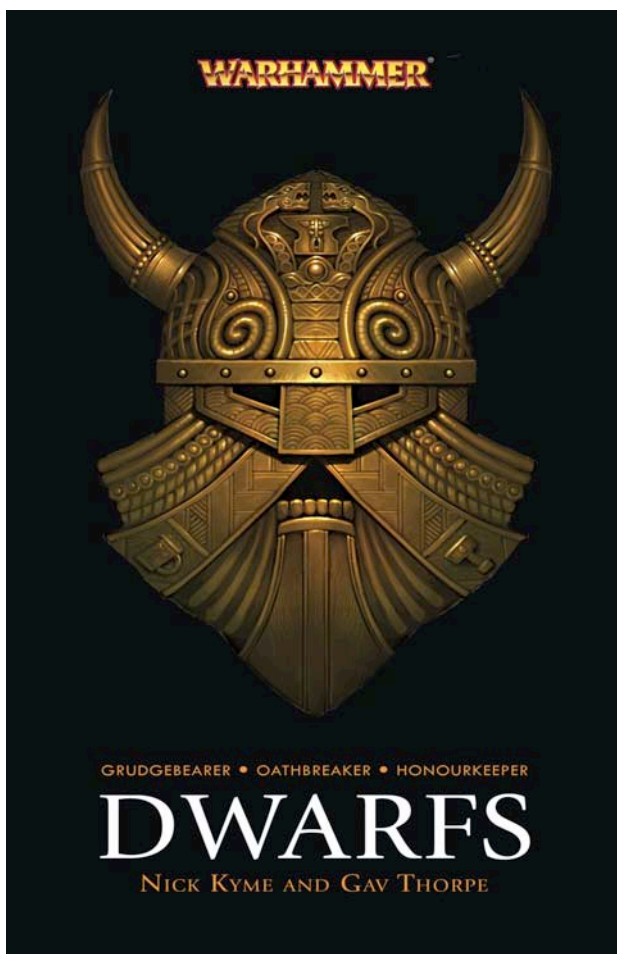




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DWARFS

An omnibus of Warhammer novels

By Nick Kyme and Gav Thorpe

THE DWARFS ARE a stoic and long-lived race. Their unbending will and pride serve them as fearsome warriors on the battlefield and the greatest craftsmen across the Old World. But cross them at your peril, as a dwarf grudge is never forgotten, a quest for revenge handed down from generation to generation until the debt is settled in blood...

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The following are excerpts from *Dwarfs* by Nick Kyme and Gav Thorpe. Published by the Black Library. Games Workshop, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

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Taken from *Grudge Bearer*:

THE THRONE ROOM of Zhufbar echoed gently with the hubbub of the milling dwarfs. A hundred lanterns shone a golden light down onto the throng as King Throandin looked out over his court. Representatives of most of the clans were here, and amongst the crowd he spied the familiar face of his son Barundin. The young dwarf was in conversation with the runelord, Arbrek Silverfingers. Throandin chuckled quietly to himself as he imagined the topic of conversation: undoubtedly his son would be saying something rash and ill-considered, and Arbrek would be cursing him softly with an amused twinkle in his eye.

Movement at the great doors caught the king's attention. The background noise dropped down as a human emissary entered, escorted by Hengrid Dragonfoe, the hold's gatewarden. The manling was tall, even for one of his kind, and behind him came two other men carrying a large iron-bound wooden chest. The messenger was clearly taking slow,

deliberate strides so as not to outpace his shorter-legged escort, while the two carrying the chest were visibly tiring. A gap opened up in the assembled throng, a pathway to the foot of Thrandin's throne appearing out of the crowd.

He sat with his arms crossed as he watched the small deputation make its way up the thirty steps to the dais on which his throne stood. The messenger bowed low, his left hand extended to the side with a flourish, and then looked up at the king.

'My lord, King Thrandin of Zhufbar, I bring tidings from Baron Silas Vessal of Averland,' the emissary said. He was speaking slowly, for which Thrandin was grateful, as it had been many long years since he had needed to understand the Reikspiel of the Empire.

The king said nothing for a moment, and then noticed the manling's unease at the ensuing silence. He dredged up the right words from his memory. 'And you are?' asked Thrandin.

'I am Marechal Heinlin Kulft, cousin and herald to Baron Vessal,' the man replied.

'Cousin, eh?' said Thrandin with an approving nod. At least this manling lord had sent one of his own family to parley with the king. In his three hundred years, Thrandin had come to think of humans as rash, flighty and inconsiderate. Almost as bad as elves, he thought to himself.

'Yes, my lord,' replied Kulft. 'On his father's side,' he added, feeling perhaps that the explanation would fill the silence that had descended on the wide, long chamber. He was acutely aware of

hundreds of dwarfs' eyes boring into his back and hundreds of dwarfs' ears listening to his every word.

'So, you have a message?' said Throddin, tilting his head slightly to one side.

'I have two, my lord,' said Kulft. 'I bring both grievous news and a request from Baron Vessal.'

'You want help, then?' said Throddin. 'What do you want?'

The herald was momentarily taken aback by the king's forthright manner, but gathered himself quickly. 'Orcs, my lord,' said Kulft, and at the mention of the hated greenskins an angry buzzing filled the chamber. The noise quieted as Throddin waved the assembled court to silence. He gestured for Kulft to continue.

'From north of the baron's lands, the orcs have come,' he said. 'Three farms have been destroyed already, and we believe they are growing in number. The baron's armies are well equipped but small, and he fears that should we not respond quickly, the orcs will only grow bolder.'

'Then ask your count or your emperor for more men,' said Throddin. 'What concern is it of mine?'

'The orcs have crossed your lands as well,' replied Kulft quickly, obviously prepared for such a question. 'Not only this year, but last year at about the same time.'

'Have you a description of these creatures?' demanded Throddin, his eyes narrowing to slits.

'They are said to carry shields emblazoned with the crude image of a face with two long fangs, and they paint their bodies with strange designs in black

paint,' said Kulft. This time the reaction from the throng was even louder.

Thronidin sat in silence, but the knuckles of his clenched fists were white and his beard quivered. Kulft gestured to the two men that had gratefully placed the chest on the throne tier, and they opened it up. The light of a hundred lanterns glittered off the contents – a few gems, many, many silver coins and several bars of gold. The anger in Thronidin's eyes was rapidly replaced with an acquisitive gleam.

'The baron would not wish you to endure any expense on his account,' explained Kulft, gesturing to the treasure chest. 'He would ask that you accept this gesture of his good will in offsetting any cost that your expedition might incur.'

'Hmm, gift?' said Thronidin, tearing his eyes away from the gold bars. They were of a particular quality, originally dwarf-gold if his experienced eye was not mistaken. 'For me?'

Kulft nodded. The dwarf king looked back at the chest and then glowered at the few dwarfs that had taken hesitant steps up the stairway towards the chest. Kulft gestured for his companions to close the lid before any trouble started. He had heard of the dwarf lust for gold, but had mistaken it merely for greed. The reaction had been something else entirely, a desire for the precious metal that bordered on physical need, like a man finding water in the desert.

'While I accept this generous gift, it is not for gold that the King of Zhufbar shall march forth,' said Thronidin, standing up. 'We know of these orcs. Indeed, last year they were met in battle by dwarfs of

my own clan, and the vile creatures took the life of my eldest son.'

Thronidin paced forwards, his balled fists by his side, and stood at the top of the steps. When he next spoke, his voice echoed from the far walls of the chamber. He turned to Kulft. 'These orcs owe us dear,' snarled the king. 'The life of a Zhufbar prince stains their lives and they have been entered onto the list of wrongs done against my hold and my people. I declare grudge against these orcs! Their lives are forfeit, and with axe and hammer we shall make them pay the price they owe. Ride to your lord, tell him to prepare for war, and tell him that King Thronidin Stoneheart of Zhufbar will fight beside him!'

Taken from *Oathbreaker*:

THE VAST EXPANSE of the Black Water stretched out in the valley below like some infinite obsidian ocean. Dense fog, cooling in the early chill, sat over it like a vaporous white skin. Even at its craggy banks, it did not stir but sat like stygian glass: vast, powerful and forbidding. In truth it was a mighty lake, massively wide and impossibly deep, set in a huge crater that yawned like a giant maw, jutting with rocky teeth. Ribbons of glistening silver fed down through clustered stones and hidden valleys, filling the chasm-like basin of the lake with the melt waters of the surrounding mountains. Its glassy surface belied, in its apparent tranquillity, what dwelled in the Black Water's depths. Rumours persisted of ancient things, alive long before elves and dwarfs came to the Old World, slumbering in the watery dark.

'Varn Drazh,' muttered Halgar Halfhand almost wistfully.

A smile creased the old dwarf's features, near smothered by his immense beard braided into ingots of gold and bronze clasps, as he surveyed the vista laid out before and beyond.

Even standing upon a ridge overlooking the deep basin of the Black Water, rugged plateaus and dense groves of pine scattered amongst the sparse landscape were visible. Wending trails and precarious passes made their way across the rock. Halgar followed one all the way up to the zenith of the mountains. Peaks, jagged spikes of snow-capped rock, weathered by all the ages of the world, raised

high like defiant sentinels. This was the spine of the Karaz Ankor, the everlasting realm of the dwarfs, the edge of the world.

Halgar smoothed his thick greying moustache absently, with a hand that had only two fingers and a thumb; the other, replete with all of its digits, rested lightly on the stout axe cinctured at his waist.

'Ever am I impressed by the majesty of the Worlds Edge Mountains,' came the deep voice of Thane Lokki Kraggson beside him, the dwarf's breath misting in the cold morning air.

Halgar frowned. A wisp of brooding cloud scudded across the platinum sky filled with the threat of snow.

'Winter is a time of endings,' he said dourly.

'The cold will be hard pressed to vent its wrath beneath the earth; we have little to fear from its asperity,' Lokki returned.

Halgar grunted in what could have been amusement.

'Perhaps you are right,' he muttered. 'But that's the thing about endings, lad, you never see them coming.'

'We are close, my old friend,' said Lokki, for want of something more reassuring, and rested his hand, encrusted with rings etched with the royal runes of Karak Izor, upon the longbeard's shoulder.

Halgar turned to his lord, released from his reverie, and clapped his hand upon Lokki's in a gesture of brotherhood. 'Aye, lad,' he said, all trace of his earlier melancholy gone.

There was a strength and wisdom in Halgar's eyes.

The old dwarf had seen much, fought many foes and endured more hardships than any other Lokki knew. He was the thane's teacher, instructing him in the ways of his clan and of his hold. It was Halgar that first showed him how to wield axe and hammer, how to form a shield wall and become a link in the impregnable mail of a dwarfen throng. Halgar still wore the same armour of those days; a thick mail coat and metal shoulder guard that displayed his clan-rune, together with a bronze helm banded by silver. The ancient armour was an heirloom, fraught with the attentions of battle. Though it was routinely polished and cleaned, it still bore dark stains of blood – ages old – that would not be removed.

'I for one will be glad of the hospitality of Karak Varn's halls,' said Lokki, walking back from the ridge and through the long grasses, pregnant with dew, to the Old Dwarf Road. They had travelled far, a journey of some several months. First, north from Karak Izor in the Vaults – the Copper Mountain – then they'd taken a barge across the River Sol in the shadow of Karak Hirn, the Horn Hold. Crossing the spiny crags of the Black Mountains had been hard but the narrow, seldom trodden roads had led them to Black Fire Pass. They'd ventured through the wide gorge stealthily, keen not to attract its denizens, until at last they'd reached the edge of the mammoth lake. Now, just the undulating, boulder strewn foothills of roiling highland stood between them and the hold of Karak Varn.

'The soles of my boots grow thin, as does my appetite for stone bread and kuri,' Lokki

complained.

'Bah! This is nothing,' snapped Halgar, his mood darkening abruptly. 'When I was a beardling and Karak Izor in its youth, I trekked from the Copper Mountain all the way to Karak Ungor, curse the grobi swine that infest its halls.' He spat and winced sharply as he got back onto the road, clutching at his chest.

Lokki moved to the longbeard's aid, but Halgar waved him away, snarling.

'Don't fret, 'tis just an itch,' he grumbled, biting back the pain. 'Wretched damp,' he added, muttering, shading his eyes against the slowly rising morning sun.

'Why have you never removed it?' Lokki asked.

Piercing his armour, and embedded deep into Halgar's barrel-like chest, was the tip of a goblin arrow. Its feathered shaft had long since been snapped off, but a short stub of it still remained.

'As a reminder,' returned the longbeard, eyes filling with remembered enmity, 'of the blight of the grobi filth and of the treachery of elves.' With that the longbeard tramped off down the road, leaving his lord in his wake.

'I meant no disrespect, Halgar,' Lokki assured him as they crested another rise.

'When you are as old as me, lad, you'll understand,' said Halgar, softening again. 'It is my final lesson to you,' he added, holding Lokki's gaze. 'Never forget, never forgive.'

Lokki nodded. He knew the tenets of his race all too well, but Halgar drove them home with the

conviction of experience.

'Now, let us-' Halgar stopped and pointed towards a shallow ravine below them, where the road went down into the basin and to the edge of the Black Water. Lokki followed his gaze and saw the wreckage of several ore chests. They were old, the wood warped and overgrown with moss and intertwined by wild gorse, but there could be no mistaking it. It was what lay next to the chests, though, that gave the thane greater pause - skeletons; bones and skulls that could only belong to dwarfs.

Halgar descended down into the ravine, picking his way through rocky outcrops and stout tufts of wild grass, Lokki close behind him. They reached the site of the wreckage in short order.

Grimacing, Halgar crouched down amongst the skeletons. Many still wore their armour, though it was ravaged by time and tarnished beyond repair.

'Picked clean by the creatures of the wild,' said Halgar, inspecting one of the bones. 'They have been gnawed upon,' he added with distaste and sorrow.

'There are more...' Lokki uttered.

Beyond where the two dwarfs were crouched there stretched a windswept highland plain, the fringes edged by shale and shingle from the lake's shore, scattered with more bones.

'Grobi, too,' spat Lokki, throwing down a manky piece of leather as he ranged across the rugged flatland. Skeletons were everywhere, together with more broken ore chests. Preyed on by wild beasts, the battle that had unfolded there ranged far and wide, making it impossible to discern its scale or

significance.

'I don't like this,' said Lokki, going to another chest – this one empty, too.

'This was a party headed from Karak Varn,' Halgar muttered, having followed Lokki, running his fingers across old tracks.

'How many?' asked the thane.

'Difficult to say,' murmured Halgar, examining one of the wooden chests more closely. 'Wutroth,' he said to himself, remarking on the rare wood the chest was made from.

Above Lokki, a thick tongue of rock hung over the grassy plain, blotting out the harsh winter sun. A narrow path, little more than a thin scattering of scree, wound up to it from the ancient battlefield.

'I'm going to try and get a better vantage point,' he said, forging up the pathway, beard buffeting as the wind swept across him.

There upon the rise, Lokki saw the full extent of the battle that had taken place. There were at least a hundred dwarf bodies, twice that number in goblins and orcs, though Grungni knew how many others had been dragged away by the beasts of the foothills to be gnawed upon in caves. There was a large concentration of bones at the edge of the Black Water where Lokki saw Halgar crouched – dwarfs and greenskin. The dwarfs seemed to be arranged in a tight circle, as if they had fallen whilst defending fiercely. Orc skeletons spiralled out from this macabre nexus, likely the remains of those repulsed. The shattered remnants of maybe thirty chests were in evidence, too. Old tracks, made with heavy, booted

feet moved away from the site, too large and brutish to be dwarfs. It had not ended well for the warriors of Karak Varn and Lokki muttered an oath.

Returning from the overhanging rock spur, Lokki found Halgar tracing a flame seared rune on one of the chests.

'Gromril,' said the longbeard without looking up, indicating the chest's contents. 'Most likely headed for the High King in Karaz-a-Karak,' he surmised, based upon the direction of what tracks still remained.

'What's that?' asked Lokki, his keen eyes picking out something amidst the carnage in the centre of the formation he had espied from above. Around one dwarf skeleton's neck was a talisman. Its chain was tarnished, but the talisman itself remained pristine as the day it was forged. There was a rune marking upon it. Lokki showed it to Halgar. The old dwarf squinted at first then took it from Lokki for a better look.

'It bears the personal rhun of Kadrin Redmane,' he said, looking up at his lord, grim recognition on his face.

'The lord of Karak Varn?' Lokki's tone was similarly dark.

'None other,' said Halgar. 'Doubtless he fell guarding the gromril shipment to Karaz-a-Karak.'

'He must have been dead some time,' said Lokki, 'and yet no word of it has come from Karak Varn.'

Halgar's expression grew very dark.

'Perhaps they were unable to get word to the other holds,' the longbeard suggested. 'I saw no dawi

tracks leading from this runk,' he added, indicating the bone-strewn battlefield. 'It is likely the fate of Kadrin Redmane is unknown to his kin.'

Lokki looked down at the dwarf skeleton that had worn the talisman, the remains, it seemed, of Lord Redmane. Its skull had been nearly cleft in twain. A split metal helm lay nearby. He ran his finger, the skin brown and thick like leather, across the wound. 'The blow is jagged and crude,' he said, 'but delivered with force.'

'Urk,' Halgar said, showing his teeth as he ground them.

'I saw their tracks, trailing away from the fight. There was a mighty battle here,' Lokki told him. 'How old do you think these skeletons are?' the thane asked, accepting the talisman of Kadrin Redmane back from Halgar.

The longbeard was about to respond when he sniffed at the air suddenly. 'Do you smell that?' he asked, getting to his feet and unslinging his axe.

A bestial roar echoed from the surrounding rocks. Lokki looked up and felt hot bile rise in his throat. Charging down the east side of the ravine, following the route taken by the two dwarfs, there was a group of five orcs brandishing bloodstained cleavers and crude spears. Seven more emerged from behind a cluster of boulders in the opposite direction, armed with brutish clubs. At least three more came from a second path, across the overhang of the grassy rise, bisecting the route of the other two groups, wielding wooden shields and crude, fat-bladed swords. Decked in filth-stained leather, studded with rusted

iron and rings punched through their thick, dark skin, the orcs yelled and bawled as they piled across the flatland.

'They have been watching us,' Lokki realised, on his feet and moving back-to-back with Halgar as he drew his hammer and lifted his shield.

'Aye, lad,' Halgar growled, sniffing contemptuously.

'Never forgive, never forget,' Lokki snarled as the orcs met them.

Taken from *Honourkeeper*:

BEYOND ARCHER RANGE, King Bagrik surveyed the carnage of the battlefield from atop a ridge of stone. Across a muddy valley riddled with trenches, earthworks and abatis his army gave their blood, sweat and steel. Sat astride his ancestral war shield, carried by two of his stoutest hearth guard warriors, the king of Karak Ungor had an unparalleled view.

The silver moat the elves had fashioned shimmered like an iridescent ribbon, reflecting the flames of burning towers. Bagrik watched keenly as gromril-plated bridges were dropped over it, landing like felled trees for the siege towers and warriors with scaling ladders to cross. On the opposite side of the ridge where it fell away into a shallow ravine, Bagrik could hear the heartening din of smiths at their forge fires, toiling in the dwarf encampment making more bridges, bolts for the ballista, quarrels and pavises. The smell of soot and iron drifting on the breeze was like a taste of home.

Bagrik's expression hardened as a siege tower lurched and slipped on one of the bridges, falling into the molten moat and taking most of its crew with it. Others had better fortune, and battles erupted across the length of the elven wall with spear, hammer and axe.

He swelled with pride at the sight of it, all of his hearth brothers locked in furious battle with a powerful foe. Sorrow tempered that pride, and wrath crushed both emotions as Bagrik glowered at the city.

Tor Eorfith the elves called it. Eyrie Rock. It was well named, for the towers at the zenith of the city had soared far into the sky, piercing cloud and seemingly touching the stars. They were the dominion of mages, great observatories where the elven sorcerers could contemplate the constellations and allegedly portend future events.

Bagrik wagered they had not seen this coming.

He had no love for sky, cloud and stars; his domain was the earth and its solidity beneath and about him gave him comfort. The earth contained the essence of the ancestor gods, for it was to the heart of the world that they had returned once their task was done. They had taught the dwarfs how to work ore to forge structures, armour and weapons.

Grungni together with his sons, Smednir and Thungni had shown them the true nature of magic, how to capture it within the rune and etch it indelibly upon blades, talismans and armour in order to fashion artefacts of power. Bagrik had no love for the ephemeral sorcery of elves. Manipulating the true elements of the world in such a way was disharmonious. At best attempting to control them smacked of hubris, at worst it was disrespectful. No, Bagrik held no truck with such transient things. It angered him. The mage towers had been the first to go.

Crushed by hefty chunks of rock flung by dwarf stone throwers, the towers had exploded in a conflagration of myriad colours as they were destroyed, the arcane secrets and the alchemy of their denizens turned against them, and only serving

to affirm Bagrik's vehement beliefs. They were just blackened spikes of stone now, broken fingers thrust into an uncaring sky, their communion with the stars at an end.

It was a fitting epitaph.

For the briefest of moments the air was on fire as elven sorcery met dwarf runecraft, forcing Bagrik back to the present. Further down the ridge, their litanies to the ancestors solemn and resonant, the runesmiths worked at their anvils. Not mere forgesmiths' anvils, no. These were runic artefacts – the Anvils of Doom. Agrin Oakenheart, venerable rune lord of Karak Ungor led his two apprentices, esteemed master runesmiths in their own right, in the rites of power as they dissipated hostile elven magicks and unleashed chained lightning upon the foe. With each arcing bolt, Bagrik felt his beard bristle as the charge ran through his ancestral armour.

Death wreathed the battlefield like a sombre shroud, but it was at the gatehouse where its greatest harvest would be reaped.

Break the gate, break the elves. Bagrik clenched his fist as his gaze fell upon the battle being fought there. He would settle for nothing less...

'HEAVE!' MOREK BELLOWED above the thunder. The dwarf's voice resonated through the bronze mask of his helmet as he urged his warriors again.

'Heave with all your strength. Grungni is watching you!'

And all thirty of his hearth guard warriors did.

Beneath the gromril-plated roof of a battering ram, the armoured dwarfs pulled the ram back for another charge. Runes etched down its iron shaft blazed as the gromril ram-head, forged into the bearded visage of the ancestor god Grungni, smashed into the gate. It was a barrier the likes of which Morek had never known, adorned with gemstones and carved from seemingly unbreakable wood. The eagle device upon the gate barely showed a scratch. The elves, despite his initial beliefs, knew their craft. Morek was determined that it would not avail them. Sweating beneath his armour, his orders were relentless.

‘Again! There will be no rest until this gate is down!’

Shock waves ran down the iron with the impact as dwarf tenacity met elven resistance and found each other at an impasse.

Breathing hard as he wiped his beard with the back of his glove, Morek paused a moment and detected the groan of metal high above. It was the third day of the siege; he’d had plenty of time to survey the city’s defences. The elves had cauldrons above the gatehouse.

‘Shields!’ he roared, long and loud.

The hearth guard reacted as one, creating a near-impenetrable shield wall to protect the vulnerable flanks of the battering ram.

Near-impenetrable but not invincible.

There was a whoosh of flame and an actinic stink permeated Morek’s nose guard as the elves released their alchemical fire.

Screaming drowned out the roar of the conflagration as hearth guard warriors burned down like candles with shortened wicks. Reflected on the underside of his shield Morek saw a blurred shape fall from the narrow bridge where they made their assault and land in the moat beneath. A pillar of blue-white fire spiralled skyward as the burning dwarf struck the moat, so high it touched cloud. The elves, employing more of their thrice-cursed sorcery, had filled a deep trench around their city with molten silver and the alchemical fire's reaction with the shimmering liquid was spectacular yet terrifying.

A second deluge of the deadly liquid smashed against the battering ram, as the elves vented their stocks in desperation. Heat came through Morek's shield in a wave, pricking his skin despite his armour. He grit his teeth against the onslaught, watching iridescent sparks crackle and die upon the stone at his feet as the elven siege deterrent spilled away.

No screams this time. The attack abated. Two cauldrons had been expended. The elves had no more. It would take time for them to replenish the deadly liquid fire. In the brief respite, Morek took stock and smiled grimly. Only three hearth guard dead: his warriors had closed ranks quickly. But the elves had more. As the battering of the gate resumed, a flurry of white-fletched arrows whickered down at the dwarfs from above, thudding into shields and plate. Despite the armoured canopy of the ram, Morek took one in the pauldron. The dwarf at his flank, Hagri, was struck incredibly between gorget

and face-guard, and died gurgling blood. Morek chewed his beard in anger. Hagri had fought at Morek's side for over seventy years. It was no way for such a noble warrior to die.

The arrow storm was relentless, the dwarfs effectively pinned as they raised shields again, unable to work the ram and protect themselves at the same time. Peering upwards through a crack between shield tip and the ram canopy, Morek saw white-robed elves – stern of face with silver swan helmets gleaming – loose steel-fanged death with ruthless purpose. Archers lined the battlements and as Morek scanned across he saw one of the elven mages incanting soundlessly as the battle din eclipsed his eldritch tongue. In a thunderclap of power, the mage was illuminated by a crackling cerulean aura. Forked lightning arced from his luminous form and the mage's silver hair stood on end as the energy was expulsed, straight towards Morek and his warriors. But before the bolts could strike they hit an invisible barrier and were deflected away. Blinking back the savage after flare, and muttering thanks to Agrin Oakenheart's runesmiths, Morek tracked the bolt's erratic deviation.

One of the distant dwarf siege towers assaulting the eastern wall exploded as the lightning found a new target and vented its wrath. Dwarfs plunged earthward from the high parapet of the tower, mouthing silent screams. The assault ramp and the upper tower hoarding were utterly destroyed. Fire ravaged it within and without, and the siege tower came to a grinding halt. In its place though, three

more towers moved into position, dragged and pushed by hordes of dwarf warriors, those at the front protected by large moveable pavises of iron and wood. As one, the heavy armoured ramps crashed down upon the elven parapets, crushing them before disgorging throngs of clansdwarfs.

All across the churned earth, as far as the deepening black of oncoming night in the distant east and west, the dwarfs marched in droves. Teams of sappers flung grapnels, heaving as they found purchase to tear down ruined sections of tower and wall. Quarrellers, crouching behind barricades or within shallow trench lines, kept up a steady barrage of bolts in an effort to stymie the heavy death toll being reaped by the elven archers and ballista. On the bloody ramps of the siege towers, and battling hard upon scaling ladders, dwarf warriors fought and died. But it was at the great gate, the principal entrance to the elven city, that the fighting was fiercest. Knowing this would be so, Morek had taken his finest hearth guard warriors and told his king he would break it. He had no intention of failing in that oath.

‘We are like stuck grobi sat out here,’ said Fundin Ironfinger, a hearth guard warrior crouched behind Morek, his shield locked with that of his thane.

Morek had to shout to be heard above the insistent thud of raining arrows.

‘Bah, this is nothing, lad – a light shower, no more than that. They can’t shoot at us forever, and once the elgi run out of arrows we’ll have this gate down. Then they’ll taste dawi steel–’ Morek was forced to

duck down as the storm intensified.

'Eh, lad?' he said during a short lull in the arrow fire, looking back at Fundin.

The hearth guard didn't answer. He was dead; shot through the eye.

Dutifully, another hearth guard moved up the line to take his place and Fundin's body was edged beyond the relative protection of the canopy to be punctured with further arrows.

No, Morek thought grimly, he had no intention of failing in his oath but if the arrow storm didn't end soon, he'd have no warriors left to break down the gate and fulfil it. Touching the runic amulet around his neck, he made a pledge to Grungni that this would not be so.

THE AIR WAS thick with arrows, bolts, fire, lightning and stone. Bagrik watched as a battery of mangonels flung massive chunks of rock that had been hewn from the hillside and smashed them into Tor Eorfith, shattering walls and pulverising flesh and bone. With grim satisfaction, he saw one missile strike the central arch of the elven gatehouse where his hearth guard stood beleaguered beneath their battering ram.

Elven bodies fell like white rain.

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