

The Siege

On the fifth day Burin died.

As Anduin watched the Dvergar pallbearers carry the body of their fallen brother, wrapped only in a shroud, unembroidered in the fashion of their kind, he reflected that this was a sight he should savour, since all too soon there might come a time when the dead might outnumber those who would administer their final rites. It was a grim thought, and only one of many that had plagued him of late. *The duties of a leader are many, Anduin*, his father had told him once, *and they do not include sharing those burdens with his men.*

Anduin dragged his eyes away from the makeshift funeral that was taking place and scanned the faces of his own soldiers. His own soldiers – once that thought alone might have been enough to cheer him, that he, a commoner, had been promoted from the ranks to Lieutenant and that, since Lewin's death on the second day, he was now effectively a Captain. Once again, the memory of Lewin, and of how he had died, was like a stab in the gut, puncturing the swell of pride within him.

At least he was not alone, however.

Corben was there, huge and bare-chested as always, his muscles rippling as he shifted uncomfortably. A warrior of the Cruithin clans, born and bred in the Highlands of Leoch, Corben was rarely happy without a claymore in his hands and occasions like this one in particular filled him with unease. They did not mourn their dead in the Highlands, and the concept of interring bodies in the earth, as was the practice among the Dvergar, was an alien one to a Clansman like him. None of the Cruithin would want his flesh preserved once his divine soul had left its shell; the smoke that rose from the inevitable funeral pyres that littered the sites of any internal conflict between the clans of Leoch bore witness to that.

Fowsh stood next to Corben, every bit as tall as him but half the Clansman's girth, his expression as unreadable as ever. His monk's cowl was pulled up but did not hide his eyes, which were grey as flint and twice as unyielding. What he thought of this pagan ceremony was anybody's guess. Anduin noticed that the Book of Vaul was clutched tightly in one hand, whilst Fowsh's other hand gripped his warhammer. The priests of Vaul were known for their intolerance of any and all other faiths but from the little that Anduin had learned of Fowsh in the short time that they had travelled together, he seemed to be of a different breed. Maybe it was because he was also a warrior and so had learned that believing in another God, or no God at all for that matter, was of little importance in battle.

His other brothers, for family was what he considered them to be, stood on either side of Fowsh and Corben. There was Lupen, the moustachioed Umbrian, nonchalantly sharpening his twin daggers, looking for all the world as if he was attending a knife throwing tournament in his home town of Giacoma rather than in the middle of a siege. Gabrel by contrast was focused and alert, shifting restlessly from foot to foot as if he was expecting the next attack at any moment. Gabrel, like Anduin, was from Taran Lir and was a welcome reminder of home in this dark place. Also welcome was Tunde, a serious expression upon the Calldrian's face for once rather than the usual beaming smile that more often than not sat upon his chubby features. Although, now that Anduin thought about it, even Tunde had struggled to find anything to smile about since the siege of Carrock Tor had begun.

As he continued to scan the faces of his men, Anduin saw fear, apprehension and false bravado aplenty. The mixture of expressions reflected the inner turmoil within him, and, fearful that an element of this might have been communicated upon his own face, Anduin quickly schooled his features to radiate a calm authority. His face darkened despite himself when his gaze lit upon Scarl, however. The rat-faced Lornishman had always filled him with a sense of unease in a way that none of the other men that he now fought with did. The Twelfth Mercenary company of Brandenburg, formed from the misfits of other nations' armed forces,

were renowned for being a mixed bag of thieves, cutthroats and murderers. For most of the conscripts this was true, although a couple of years of rigorous drilling in ‘The Pit’, which was the affectionate but well-earned name given to Sergeant Dagner’s academy in Brandenburg, soon beat out any thoughts a recruit might have of reverting to type. Somehow, Scarl, alone of all his men, had survived the training without wholly shedding the traits of his past.

Anduin had no clear idea of what dark deeds Scarl had done to earn himself exile from his homeland of Lorne, but watching, with mounting anger, as he saw that the mercenary was ignoring Burin’s wake and instead leering with a horrible intensity at Miriel, he could well guess. The girl was thankfully oblivious, as her attention was wholly on the Dvergar placing their fallen brother into the earth. Scarl noticed Anduin and his eyes quickly snapped back to the spectacle of the funeral. Anduin nodded at him, a gesture that might have been interpreted as an acknowledgement among comrades, but equally as a warning.

Anduin had never wanted Miriel to come on this fool’s errand. It was not that the girl had not proved herself in battle before. She had done so, more than proved herself in fact, given that, as the only woman in the Twelfth she had had to work twice as hard as any of her battle brothers. That included her initiation, when Captain Lewin had promised to let her into the Company only on the condition that she defeated Corben in a wrestling match. The offer had been made in jest, with little expectation that a slip of a girl, and a noble to boot, would even agree to wrestle a man of Corben’s size and bulk let alone defeat him. After a very short wrestling match, and a lifetime’s worth of embarrassment for the Highlander, Miriel was welcomed by the other men and treated like a sister in their midst from that time on.

Anduin’s problem stemmed rather from the fact that this was a siege, and sieges did strange things to men. There was never any knowing when a siege would end. As resources grew scarcer, and food in particular began to run out, then the fragile bonds that kept the defenders united in their cause began to fray. Anduin had known comrades in arms of many years turn on each other to fight to the death over the last remaining slice of bread in an empty larder during a siege. It was no place for a woman; especially with men like Scarl around.

Anduin was broken out of his reverie when one of the Dvergar approached him.

“You will speak... for Burin?”

The Dvergar, whose name Anduin recalled as being Namian, spoke the Settler Tongue haltingly and with a rude accent yet among his kind that qualified him as an expert in their dealings with men. Few Dvergar mastered the languages of men, which they regarded as rough and uncouth. Anduin could understand why, for when he had first heard the Dvergar tongue it had amazed him with its courtly seeming and rich sounds.

There was much about these people of the high mountains that had been a surprise to him and his men. In the lowlands the Dvergar were spoken of as the Little People, as if they were fey spirits as insubstantial as smoke. It was said that not only did they live in the earth but also that they were of the earth, spirits of rock and mountain mist that neither ate nor slept nor even truly lived. Anduin shook his head ruefully. After living in Carrock Tor for less than a week he had already come to realise that the folk of the mountains were every bit as real as the men of Eryni, Umbria or Alben. They lived, loved and died just as men did.

And they mourned.

“Of course my friend. I will speak for Burin.” Anduin said, his voice solemn.

Namian gave him an equally solemn nod in reply then returned to the site of Burin’s burial mound. A ring of other Dvergar surrounded this and in truth it was little more than a mound at that. Corben had once told him that the Dvergar usually buried their dead in great cairns large enough to hold not only the body of the deceased but also all of the earthly possessions that he had chosen not to pass on to his surviving kinsmen. The Cruithin knew more about the mountain folk than the rest of his men, for Corben came from the Highlands

of Leoch, which were the nearest human realm to the Carnassial Mountains, where the majority of the Dvergar lived.

Anduin reflected that it was hardly surprising that, in the middle of a siege, the folk of Carrock Tor had been unable to raise for Burin the cairn that he had deserved. Even so, it was a shame that so sombre a memorial should commemorate the fallen Dvergar warrior, who had been so full of life and laughter when he had been alive.

With a heavy heart Anduin approached the ring of Dvergar encircling Burin's tomb. He saw straight away that the body had already been placed within. Burin was attired in the clothes in which he had fallen, his armour bloodied and his helm cleft. If time and circumstances had allowed for it the fallen Dverg would have been garbed in full ceremonial armour, although Anduin observed that there had been sufficient regard paid to custom in that two gold pieces had been placed over both of his eyes. That was to pay Morannon, their god of the dead, for entry into Asval, the Dvergar's celestial Hall of the Slain. These Dvergar had strange customs.

Anduin was greeted by one of the older Dvergar, Guthrir, who unlike his comrades wore no armour but was instead clad in fine ceremonial robes. Anduin had previously speculated that Guthrir was some sort of priest but Corben, who had explained that there was no such thing among the Dvergar, had disabused him of this notion. Guthrir, Corben had explained, was a Runesmith, and that made him much more important among the Dvergar than a mere priest.

For this reason Anduin grew increasingly apprehensive as time passed and the diminutive form of Guthrir stared at him without speaking.

"I cannot speak your tongue..." he began to explain but was cut off by an outstretched palm. Guthrir then began to speak, in Futhark, the language of the Dvergar.

Once again Anduin was struck by the rich sounds of the Dvergar speech. Guthrir seemed to take his time over each word, ensuring that it was properly enunciated and that it did not jar with the melodious whole. By contrast human speech did indeed sound rough and vulgar.

"It is enough that you speak in your tongue, for Burin admired you as a brother. As do we all *An-Madoc*." Namian said, translating on behalf of the elder Dvergar.

Anduin bowed his head, both to acknowledge their respect and to show his own. *An-Madoc*; Corben had told him that he had earned this title, meaning one who was brave of heart, on the second day, when he had saved the life of Gwydir, the captain of the Dvergar relief force, and nearly lost his own in the process. It was a great honour to be given such a name, which was rarely bestowed on one who was not of Dvergar blood.

"I knew your fallen comrade Burin but a short time, but it was long enough for him to earn my respect," he began, then paused as he saw a familiar face appear at the edge of the crowd of his men. His heart sunk at the sight of the new arrival, for he knew that it could only mean one thing, and that was something that he had hoped would never happen.

Corben noted his leader's sudden discomfort and followed his gaze to the man that had joined the gathered mercenaries without their notice. When he saw who it was he tensed immediately and, noticing this, Anduin was hardly surprised. Mordis Kell tended to have that effect on all his men, even those who did not know him well knew enough to realise that the man was like a stormcrow, rarely anything other than a bringer of ill tidings.

Kell moved with a grace that was more reminiscent of a dancer than a fighting man, but there was nothing else that was in any way delicate about him. Not as tall as Fowsh or as powerfully built as Corben, Anduin knew with the certainty that came to anyone that had spent their whole lives around fighting men, as he had, that the Karsak was more dangerous than either. Like all men from the Near East, Kell wore a baldric over his rough travelling clothes and his hair, as fiery a red as Anduin had seen in any Karsak that he had encountered,

was tied back from his face by a bandana to reveal swarthy, weather beaten features and a pair of bright green eyes which flicked from side to side with a seeming lack of interest in anything that was going on around him. Anduin was not fooled though, since he knew that Kell had been hired by his master for his powers of observation just as much as for his fighting skills, and that there was little that those green eyes missed. And his master had sent Kell here now; Anduin had no doubt of that.

Anduin completed his eulogy to Burin then, speaking of the Dvergar's good deeds during what little time that he had known him, of his kindness and bravery and of how he felt sure that such deeds must have earned him a place in Asval among the fallen Dvergar heroes of past ages. Although the words were heartfelt Anduin hardly thought about what he was saying, his mind on other matters now, new worries precipitated by the sudden arrival of Mordis Kell and its implications. He hoped that he did not cause offence when he spoke of Asval, holiest of places to the Dvergar, but as he looked on the gathered throng he saw that their faces, though sombre, were not disapproving. When he had finished Namian came to thank him, and though he seemed grave, his words halting in his pidgin version of the Settler Tongue, he appeared grateful despite that.

As Anduin moved through the silent column of Dvergar gathered around Burin's makeshift cairn he found it impossible not to be reminded of Lewin's funeral just a week previously. A few of his men had died before that but that had been the first death to have really shaken them, in its manner just as much as in the life that had been claimed, and in the brief lull between that attack and the next one he had seen them visibly deflated. There had been further deaths since then of course and each time he had noted the diminishing effect on the ones left behind – less sorrow, less rage against the foe, altogether less of an impact. Inside, he wondered whether he should be pleased by that or saddened.

“A grim day, Captain,” said Kell, falling in beside him as Anduin trudged past, barely acknowledging the other's presence, his eyes fixed straight ahead.

“Lieutenant,” said Anduin, correcting him on reflex, “the Captain is dead.”

Kell gave him a sidelong glance, seeming on the verge of argument before nodding and smiling. They spoke no more after that, as they were headed back towards the Inner Keep, and the way was treacherous. The stairs leading up to the tower of the Inner Keep were uneven and not protected by any walls. All of their concentration would be required in order to avoid a misstep that would lead to a certain death plummeting down the slopes of the mountain.

The Dvergar had constructed Carrock Tor many centuries ago as a watchtower to guard the Finbar Pass, one of the few passable routes through the Carnassial Mountains. As such it had been built with utility in mind rather than to impress or even please the eye. The eyes of most humans would in fact have been disappointed had they searched the Finbar Pass for sight of Carrock Tor, for it had been built in such a way that even the keen eyes of the Dvergar would pass over it as nothing more than a natural feature of the mountains, so cunningly had it been constructed. Unfortunately, this meant that many of the basic characteristics of a human fort, such as walls, buttes, towers and steps, were simply not present in Carrock Tor. The site of the fortress was meant to provide all of these elements, anything more was considered an unnecessary luxury in the minds of the Dvergar.

Unfortunately, as Anduin had discovered almost as soon as he had arrived in Carrock Tor, the way in which it had been built did not make moving around the stronghold an easy task. The Outer Keep, where Burin's burial had taken place, had hardly been built upon at all, and its surface was rough and rocky. This made it particularly dangerous in the chaos of battle, especially when the rain fell and finding one's footing became a precarious prospect on the rain-slicked ground. The 'walls' of the Outer Keep were simply rugged outcrops of rock,

jagged and uneven. A man who lost his footing there would not need to worry about falling to his death – he would be far more likely to die impaled on a spine of rock.

It was a different matter, however, in the Inner Keep that Anduin and Mordis Kell were now headed towards. Resembling a small battle tower, or the turret of a large castle, the Inner Keep was more obviously the work of Dvergar craftsmanship. The Dvergar eschewed curves and arches, for theirs was a culture where efficiency and common sense was valued above aesthetic merit. It was therefore unsurprising that the Inner Keep was blocky in design, and that the steps leading up to it, roughly hewn out of living rock, were not spiralling but rather they were broad and almost horizontal in places, making the ascent particularly difficult for Anduin, if not for his erstwhile companion. Anduin gave Kell a sidelong look as they climbed and thought back on the circumstances that had brought them into each other's company.

They had been stationed in the city of Kesseldorf, somewhere on the border between Alfinheim and Erkenlund, when the Commander of the City Militia had summoned Lewin to an audience with him. Anduin, as his then newly promoted Lieutenant, had gone with him. Cor Sorenson was a formidable man, a hero of Erkenlund and veteran of the March Wars, and it was not wise to keep him waiting. Anduin remembered the sense of awe he had felt as he had entered Sorenson's private chamber, situated in the main tower of Kessel Castle, overlooking the murky expanse of the Drakenwald Forest that separated Erkenlund from the High North. As Militia Commander Sorenson was now as much of a politician as a soldier, but his room was clearly that of a fighting man, adorned with weapons, trophies and maps of the surrounding areas. Anduin had been surprised to note that the map that lay open in front of Sorenson was one of the Carnassial Mountains, which were far from Erkenlund on the other side of Alfinheim. He had wondered then what Sorenson's interest in that region might have been but his puzzlement had not lasted long.

"I must admit to a certain amount of surprise at having been invited here by you, Commander Sorenson," Lewin had said, "Since we have never spoken before I assume that you have summoned us here for business rather than for exchanging pleasantries and that you intend to hire the services of my men and I as mercenaries. But as far as I am aware you have the entire Kesseldorf Militia at your disposal - what interest could you possibly have, then, in a rabble like us?"

Lewin had always been blunt, and that had been part of the reason that Anduin had liked him, why all of the men had respected him. Anduin had been worried at the time about his taking such a tone with the Lord Commander of Kesseldorf, however, as he was a man who could theoretically have had them put in chains for mere impertinence. Sorenson had not appeared to take any offence, however, and his response had been equally blunt.

"You're as direct as they say Captain and for that reason I'll pay you the courtesy of being equally frank. I need you and your men because the task that I am about to ask of you is one for which I would never risk my own men. I need you for what most soldiers would regard as nothing more than a suicide mission."

Lewin and Anduin had exchanged incredulous looks at that point. They had not needed to speak aloud to know that they had the same thought at that point – that either this was a joke in very poor taste or the Lord Commander had finally lost his mind. However, when they had turned back to look at Sorenson he had seemed neither jocular nor mad. Given that his last statement had piqued their interest if nothing else they had opted to remain and hear him out.

"You have heard of the Little People of the Carnassial Mountains?" Sorenson had begun, addressing Lewin. At that point, from the look on his captain's face, Anduin had wondered if Lewin had been on the verge of losing his temper. With his sudden talk of the Little People it had appeared that Sorenson was mocking them.

“Only from children’s stories, my lord,” Lewin had said in an even voice, and Anduin remembered having admired his captain’s self-control. Had he been addressed so, Anduin doubted that he could have maintained so equable a temperament. It seemed that the Lord Commander was treating them, the fabled Twelfth Mercenary Company of Brandenburg, as a joke.

“You may have heard of them but it is plain that you do not believe in them,” Sorenson had said, and he had almost appeared disappointed, “Know that they exist and that they are the ancient allies of this realm of Erkenlund.”

Anduin nodded ruefully to himself as he recalled the scene in his mind, his and Lewin’s disbelief and how Sorenson had had to recount incidents in the history of Erkenlund on which its people had been saved by the appearance of Dvergar soldiers. When they had questioned the veracity of such stories on the basis that they had never heard them before, Sorenson had explained that it was because the Althing, the ruling body of Erkenlund, had opted to keep such incidents secret for fear of offending the all-powerful Church of Vaul, which objected to the existence of beings that their deity had not created, such as the non-human Dvergar. Despite this denial, the military leaders of Erkenlund had recognised the sense of having allies on their doorstep and had pledged long ago to send help to the Dvergar of the Carnassial Mountains upon request. It was a pledge that the men of Erkenlund had not been called upon to fulfil until that point.