside the pain in his chest, more than just the spear. Pain that he failed his tribe, that they may not survive this fight.

His head lolled to the side, and as he died, he saw two things: the sun never moving, and the sand condemned them all.

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Meanwhile, the people of the later called Ever-Standing walked away from the battle, to an uncertain fate, an improbable hope.