

The Black Company in Middle Earth

Chronicle of the Black Company + Lord of the Rings Crossover Fan Fiction

By **McJunker**

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Author's Note:

I assume, if you came across this fic, it's because you enjoy LotR and wanted to read fiction set in that world. Well, ideally you'll be getting that and a great deal more besides. If you lack familiarity with the Black Company series by Glen Cook, I hope that I've made the style and characters appealing enough to hold your interest and that lack of context will not keep you from understanding what's going on.

Also, go find a copy of the Black Company and read it. It'll make you a deeper person, I swear.

If you *are* familiar with the Black Company, then I hope that, like me, the idea of the Company serving Sauron the Great makes you wonder how Tolkien's wonderfully crafted world would have appeared to someone like Croaker, or Raven, or the Lady. This fic is my attempt to reconcile these two distinct and colorful worldviews into a single cohesive story, and I hope that you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it. Feedback is, of course, welcome.

Many thanks to Norwest, who offered story ideas for me to polish up, and also took existing ideas of mine and polished them up in turn.

1. Osgiliath

In those days the Company was in service to the Eye of Barad-dur, the Dark Lord of Mordor. I'll never understand why these raving sorcerous overlord types give themselves names like "Bloodfang the Foul," or "Lord Slaughter," or whatever. It can't possibly earn them universal acceptance. If I was an emperor, I would call myself "Lord Galadel the

Kind," or something like that. No one could object to being ruled by someone named that. Then I could rule my conquests with an iron fist and no one would revolt. Think about it- would you rebel against someone named "Galadel the Kind"? You'd feel ridiculous.

Heh. The Old Man didn't want me to be Annalist at first- he said I didn't take it seriously enough. I take it seriously, right?

Anyway. The way it is is, the Dark Lord of Barad-dur... gods, even *I* feel like taking up arms against him with a name like that, and he's paying my wages.

The general situation is, the Lidless Eye has himself a cozy little stronghold- a fair sized chunk of land with fuck off huge mountain ranges three quarters the way around it, with real strong fortresses at the only two entrances. No one gets in to Mordor, no one gets out of Mordor, lest he says so. He's got himself a lovely little homebase that ain't no one's gonna get him out of, but that's not enough for him, no sir. Being content with what you got is not a speciality of the really high-class sorcerors. They always gotta expand and dominate, and the only ways he has to advance is north into a swamp with the lovely and inviting name of the Dead Marshes (I don't even want to know how it got that name), or west across a well-defended river to a country called Gondor. And Gondor supposedly has the most professional army in this part of the world, ourselves excluded, obviously. Nobody's better than the Black Company. Always outnumbered but never outfought, that's us. Obviously, if the Eye of Barad-dur wants to break out of his homeland and get into the really serious business of world conquest, Gondor needs to bite the dust first. To force-feed the Gondorians some of that fine gourmet dust, he needs an ass-kicking army. And if you need your army to kick some ass and take some names, you come to us.

My name is Haroun, the Annalist of the Black Company. Haroun's not the name I was born with, but then, ain't no one goes by their real name in this outfit. It's my job to chronicle the life of the Company. If we take someone on, I record his name. When a brother falls in battle, I record his death.

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For most of us, it is the only immortality we have to look forward to, since few if any of us have a use for religion. I maintain the written records, keep the history of the Black Company alive, and forge another link in a chain that reaches so far back into history that I kinda think that there never was no time when the Company wasn't swapping violence for cash. You go back to the old days, the mythological times where djinni and gods first shot the shit and formed the world according to their fancy, I bet you'll find our forerunners agreeing to slit some devil's throat in exchange for a pot of enchanted gold.

It is an indisputable fact that our Annals, which I gotta haul personally everywhere we march, go back 750 years, and it's stated in the earliest Annals we got that we lost at least two hundred years worth of history that came before it. If my Company doesn't go back at least a millennium, it will likely cross that milestone in my lifetime. Show me a dynasty with a lineage like that, I tell you. When you march in the Company, brother, you stand on the shoulders of giants. We stand six hundred strong and are better armed and provisioned than any other standing army in the part of the world. We are elite, we are dedicated, we got esprit right up the corps. And we'll serve any warlord you care to name if the price is right and he don't try to backstab us.

The Dark Lord of Mordor has purchased our service, and we shall serve him faithfully until our contract of five years is up or he welches on us. Which is why, today, we're seeing action for the first time in two years. Lack of proper employment has not dulled our swords, nor worn our crossbows' strings. We have spent the unending months sweating our weakness away under the merciless gaze of Bullet, our Sergeant. Bullet is as close you can get to a dwarf without actually being a dwarf, standing about 5' 3" and weighing at least two hundred and thirty pounds armed and armored- I've seen him single-handedly break down shieldwalls by swatting aside the enemy spears and shoulder charging the poor bastards behind them. He's got this intimidating huge black beard obscuring most of his face, and tiny little eyes that always seem to be glaring at you, even when he's in a good mood. You know where you stand with Bullet. He was a senior brother in the Company when I joined up eight years ago- a veteran's veteran. With him keeping us whipped into shape, we'll be fit for any battle the Lidless Eye cares to throw our way.

The only real complaint any of us grunts have about the whole business is, we gotta work with the uruks. Uruks are creepy looking buggers, a bit shorter and broader than a man could realistically be, with yellow skin. Fucking *yellow skin*. Not

that sorta off-white color like the Children of Hsien, our honored ancestors who at one time made up the bulk of the Company. They are *fucking yellow*. Like daisies, or like they're all suffering from malaria or something. Not to mention- fangs. The uruks have fangs like wolves. Those who follow after me, my future brothers, may not credit it, but they have literal fangs, and they ain't just for show. I've learned enough of their tongue to overhear them; it turns out they enjoy a nice tasty human now and then. Who the hell wants a bow-legged, malaria ridden man-eater next to them on a shield wall? None of us are sure whether they're human beings in real bad shape, or a different race entirely, or even a magically bred creation. Sapper, our pet wizard, remains aloof and mysterious on the matter, drops hints that they are formed from the leftover cold aura that fills the voids between the stars. We reckon that means he don't have a clue either. There's also this race of bloody great bastards, must be at least 15 feet tall and five feet wide, that the natives of Mordor call trolls. They use dead tree branches like clubs and big-ass rocks like boxing gloves. They look a bit like a bigger version of Bullet, actually. We don't mind *them* so much, seeing as we would have no objection at all to a couple of the great brutes charging at the other guys. Less work for us, right? Rumor has it there is a special caste that have trained in arms and have custom made armor and mauls. To which we all agree- thank the gods we signed on with this team and not the other fellows. Naturally, once the Captain found out about the trolls, he had himself a strategy meeting with the Lieutenant and the Sergeant to figure out how to kill them if we had to. We got to practice our axe work and our physical stamina for a month. Bullet almost pissed himself with glee. Company policy is to always remain in a position of relative power with our employer, a policy that has saved our hides more than once in my time alone.

We had been killing time at Minas Morgul, training under Bullet and gambling our pay on never ending rounds of Tonk. Minas Morgul... Minas translates as tower, I know that much. Morgul, I think, translates something like Death Ghosts. Dark Ghoul? I'm not sure, I don't speak the lingo very well yet, but I reckon the Red Eye has the right kind of personality to name his western-most fortress the Death Ghost Tower. On the other hand, The Tower of Dark Ghouls has a certain ring to it as well. I guess it just a wizard thing. I know that if Sapper, being the unnervingly vicious little bastard that he is, ever gets a chance to be an overlord, the first thing he'll do is whip up a throne made of skulls and congealed blood. He'll then proceed to stick it in a big-ass castle with spikes and doom and gloom that he'll dub The Realm of Unending

Screams. They are a theatrical lot.

After two years of loafing around soaking up our wages, we have to earn our pay. The time was nigh—the Dark Lord was ready to set the ball of war a-rolling. Messengers came and went, the rumor mill turned, and orders trickled down; we were bound for the trenches of Ithilien—damned if I know the translation of *that*. Ithilien was a sort of No Man’s Land in between Minas Morgul and Osgiliath, the conquest of which being our main objective. For years, there had been minor skirmishes in the area, march and counter march, a handful of casualties per side, but recently the Eye had made a special effort to secure the area. A month ago a couple of thousand uruks got dug in within sight of the river-city, preventing any easy sorties from the Gondorians. They’ve swapping arrows and hurtful imprecations about each other’s lineage ever since. Those couple of thousand uruks are about to get reinforced by a mixed force of Easterners and Haradrim numbering about ten thousand, three thousand trolls divided into ten companies, approximately a skillion more uruks, and most devastatingly, us.

...

The previous Annalist, Wallace, caught an unknown plague marching through the Plateau of Gorgoroth. By the time our physic Pork Chop and Sapper got a diagnosis, he was a goner, though at least they managed to inoculate the rest of us. Per tradition, the Annalist’s second was the Standard bearer, Erik, who held the honor for two days before being knifed to death by a Southron over a game of cards. It was a massive snafu trying to rebuild the traditional structure within the Company, and being a Company man of good standing I got the job. We know that this is the fifth time in the history of the Black Company that a man went from ranker to Annalist without being Standard Bearer first. If I am slain in any upcoming battles, the new Standard Bearer, Papa Jack, will replace me. And when he dies, someone will step into his shoes, and so on, continuing our story long into the uncertain future. I am proud to hold the post for now, and sincerely hope that Papa Jack won’t be writing a damn thing for a hell of a long time. Mind you, I still gotta be on the front line. Even at six hundred strong, which is doing pretty well compared to most of our history, we can’t afford to do without a single trained soldier. So my duties as Annalist are a sidejob— I’ll be getting no special treatment.

Which is fine by me— like I said, esprit right up the corps.

...

I’m part of a specially trained squad. Our only job in battle is to accompany Sapper as he dishes out the

pain and to make sure none of that pain is returned with interest. Not counting Sapper himself, there are six of us. I’m the corporal in charge of the squad— or am I an officer now? The Annalist is always considered an officer. I’ll have to ask the Lieutenant later, ‘cause if there’s even the slightest chance that I can get into the Officer’s Club, I’m definitely going for it. Anyway, it’s my job to coordinate the squad to do what it does best.

Blink, a master with his heavy crossbow, is our sharpshooter. I’ve seen that crossbow put a quarrel through the shield, the breastplate, the man himself, then out the back of the armor; it was practically a hand-held ballista. He has this nifty cranking mechanism that can reload it in less than twenty seconds, too. Sapper drafted the designs for it and had a weapon smith Haradrim cook it up. Blink even managed to get the transaction labelled as "for the common good of the Company" in his report to Quartermaster, which meant the money he bought it with was reimbursed from the pay chest. Lucky bastard.

There’s the twins, Spike and Bop. In spite of our Company’s name, they are the only two members of the Black Company who are actually black— the rest of us are varying shades of brown. According to the Annals we have, in our first hundred or so years, the Black Company was composed entirely of men like Spike and Bop. They weren’t exactly identical; you could always tell which one is which, but there could be no mistaking that they were anything but twins. They were far away from their homeland, having migrated west until they hit the sea, than started north till they hit us. The little I could glean of their history suggests they pissed off someone powerful back home and found sanctuary with us. They were excellent swordsmen individually, but team them up and they were nigh unbeatable.

Reader— a giant of a man with great bulging muscles, like a troll that decided to shrink nine feet and bulk up a bit. His name, like a great many of the nicknames we have, is wholly ironic, as he is completely and proudly illiterate. Which means he thinks of the Annalist as a sorcerer of stranger and more terrible power than Sapper. Once he dons his steel coat and helm, hoists his overly large shield, and hefts his nonregulation warhammer, he’s practically a shieldwall unto himself. And none of that extra weight slows him down a bit.

Lastly, there’s Sainly. He picked up his name after drunkenly burning down the natives’ place of worship while on leave, bellowing out that the priest was a lying catamite. I never learned the details. Sainly was surefooted and quick-witted. If ever we needed a sentry taken out quickly and quietly,

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Saintly was our man. He is equally at home in a melee or stalking the enemy in the dead of night. He has an intuitive grasp of small unit tactics that made him worth his weight in gold to me.

Mind you, I was never quite sure why we were needed exactly. Wizards are notoriously difficult to kill- a quick scan through the Annals will bring up the sheer unfuckingkillability of such characters as Soulcatcher and the Limper, The Thing With Many Eyes and Varthlokkur, Nakar the Abomination, and many more besides. Sapper could likely survive anything the enemy threw at him. Still, orders are orders, and I can't deny that fights go a lot smoother when Sapper has a chance to concentrate on his work without having to dodge an arrow or sidestep a pike. We do our jobs well, in any case.

...

Today, we're not protecting our lovable little bundle of cranky sorcery. Orders, from the Tower itself- no wizards in the opening rounds except the Nazgul, who were these nine creepy-ass undead sorcerous kings. I think their name translates as "Ring Ghouls," so called 'cause they each got a special ring that binds them to the Dark Lord's service through all eternity. Note to self- if our employer offers us rings in payment, politely but firmly refuse. They got voices like the grave and are always shrouded in cloaks, covering antique black armor. The uruks tell us that if one of the Nine ever removes his cloak, you'll see nothing underneath. Just a suit of armor moving by itself, and an eldritch crown floating in mid air. The only thing visible is where their right hand should be, there's a ring that shines with a horrible light. Or so the uruks say.

Anyway, enough rumor mongering. The Nazgul have told us to keep Sapper out of it entirely. The Eye doesn't want any minor wizards on his team revealed yet, so as to keep them as a tactical surprise for later battles. The Gondorians have been getting their asses raked by the Nine for years now, so there's no point in keeping *them* in reserve. Our job today is to act as line breakers for the main assault. This means, see, that the skillion or so uruks charge the barricades helter-skelter and die in droves. But as a direct result of them dying in droves, they'll either break through and start rampaging through the streets of Osgiliath or get stopped in their tracks, which is where we come in. My special squad gets to be thrown at any bit of the defense that starts getting too cocky.

Now that I think about it, I reckon that the uruks get a real raw deal. Their bosses pretty much see them as battle fodder, which has never been the stance of the Black Company. To the Captain, ain't

none of us are expendable. Those poor freaks are going to suffer greatly in the coming weeks.

...

"There they go," Saintly remarks. The six of us are hanging back in the trench cooling our heels as a swarm of uruks are rushing the stone barricades. The Company is a quarter mile to the rear, in reserve, tasked with our job but on a larger scale. The front three ranks of the uruk force, if ranks they could be called, get cut down in a furious storm of arrows.

"Whoops! And there they went." Saintly's sense of humor is blacker than sin. Speaking of black, it turns out uruk blood has a nonstandard color scheme. Another reason to think of them as creeps.

"Note the positions," I tell the squad. "There ain't no archers on ground level, all those arrows came from the second and third stories of the stone buildings." They know their jobs a lot better than I do, but teaching their grandmas to suck eggs makes me feel useful.

Spike nods. "They know they'll lose the wall, but once our boys get into the city itself, them archers will give them hell."

"Also saw some movement on roofs," Blink adds. After a brief pause: "Hey, Haroun, would you mind if I...?"

"Go for it. We got nothing better to do."

Blink unslings his crossbow and places his chest up to the trench wall, resting his weapon on the churned dirt.

"Five silver pieces says he makes the shot," Bop pipes up. No one responds. "Offering ten to one here, now."

"Ten to one? Hell. You're on." Reader lays his hammer and shield down and peers out. The horde of uruks has got itself jammed up to the barricades, laying on a whole lotta ropes and ladders. Pretty soon it's going to be hand to hand. None of that matters now- we got a bet on, with stakes up to fifty silvers.

"Don't you miss, now," Bop tells Blink.

Blink grins. "I don't miss."

"Hey, Blink. I'll give you twenty five silver pieces if you miss."

Bop starts cussing Reader out, joking like. Spike punches Reader in the chest, pulling the punch, obviously. Even without the steel armor, punching Reader could break your hand. The rest of us chuckle a bit. It doesn't look like we'll be needed just yet. The uruks are on the wall now, duking it out with the Gondorian infantry. The Gondorians are all better armed and better trained, but they're outnumbered considerably, and some crazy-ass sorcery is at work in the uruks. Sapper could probably explain it better, but basically the head Nazgul, a charming sort of fella called the Witch-king, has some sort of spookiness up and running that drives them into berserker rages if they're close enough to him. They're still poorly armed and untrained, but that doesn't matter much when you outnumber the other team a trillion to one.

Blink takes a deep breath, lets half of it out, and looses. A deep, loud *twong* announces the flight of his missile. We all follow his line of sight and see an archer on a roof, who was just about to loose an arrow himself, get knocked back and out of sight.

"Right on the trunk," Bop gushes. The Gondorian emblem is an uprooted silver tree with seven stars on a black field.

Blink matter-of-factly starts to wind up his crossbow again, while Bop does a low-key dance in place. Reader shrugs fatalistically. He had known that the odds of seeing that fifty silvers was slim, but if there had just been a gust of wind...

The uruks have the wall now, though they might well wish they hadn't. All the archers in this section can concentrate on them, and between the wall and the city itself, there ain't no cover to speak of. The Gondorian infantry has withdrawn in good order to the streets, and the uruks can't seem to build up the momentum to charge them. The sorcery of the Witch-king is no replacement for good tactics. They mill about, getting cut down, attacking the foot soldiers in dribs and drabs and barely causing a dent in the defenses. The entire offense has come to a bloody halt.

"That's our cue, lads." We all grab our arms, haul ourselves out of the trenches, and sprint as best we can to the wall. We jostle our way through the uruk ranks, with Reader leading the way. Under the wall, near a ladder, surrounded by a bunch of snarling, crazed uruks...

"I saw that they're targeting the ones already on the wall, not the ones coming up the ladders and ropes," Sainly says. "We should be fine until we actually land on the parapet."

"Right, I say. I'm going up first. I'll be trying to organize those poor dumb bastards upstairs into something resembling a fighting unit. Reader, you're next. Plant yourself right in front of the ladder and try to shield everyone else as they come up." Reader nodded grimly. "Once we're all on the parapet, you five get yourselves into a Turtle formation surrounding Blink. Blink, start picking off anyone who looks uppity." Blink nodded. Truly, the secret to successful leadership is delegation. "On my mark, we send the uruks into the meatgrinder and we use them as cover to get in close to the other team. Once in position, standard line breaking tactics. Everybody got that?"

They did. I scramble up the ladder, pushing the ugly brutes out of the way so that we could go up first.

I scream and roar to convince myself and the uruks that I wasn't scared, then cuff and smack the uruks around trying to get them into some kind of shield-wall. It could never be a proper shieldwall, mind—their shields were more like bucklers. Useful in hand to hand, in their own way, but unsuited to protection from missiles or spear walls. I get them kneeling and overlapping their shields, then I get them to advance slowly and cautiously to make room for more uruks to come up onto the wall and I make them join in too. The archers can't inflict enough damage fast enough to stem the tide, and the foot soldiers don't dare leave their defenses to engage us.

I check back toward my squad— they're fine, with their back to the defensive wall, kneeling down with their wide shields up. Blink can't see past his brothers' shields, but I hear Sainly calling out to Blink—"Big guy without a shield, third rank, eighth file from the left!" *Twong!* "Hit! Pair of bowmen, far right flank, on the roof!"

Arrows whistle around me, but none have my name on them. If I was in charge on the other team, I'd be screaming at my bowmen to take out the guy who's in charge. Is that what the Gondorian across the way is doing? If it was, how am I still alive?

Does it matter? They miss. That's all I care about.

When I finally let the uruks off the leash, they howl like the damned and rush at the Gondorian line. They collide with a metallic clash that leaves my ears ringing, and by the time I rejoin my brothers to add my shield to theirs, the other team has buckled and started to withdraw. More uruks stream unopposed up the ladders and join in the savagery. You can count this tide turned in my book.

We had all studied maps of the city. It's set up so that the great river Anduin splits the city in

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two halves, and there's been enough skirmishing between Mordor and Gondor over the last century to have functionally ruined the eastern half. All of the major fortifications in the city lie on the river banks. The way we figure, the only thing standing between our boys and the river are those damn archers in the buildings. I send Sainly back to the trenches to tell them that our section of wall is breached and to start bringing in the trolls. Trolls can shrug off sheaves of arrows at a time, and they regard stone buildings as challenges. Don't stand on ceremony, fellas.

We could well have waded into the close quarters melee down there on the ground, but that would be really, really stupid of us. We weren't going to change the swing of battle by ourselves, and we might get hurt. Where's the profit in that? We were told to break the line if the uruks got stuck, and hey, look! It's a broken line.

We'll get paid whether we bleed or not. By all means, then, let's avoid the bleeding.

...

Our forces outdid themselves. As my squad was trudging back to the trenches and into the mess hall, the Nazgul sprang into action, hitting the other team with a nifty little fear spell that drove even the bravest of them into hysterics. The Lieutenant managed to sneak a hundred of our best men through the confused enemy lines, and outflanked two whole companies of fleeing Gondorian infantry, killing them by the score. They remained in position to roust any pockets of resistance before they could solidify.

We didn't just capture the eastern half of Osgiliath, we drove them from the city wholesale. Even as I'm writing this, trolls are starting to fortify the western edges of Osgiliath, just as Gondorians had done for us.

The Black Company got ten brothers lightly wounded. That's all. Pork Chop'll have them all back on their feet within the month.

Here's to hoping that the Lidless Eye gives us a hefty bonus for this.

...

I spoke too soon. A surprise Gondorian counterattack drove us back to the eastern side of the Anduin. They didn't have the momentum nor the numbers to knock us back to the trenches of Ithilien, but they managed to destroy the bridges that span the river. Getting at them at all will be a chore, let alone fighting through their soon to be constructed defenses.

Ah, hell with 'em. We still earned that bonus.

...

A squad of Company men was trapped on the other side of the river when the Gondorians struck. By all accounts, our brothers died hard, making the other team paying a high price for their victory. The details, as always, will be written down in the Book of the Slain as well, but I will here personally mourn our first brothers lost in this war:

Brother Dollface, we here record your passing. You die a soldier of the Black Company, and we on earth await reunion with you when our own time comes.

Brother Ahmed, we here record your passing. You die a soldier of the Black Company, and we on earth await reunion with you when our own time comes.

Brother Twink, we here record your passing. You die a soldier of the Black Company, and we on earth await reunion with you when our own time comes.

Brother Wazzer, we here record your passing. You die a soldier of the Black Company, and we on earth await reunion with you when our own time comes.

Brother Feisal, we here record your passing. You die a soldier of the Black Company, and we on earth await reunion with you when our own time comes.

May a brother of my Company note my own passing in this ancient way when I am slain myself.

...

I take it seriously, right?

2. Minas Morgul

We're killing time again in Minas Morgul. We rankers don't know whether our invasion had been stymied by the Gondorian counter-attack, or if the Eye had always intended to take a breather here. Either way, we're stationed here until things pick up again. We couldn't even advance if we wanted to, since our Nazgul have taken off on a special mission way up north. Ain't no one else can keep the uruk masses in check and marching in the right direction, let alone getting them to actually fight.

Quartermaster will tell anyone dumb enough to stop and listen that the Dark Lord wants to open up other fronts to the north and west before attacking. That way, we won't have to tangle with any relief columns of men, dwarves, or even worse, elves. You hear rumors about those guys- the uruks claim that elves live forever until killed, that elven archers can shoot a butterfly's dick off at five hundred yards, that elves never have to sleep or eat so long as they drink a special potion that only they know how to brew. We are not sure how much to credit, although

the gods know there is weirder shit than that sworn to in the Annals.

Quartermaster says that he traded with an Easterling merchant who has a brother who lives up north in Rhun who claims to have seen orc encampments up there that got the Red Eye painted on their shields. Proof positive, he says, that our paymaster has forces working outside of Mordor to threaten any potential allies of Gondor. We're just waiting for our auxiliary guerrillas to get in position before we strike.

Military intelligence. Contradiction in terms.

...

Bored. So bored. Very, very bored. We get leave, but where precisely are we supposed to go, the Plateau of fucking Gorgoroth? I spent a whole damn day leafing through the Annals for entertainment instead of knowledge. Found an anecdote about a war that got started by a farmer chasing a pig across the border to a neighboring country and accidentally breaking three international laws with a single action- Willfully Violating Border Protocol, Livestock Rustling, and Engaging in Brigandry Without a Marque from the King. 'Cause he removed the pig from another sovereign state without permission, see? That runaway pig started a war that lasted three generations. I repeated this anecdote to anyone who would listen for the entire day, until the Lieutenant informed me that I had told him that stupid bloody story three times already, and that he had *overheard* me telling it another five times. He then politely warned that if I told it once more, to anyone, he would stick me in plate armor and use me for Company archery practice.

So I rewrote it here in a newer volume of the Annals, so that every future brother runs across immediately instead of digging around for it like I had too. He didn't say nothing about writing it to anyone, now did he?

Also, I asked him about my new rank and the Lieutenant says that I have the pay grade of an officer, but the authority of a corporal. So I'm sort of a non-com / officer hybrid. I make more money than the sergeants but I can't give them orders. It's good to have that cleared up.

I can get into the Officer's Club, though. That's the main thing.

...

Bullet overheard me, Spike and Bop bitching about the boredom. We had to run his special obstacle course for two hours, then do sword drills for another three, then to cool down we did a half hour of Iron Lunges, and that's in addition to the standard

two hours of training we do anyway. I was seeing spots and going deaf with exhaustion, though I managed to keep from throwing up. Give me back my boredom, for pity's sake. First rule of warfare, my future brothers- don't ever tell the Sergeant that you have nothing to do.

Murky and Crow thought our plight was hilarious, so Spike came up with the idea to dust their blankets with crushed black peppers from the mess hall. He would like to report that while his hands are still stinging from his prank, it was completely worth it.

...

Saintly would like me to note for posterity that he and every other fucking soldier in this outfit is going insane for lack of women. Most of the females in Mordor are uruks. You can guess how many of our boys want to sheath their daggers up *those* sheaths. Ain't no one dumb enough to go to a whore that's got fangs, you know what I mean? All we're saying is there had better be women in Gondor *somewhere*, and if there ain't, we might have to go AWOL down south to the whorehouses of Umbar. Then again, maybe some fresh, curvy young thing from the Gondorian territories will be imprisoned here. And she'll have warm brown eyes; long, clean, raven hair; she's wearing nothing but a thin, tight-fitting white dress that's torn all the way up past the waist, revealing a long, white leg and a gorgeous hip for anyone to see. She's desperate for protection from these cruel uruks, and she'll do *anything* to keep out of their clutches, anything at *all*... Ah, sweet imagination, you are the only balm to sex-starved souls.

...

Note to self- do not use Annals for personal sex fantasies. It's unprofessional.

...

There are four of us sitting around a low wooden table playing tonk. The boredom was being temporarily alleviated through honest gaming.

"My deal?" Pork Chop asks. We assent. He deals out the cards, five each.

Bugger this up the ass. My count is forty-seven, king queen jack nine eight, no possible runs. If my luck got any worse, it would aboutface and turn wonderful again. No one declared tonk, but Saintly lays down a run of six seven eight. My nine will play there, at least.

Face cards count as ten, aces as one, face value otherwise. If your count in the first round is 49 or 50, or 13 and below, you declare tonk and win double stakes, right off the bat. Otherwise, you draw and discard to get suited runs and three of a kinds to

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lay down to decrease your count. If you reckon your hand has the lowest count, on your turn you go down and show your cards. If you do have the lowest count, you win the pot. If you don't, you pay double to everyone with a hand equal to or lower to you. If all your cards are tied up in runs and three of a kinds, you win the pot automatically.

I was clearly not gonna win this one.

Aya Bastard snags the initial discard- a five- and discards three fives, discards a ten. He stares at Sainly, daring him to go down. Sainly sighs, draws, discards the eight he drew. I slide my nine out, draw a two. I ditch my queen. Thirty count. I got a chance. Pork Chop draws, discards. Nothing interesting.

Aya pauses. We realize he's going to chance it a second before he lays down an eight and an ace. Nine count. Sainly bangs his head against the table, lying in the universal pose of misery accepted, holding up his hand for all to see- eleven count. Aya Bastard rakes in his winnings.

"Hey, Haroun," Aya says as he shuffles. "You're an officer now, right?"

"That's right." Sorta.

"Then do you know what the delay is? I thought we had a world to bitch-slap." He starts the deal.

"Way, way above my pay grade. Nobody tells me nothing. I don't think even the Old Man knows what the deal is." Twenty-two, possible run. I quickly scan the others' faces, looking for hints as to their hands. No one lays down. Sainly draws, discards. Useless. I draw and shave off two points, leaving me at an optimistic twenty.

"Whatever happened to the Cap? He ain't been around here for the last month," Pork asked no one in particular. "Didn't even say 'ta-ta, fare thee well' before he up and left."

Aya goes down. He's got twenty-three.

I slap my cards down. "Burned ya."

"Ay! ya bastard!" Aya got his name from playing tonk. It started out as a genuine outburst but has evolved into ritual.

I sweep the winnings to my side, smiling wide. Boredom can be kept at bay for as long as you got stakes on the table.

"The way I hear it," Sainly chips in, "is that the dopes in the upper ranks realized that only we have the slightest idea how to wage war, so they decided to get their money's worth out of the Captain. I think someone said he was down on the front lines, organizing the offensive. My deal."

That makes us all feel a little brighter. If the Old Man is in charge of the planning process, you can be pretty sure things won't fall apart *too* quickly. Ain't nothing worse than going into a fight knowing that the guy with the gold braid has got his head up his ass.

...

Sapper is in a foul mood, threatening to turn us into cockroaches and setting small fires to people's shoes. He always transforms his fear into ire. The wiser grunts keep out of his way, the younger, dumber ones start baiting him to break the tedium. Pork Chop gets his work cut out for him for a day or two.

The Nine have returned, and by the gods, they got trashed. When the Nazgul set out north all those months ago, they had taken bodies in the form of black riders, hooded and cloaked, hell bent for leather in a far off land. They came home incorporeal; deranged and weakened spirits with barely enough energy to crawl home to Mordor, and there to grovel in fear and shame before the All-Seeing Eye.

Gods, I can't even imagine what could have taken out all Nine of them. Our paymaster is keeping a real tight lid on all details of their mission, and subsequent defeat, so in the vacuum has been filled with all manner of wild theories. The elves invoked the Gods themselves to vanquish them. They were searching for lost treasure and a dragon took umbrage to their meddling, and burned their physical bodies away. The Witch-king had tried to rebel against his Master, and the eight loyal Nazgul fought him to the death; even now, the Lord of the Nazgul is suffering the penalties of disloyalty. No one believes any of it, but we can't help but swap the increasingly unlikely rumors we hear.

Gondor has no great sorceries, nor any special knowledge of the Black Arts. What kind of djinn or god could possibly lay a finger on the Nine greatest sorcerers in this section of the world, save their Master alone? Does the other team have some unguessed power that the Eye hadn't Seen coming?

Are we about to bring a knife to a swordfight, that's what we're worrying about.

None of us here in Minas Morgul, be we uruk, Southron, Easterling or Company, are left unshaken by this development. What started out as a straight up military campaign is starting to look like an apocalyptic world war, like something out of the old Annals. Throughout its history, the Company never comes closer to oblivion than when wizards march to war.

I leaf through the Annals sweating cold, reading of our involvement in the various world churning wars- the Siege of Dros Delnoch; the Pastel Wars; the Battle of Charm; the Matayangan invasion of Shinsan. Only now, it don't look like ancient history. Now it looks like more like a prophecy- or perhaps a promise. What did we sign up for here?

...

The Nine are back on their spiritual feet. It took a month and a half to get the right slab of ectoplasm in the right piece of arcanelly protected armor, or whatever goes on when sorcerors get their acts together, but we all breathe a little easier knowing that they're up and running at full capacity. The official word is that they were semi-slain by an enemy wizard called the Grey Walker, a guerrilla mastermind who has been harassing the Eye for centuries. The Eye sends a company of uruks to conquer a town up north? He'll manipulate some wanna-be hero into organizing the defense. We try to muscle into a gold-mining operation in the Misty Mountains? He'll convince the dwarves that they got an ancestral right to them mines, and then we got a bloodbath on our hands. Any plan that our side cooks up, you can bet your life that he'll turn up, twisting arms and deluding the weak-minded into fighting his battles for him. Apparently he doesn't like getting his hands dirty, nor utilizing the flashy blowing-stuff-up spells that Sapper enjoys so much. He's more of a general than a warrior, so to speak. The price on his head is almost as much as our total commission, and we do not sell ourselves cheap.

The story we're given is that the Grey Walker ambushed them. Next time, our superiors say, we'll make him fight on our terms, on the Pelennor fields before the fortress of Minas Tirith, where he'll be outnumbered and outmaneuvered. Next time, they say, it's our turn.

The uruks may kept calm by such a story, but we ain't. First off, how the hell does one guy ambush Nine? He can't. He'd get one or two, maybe, but if he really was bigger and badder, the others could just run off. No, we reckon it's far more likely that they ganged up on him and got their asses handed to them. This really, really does not bode well for us. Second, you've just told us that a wizard greater than all your sorcerous Ring-Ghouls combined is

waiting for us behind high stone walls with a professional army at his disposal. Was this actually suppose to reassure us, O messengers of the Red Eye? On the other hand, now we understand why you wanted us to keep Sapper out of the fray. If this Grey Walker knew about him beforehand, he could stomp him like a bug and move on. By keeping him a surprise, he'll last long enough to put some good work in.

Of course, if the Grey Walker does find him out, then it'll be up to me to protect him. Just me and five dopes in armor withstanding the onslaught of the wizard that slew all the Nazgul by himself. I can tell this upcoming campaign is going to be a fun one.

Then again, we're hearing good news from the outside world. One of Gondor's next door neighbors, Rohan, has got itself meshed in a civil war that I would bet my life has its origins in Barad-dur. A local wizard, Saruman, has recruited or possibly bred himself an army of super-uruks and made a blatant grab for power. Reports are unclear as to the exact course of the fight, but it sounds like our side is kicking ass. Even if Saruman loses, Rohan will likely be too weakened and fractured to lend much strength to the help defend Gondor.

We hear that a kingdom of men and dwarves called Dale is under attack in the north. If I had access to a map, I would be more specific, but when all you got is word of mouth, vagueness will just have to do. Dale was set up and empowered by the Grey Walker something like fifty years ago, and has been a thorn in our side in that theater ever since. A small but respectable horde of Easterlings clashed with Dale's warriors, but things have since settled into a state of siege. There's no sign that Dale can break out to help Gondor. Good thing, too- you hear stories about dwarf-made weapons.

In Mirkwood, our outpost in Dol Guldor has uruks supported by magically augmented giant spiders raiding deep into the elvish kingdom there. You don't send out the troops when seven foot arachnids are trying to crawl over your own city's walls, into the parks where your own children play. So we figure no elvish archers are showing up either. Lucky thing for all the butterflies in the area.

The Corsairs of Umbar, the city that we were hired out of, have officially allied with Mordor. They'll be launching raids up and down Gondor's coast in the coming weeks. If Gondor tries calling up the militia to help defend Minas Tirith, they might find that most of them will be staying home to protect themselves from the dreaded Umbar pirates. Ho ho ho.

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Here in Minas Morgul, the Witch-king has locked himself in his chamber and started up some sort of hocus-pocus. I don't know what he's doing, precisely, but the skies are darkening, black clouds reaching like claws towards Gondorian skies. Sapper refuses to comment when I ask for his views on the subject- apparently the Witch-King is whipping up some bad mojo. It's still nice for us mundane folk to know we'll be having some sorcerous support.

Best of all, the Captain's back from Osgiliath. He's got this secret smile, like he knows a wonderful secret. Like a prankster leading his dupe into a trap. That controlled grin of his does more for morale than double rations and three week's leave.

Over all, things are looking good for us. Yet we all are haunted by the conviction that as long as the Grey Walker is free to plot and scheme, things won't be going according to plan.

...

News from afar- the wizard we backed in Rohan got put down. Still, the basic plan worked, in that the Rohirrim army suffered grievously and is in no shape to fight. All reports agree that they won't be ready for any kind of campaign for months.

Orders came today. We're heading out for Ithilien on patrol, guerrilla hunting. Yesterday, a column of infantry and war-elephants coming up from Harad got ambushed and raked by a Gondorian company that managed to sneak past our front lines. The other team inflicted casualties at will, then flipped the Haradrim the bird with both hands and melted away into the countryside that they've spent years familiarizing themselves with. Will a large group of soldiers who don't know the countryside be able to locate the guerrillas and force them into a stand up fight in just two quick march throughs? No, of course not. Does irregular warfare require time, commitment, and specialized tactics? It does indeed. Does any of that change our orders? Not a jot. We march tomorrow.

With any luck, it won't be as mind-crushingly boring as it is here.

...

Marching up and down the same paths twenty damn times, looking for an enemy who's too smart to show up, is exactly as dull as staying at Minas Morgul. Except here, we have to eat the dust that we stirred up the last time we marched down the road. Why did I join this outfit again?

...

Orders came, and we're on the move. It's time to take the fight to the enemy, first at Osgiliath, then onwards to Minas Tirith.

All we can say is, it's about bloody time.

3. The Pelennor Fields, Part One

Upon reviewing my notes, I find that I've been inspecific about just how big our army was- I keep finding words like "masses," "skillions," and "hordes." Part of this I can't help- I'm not given nice, neat reports detailing our strength; I have to do the best I can by sight and rumor. Well, I've been asking around, and soaking in the rumors and making careful guesstimations of our numbers while we march towards Osgiliath. And despite this, I still can't tell you the strength of Mordor with any kind of precision. But I can record for posterity what I have learned:

From Khand came a regiment of Variags numbering five thousand- grim, bearded fellows with arms like battering rams. They were terrific men to have on a battle-line, 'cause they had this special kind of shortened halberd that's a joy to watch them use. It can be used against mounted knights and blocks of infantry with equal precision and ferocity. And if the other guy gets too close to use it on them? They got these back-up longknives called *kukris* that are bent forward at an odd angle. We watched one Variag, a guy named Ultfaln, throw a block of wood into the air and chop it in half with one quick cut. After that little demonstration, a bunch of us lined up to trade for or buy ourselves a *kukri* of our very own.

From Rhun in the north came seven thousand warriors. You could tell from their equipment that these were lone wolf types- their shields aren't designed to interlock and their swords are too long to swing safely if they're standing next to someone. As duellists or brawlers they might be hot shit, but twenty Company men working together could whip a hundred of them, and that's not even an exaggeration. What sort of moron doesn't know by now that it's teamwork and cooperation that win wars? I hope they get stationed on the opposite end of the battle-line than us, 'cause if things go sour they'll break like glass.

The king of the Hammad al Ghul came to fight personally, along with his elite bodyguard, the Immortals; so called not because they live forever, but because when they die they are immediately replaced by new recruits so that the regiment itself never dies. This is also roughly how the Black Company works, so they get brownie points there. The Immortals number just one thousand, but every one of those soldiers is a veteran of ten years and stand taller than six feet tall, with long, thick spears and solid shields. If any fighting unit in this madhouse

can go toe to toe with the Company and come out alive, it's them. Not that we'll ever tell them that.

From out of the far eastern kingdoms come a mixed force of pikemen numbering ten thousand. From what we understand, each of the ten kings of the Eastern Crescent placed a thousand troops at the Eye's disposal for the foreseeable future. There's nothing particularly badass about *these* soldiers, but still- ten thousand warm bodies is nothing to sneeze at.

So that's the Easterling faction- about 23,000 fighters.

From the South, the various warring tribes of Southrons have been united only in their fear of the Lidless Eye for generations, so when emissaries of Mordor came a-calling up the troops, they turned out in droves. Sworn enemies shook hands and blood feuds were put on hold a generation in order to obey the dread command of our paymaster. The eight Haradrim tribes have coughed up about five thousand bows and thirty thousand scimitars between them. Their swordsmen are nothing special by Company standards, but they are all supported by the oliphaunts. The Haradrim have rigged up some platforms on their war-mumakils, so that each monster can carry up to eighty archers each. Twelve oliphaunts times eighty bows equals almost one thousand men holed up in what is essentially a fortress that you can pick up and carry with you. As long as the swordsmen stay within bowshot of their oliphaunts, they'll be the linchpins of any battle formation the Witch-king wants to construct. Not to mention, you could also just drive the beast into the enemy ranks and have it stomp around to its heart's content. That works too.

Also, the Eye has reached out far into the south east of his territories, sweeping in tribes of savages eager for rape and plunder. They are ill-armed, untrained, and extremely unpleasant, so I'm kind of looking forward to watching the Gondorians make mincemeat out of them. There were about 5,000 of the vicious little buggers all told.

That's the Southron faction- 40,000 thousand fighters. We're up to 63,000 already, not including the bloody great war-oliphaunts.

Now, Mordor has been churning out uruks by the thousands for decades, by breeding or magic or job listings or however it is that you recruit uruks. I can't estimate their numbers any more than I can number the grains of sand in the desert, but I figure there are about 200,000 uruks within a half day's march of the Gondorian defenses. This figure does not include the untold bazillions back home in Minas Morgul, posted in the Plateau of Gorgoroth,

manning their stations at the Black Gate, or preparing to storm Cair Andros upstream of the Anduin, or on various raids into the enemy homelands. Damn it, I'm using words like "bazillions" again. The uruks, as previously noted, are badly armed and armored, but once the Nazgul start up their berserker spell their shortcomings will cease to matter.

Then there are the trolls. About 15,000 of the standard smash-puny-human-with-big-rock variety, and 2,000 of the real high class ones that are wrapped in armor and use actual steel weapons. In addition to fighting, the trolls will be hauling the fifty siege weapons we have been constructing, and pulling the siege towers towards the walls of Minas Tirith.

And, of course, the Nazgul. Nine Ring-Ghouls mounted on scaly winged beasts, zipping around the battle field like proactive vultures, slapping around any Gondorian who looks at them funny.

Just about the only thing we don't have is decent cavalry. Still, it's not like you can use mounted troops against a stone wall.

Over 200,000 soldiers marching out of Mordor, with over 150 pieces of siege equipment. 63,000 assorted men, with fuck-off great war-mumakil. The Nine greatest powerhouses of sorcery of this hemisphere. Add to all that a certain hardcore group of mercenaries and you got yourself a worldbeater.

Oh, and Gondor? Unsupported by any ally, and weakened by years of raids and in general decline? With a Steward struggling to maintain internal cohesion in his kingdom, and an army diminished by years of conflict? The other team numbers about 34,000 soldiers, a couple dozen field ballista, and a couple hundred mounted knights.

Yeah, good luck with that, sports.

...

We found out today what the Captain's been up to in Osgiliath- he's been slapping together an invasion plan that's, dare I say it, as dirty as it is elegant.

One of the primary strategies of the Black Company is sneakery. Slyness. Devious cunning and strategic misdirection. We have a thousand years' worth of underhanded tactics on tap in the Annals, and every few years we add a new variation to it. This is *our* contribution to the Company's playbook:

The way Osgiliath is set up, as I told you before, is that it's got the Anduin cutting it in two. We have the eastern half; they got the west. The Anduin, at this point in its long journey towards the sea, is far too deep to ford and any boat that tries to cross would get shot up by arrows or sunk by ballista. The only way across are the six ornate bridges that

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used to connect the two halves until the Gondorians dismantled them. The Captain has been working furiously for the past months to construct long steel plates that can be dropped across the remains of the bridges. If we can get close enough to plop them down, we can storm across and get into the close-quarters fighting that our numbers will surely carry. The only ones buff enough to haul the plates are the trolls, so they'll be leading the assault. We'll lose hundreds of trolls, no doubt, and we'll need to repaint the stone streets black with uruk blood to even get close enough to start the melee, but this plan will work. It's basically trading away ten thousand of our guys in exchange for being on the other side of the river.

Of course, if that was in fact the plan then the Captain wouldn't have had the warsmiths banging away at all hours of the night making the six steel plates. He wouldn't have allowed the other team to see us transport them to the six bridges. And he really, really would not have had the trolls practice running and dropping the plates in full view of the other team. He was a stage magician flaunting his beautiful half-naked assistant to keep your eyes off what his hands are doing.

While the other team watched our lovely plates being set in place and nodded sagely to themselves, the Old Man was building a fleet of lightweight boats in the trenches of Ithilien. The boats varied in size; some could only hold five guys, some could hold up to fifty. But I swear to you, there were over a thousand of them. Every night, a few more boats were smuggled quietly into Osgiliath and placed in hidden caches throughout the city. The other team has a skeleton company patrolling the river while the main concentration of troops are massed at the bridges. When the orders come for us to go over the top, the Gondorians are going to be some surprised motherfuckers.

...

Our camp is abuzz with rumors- the other team has made their first move. Nobody is precisely sure what actually happened, but it sounds like the Nazgul and the Grey Walker mixed it up today. I sought out Sapper to get his informed opinion. He told me to piss off until I mentioned it was for the Annals.

"Oh," he said. "So it's for posterity, like."

"Precisely. So tell me, from a sorceror's perspective, just what exactly happened out there today?"

Sapper preens. Pesky questions from nimrods he detests, but give him an audience and a leading question and he'll pontificate for hours. Still, I'm Annalist, ain't I? Duty before pleasure.

"Do you remember," he began, stretching his plump frame as tall as he could, "that shadow company of Rangers that ambushed the Haradrim?"

Of course I bloody did.

"Well, it seems that they tried to regroup with their main force yesterday evening. Which is a tactical error, in my opinion. A highly motivated and self-sufficient group of commandos operating behind our lines could wreak havoc on our lines of supply, could obstruct our strategies, could sap morale and devastate our forward momentum. They could do far more good as raiders in Ithilien than fodder in the upcoming battle. As Sleepy noted during her legendary campaign against the forces of Taglios and the Protector, possessing the psychological initiative is far more vital than mere numbers on the battle line..." And he went on like that for a while. I gradually guided him back to the original question.

"After their commander dropped them off across the river, he and his officers made a break for Minas Tirith, evidently with reports of our movements that were too urgent to go through the proper channels. Their movements attracted the interest of the Nazgul. The Witch-king sent out five of the Nazgul to either eliminate or apprehend them. They mounted their *Gharashni*."

"Their what?" I interrupted. He gave me that certain withering look you give to dumbasses who make your life more difficult.

"*Gharashni*. The scaly flying bird things that the Nazgul ride."

"Thank you, continue."

"They mounted their *Gharashni* and went haring after them. While they were in pursuit, the Grey Walker himself sallied and drove them off. Non-fatally, of course. "

Well, shit, Sapper, I kinda gathered that from the rumors. "Is there any perspective you can give us as to the fight itself? Are we in danger of being outclassed on the magical side of things?"

Sapper looked haunted for a moment, like he was contemplating a horrible future that he can foresee but not change. "Maybe. It's complicated."

"Put it in layman's terms."

Sapper scowled. "Layman's terms. I swim in the very currents of the universe, manipulating the fabric of reality, and he wants layman's terms. Alright. Imagine you're a swordsman, right?"

"I *am* a swordsman. I am literally wearing my sword right now."

Another withering look, like *I'm* the one who said something dumb. "Imagine you're a swordsman. You spend your whole life perfecting your technique, improving your strength and building up stamina. You study all the great fencers and learn several different schools of fighting, eventually finding one that seems to match your strengths. You hone yourself almost as a living blade, swift and sharp and sure. There is no greater swordsman in the world than you, you follow?"

The hell? "Of course."

Sapper leaned back and smiled. "Now imagine you have your sword taken from you and have to enter an unarmed martial arts contest, and if you lose, you die. You follow?"

The hell? "Not even slightly."

"In that analogy, the swordsman is the Nazgul, okay? They are all strongly tainted with the Power, a taint that's been expanded by those damn rings of theirs, and they've had millenium to hone their talent even further. But the Grey Walker, he's not even a sorcerer. Did you know that? There wasn't even the slightest hint of the Power when he drove off the Nazgul. But he was packing something, wasn't he? He must have some source other than the Poles of Power. And we none of us can imagine what."

"That other source being the... martial arts thing, right?"

"That was a bad analogy. Ignore it. What we have here is two separate and opposed schools of power duking it out. It won't be which side has the biggest magical muscles, it'll be which side trumps the other, and until they get down and dirty and sort it out no one knows how it'll turn out. Imagine a game of tonk where you bet all the money you have and you're not allowed to look at your cards. You just have to decide when to go down blind and hope your cards are lower."

"...what?"

"Another bad analogy." Sapper shrugged. "Well. I can't dumb it down any further without starting to drool all over myself, so you'll just have to take it at that." Sapper smiled the smile of a man who has confused someone dumber than himself and wandered away to the mess hall.

Gods, wizards are weird.

...

We're all sure that tomorrow's the day, although nothing official has trickled down. We make the necessary preparations- we seek out the smiths and have new edges put on our blades, we shake out any

rust in our armor, we test our crossbow strings for slackness. We neurotically account for every spare dagger or pair of brass knuckles we have, and check and recheck that each strap and buckle is working right. When the stakes of the game are your life, you better believe you'll obsess over doing everything that's in your power. Each man has a suit of chain mail, a helmet, a spear, a sword, and a shield, except for the crossbowmen, who have small axes or a *kukri* for back-up. Each item is as close to battle ready as human effort can bring it.

Every Company man draws lots, and ten men are selected at random to guard the Annals while we are in combat. The Lieutenant and I find a nice, deserted building to store them in. We think it used to be a nobleman's house, because before the uruks looted and trashed the place it must have looked marvelous. Despite the mess and graffiti and blood on the walls, it was still a nice place. It's a shame I have no interest or knowledge of architecture, because if I did, I think this place would blow me away. The whole city is like that- a stone garden of tranquility and dignity, brought low by war and disaster.

We put our ten chosen men in what used to be a wine cellar, gave them official charge of the Annals, and locked the door from the inside. If nothing survives except the Annals, the Standard, and one man with breath in his lungs, the Black Company will march again.

...

The darkness of night- it's even darker than usual from all the sorcerous crap in the air from the Witchking's spell. My squad isn't detached from the main force anymore; we'll be fighting with brothers guarding our backs for the first time in a long time. We're stationed at the northernmost bridge, ready to cross the river once the uruks peel open the defenses.

I'm glad we're not the ones in the boats. If something goes wrong, they'll be sitting ducks.

Someone behind me whispers a query to his neighbor. Almost before he's finished Bullet is at his side.

"Goddamnit, Shaggy," I hear Bullet hiss. The man has a whisper like a dragon's breath. "If this plan goes belly-up because you can't keep your mouth shut, I will break every bone in your body. Did you not hear the Lieutenant order everyone to shut the fuck up?"

"Sorry, Sarge."

"What's that in your hand?"

"Nothing, Sarge."

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"Open your hand. Is that a pipe? Were you going to light up that fucking pipe *now*?"

"Wasn't gonna smoke it, Sarge."

"Are you retarded, Shaggy? Is that it? Give me that fucking hashish. You're on charge, Shaggy, and you better be thankful I caught you before you really fucked things up."

I swap glances with Saintly, who's next to me on the line. We both choke back laughter, because it's always funny until it happens to you.

The uruks down on the shore are bringing out the boats. From here, they are looking mighty fragile, but I have faith that what the Captain plans works right. If *he* reckons the boats won't spill or sink...

No sign that other team is wise to us yet. I grip and regrip my spear shaft, trying to find a spot where my hand won't slip off. My shield is getting heavy and we haven't even moved yet. How am I going to keep it up once I get into the thick of it?

"And the little bastards are... off," Saintly breathes. If Bullet had heard him... but Bullet is on the left rear ranks and Saintly and I are front and to the right. Saintly knows when it's safe to mouth off- it's a talent of his that none of the rest of us can quite imitate.

The boaters are floating softy across the Anduin, as slick as you please. They occasionally put oar to water to maintain their speed or to keep from drifting downstream, but otherwise they are running silent. Our luck is holding; none of the defenders are crying out, there is no rain of missiles, no clank of armed men taking positions. They enter the designated killzone, where any archers on the rooftops can shoot straight down into the boats with no protection offered by the wooden rims of the boats.

Nothing. Not so much as a harsh word from the defenders of Osgiliath.

We all grin to each other in silence. None of us have any objection to an anticlimax like that.

The boats touch the western shore and still no response. From our elevated position, the boats are just dark blobs discharging crouched silhouettes. The second wave of boats takes off from our end. Even if the other side catches on and starts fighting back this exact instant, they can't possibly stop this wave from reaching the beachhead.

The plan is to establish a secure front on the western side, then expand it to include the bridges. Once the bridges are ours, our sneaky little steel plates will let the rest of us in.

Shouts! Metallic clashes, screams of pain, of bloodlust, of primal fear being fed into the fires of rage. The other side has finally woken up. It doesn't matter. We have our beachheads, the battle is ours.

The uruks are assaulting the Gondorian positions on our bridge from the rear, where they're vulnerable. Judging from the sound of battle, the uruks are getting their noses bloodied. Say what you will about the Gondorian army, they know how to fight a war. On the defensive, fighting as unit, they are curb-stomping our boys, not yielding an inch. On the other hand, we can trade up ten dead uruks for one wounded Gondorian and still win the battle by a comfortable margin.

Bullet whispers, somehow loud enough for everyone to hear. "They're distracted. Now."

Our three trolls, who are hauling our thirty foot plate, trot heavily towards the broken bridge ahead of us. We all crowd up behind what cover there is and wait for them to do their thing.

A couple dozen Gondorians see us and holler a warning as the trolls hurl the plate across the bridge. The trolls die quickly but valiantly, shot in the eyes by sure-sighted archers and hamstringed by the swordsmen, but by that time we've already advanced across the bridge, shields raised high and interlocked. Crossbowmen on the roofs above us are sniping any Gondorian who shows his face. The other team is double flanked, run ragged and out-classed, and they know it too.

And yet, as a unit they escape mostly intact. In a display of courage and professionalism that comes close to our own standards, they make a concerted rush at the uruks, who break like a sand castle getting a crossbow quarrel through it. The other team is through the gap and on the streets before we can catch more than a handful of them.

Our bridge is taken, the enemy is rooted out, and we suffered only minimal casualties. And yet, it feels somehow like we got outplayed here.

"Did you see that tall fellow in charge?" I ask Aya Bastard, slightly out of breath from the quick march in armor.

"The guy with the long dark hair?"

I nodded. "I think that was the guy the Nazgul were chasing before. Can't be sure, but..."

"Yeah, I was thinking that. We'd have gotten the lot if it weren't for him. Son of a bitch." It was true. That fucker was born to command. I didn't think they had a chance at breaking out, not under attack from both sides.

All along the river front, it was the same story. Chaos followed by clashes of our boys and theirs, then a fast but dignified Gondorian retreat to the western edge of the city, and from there to the wall around the Pelennor fields. We move forward, in case an enemy unit decides to stay for a last stand. None do, which makes our task a lot easier.

There are comparatively few bodies in Gondorian black and silver, whereas there are small mountains of uruks lying around. The other team's armor is really making the difference when it comes to confused brawling. We paid a steep price for this small victory, but then, we can afford it. And it would have been a hell of a lot worse if we tried to rush the bridges. They probably lost seven hundred men all figured, and we, ten times that many. Still a net gain for us.

Bullet sends Sapper out ahead to do some good, which meant I am sent out again with my special squad. We prowl the streets like thugs at midnight, looking for trouble. Where we find it, Sapper works his mojo and the trouble dissolves like sugar candy. These Gondorians have no conception of how to counter small unit sorcery. Forward momentum is maintained.

...

For the first time in three and a half years, the Black Company picked up a new recruit.

It was after the rush of uruks drove the Gondorians out. The Witch-king wanted to savage them good before they got back to the walls of Minas Tirith, so he pressed the chase hard, harder than he should have. Once the retreat crossed the wall into the Pelennor fields, the Gondorian cavalry, previously dismissed as being too small to worry about, counter attacked to cover their comrades' retreat. My squad got to watch four hundred armored knights pulp about 2,000 uruks caught on open ground in loose formation. It was like watching a heavyweight take the ring with a featherweight, except the featherweight wasn't allowed to block. I don't think the other team lost so much as thirty men, while no more than three hundred uruks made it back to the safety of the city. The only good news was that the Witch-king managed to stick the Gondorian commander with a poisoned dart before getting driven off by the Grey Walker again. Someone had better figure out a way to scrag that old man before the Nazgul get trashed again. After watching the brief debacle, me and my squad skipped on back to the river where our rendezvous point was. On the way we saw a small company of uruks trying to smash down an oak door.

We were in no particular hurry, so we stopped and watched.

There was this big ornate building, clearly another nobleman's house like the one we were keeping our Annals in. Real spacious and elegant. As they splintered the door and rushed inside, we heard screams and shouts from within.

"Looks like a couple of them boys got cut off from the retreat," Reader remarked. We all mumbled agreement.

Another scream, louder than and higher than the snarls of the uruks. A woman was inside. We all froze, unsure of how we stand.

Company tradition forbids the usual custom in war of raping women. We can even pinpoint at what part of our history we adopted our unorthodox attitude- the Book of Tobo describes the draconian levels of punishment that Captain Lady resorted to in order to stop the practice. Lady used to be our employer-sort of the Lidless Eye of her day. She knew how to force people to quit their habits- there's the heated blade, the spike, the crucifix... At 85 years of leadership, she was the longest lasting Captain we've ever had, and she left an indelible mark on Company practice. You do not rape in the Black Company. Full stop. There will always be rankers who try and often succeed in getting away with a bit of involuntary seduction, but official policy is to hang them when caught.

However, tradition is much hazier on whether we are obligated to intervene to save a woman from our allies. There is precedent, but no requirement.

I catch my boys' eyes one by one to gauge their reactions. I've known these men for most of a decade- fought with them, slept by their sides, lived with them day after day for years. I know them better than most men know their own brothers. I can usually tell what's going on inside them.

Blink doesn't care. He's tired, sore, and has an arrow head in his chainmail rubbing into his side. He just wants to go back to the rendezvous point and lie down and hibernate.

Reader looks concerned, like he heard some bad news but isn't sure whether it affects him. Whether we intervene or walk away, he'll back either option.

Spike and Bop are agitated. If they didn't have self-discipline, they'd be whipping out their longswords and rushing the company of uruks right now, chopping and slashing in perfect unison. I found out later that they had had a sister who was snatched from them when they were children, before they ever took up arms. Theirs was the rage of love soured.

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Saintly is, and there's no other word I can think of that fit him better, cold. He's standing stock-still, staring at the uruks, breathing under complete control. I can't figure out if he's so enraged he's almost at the bursting point, or if he's as utterly indifferent as he looks.

Sapper's just spent half an hour shooting fireballs at people, so he's at peace with the world. He's not at all concerned about the woman, but I think he'll take any excuse to get into another scrap.

And for myself? Do I take my ethical cues from my surroundings, a moral chameleon? Or did I have an unbreakable moral code that was forcing me to take a stand? I can't say exactly. The Black Company teaches us that good and evil are relative, depending entirely on which side of the fight you're on. One man's hero is another man's monster. Drawing a line in the sand and declaring that only your side is right is stupid and pointless. Honor exists only between ourselves, so we do not rob, betray or abandon our brothers. Outside of ourselves, honor consists of following our contract and not breaking faith with the client. The Company has been mother and father to me, and like the good son I adopt its values. But...

Damn it, you try listening to a woman's screams for mercy and try to tell yourself that there's no such thing as objective good. Your solid, dependable sense of moral ambiguity tends to fall apart at the oddest times.

My stance on the matter is, I want to help. But I wasn't going to get involved unless my brothers would back me up. From what I could tell, at least five of them would. So we saved the woman.

The uruks had dragged her out in the street. She was kicking and hollering and her eyes were wide with fear and horror. Judging by the smell of the place, and the fact that we heard only screams and no telltale clashing of steel from inside, this had been the field hospital. Wounded men, non-combatants. The woman was presumably a nurse, or possibly a doctor, depending on whether Gondorian culture tolerated that sort of thing. The wholesale slaughter of the wounded didn't bother us- killing your enemies when they couldn't fight back was another long-held Company tradition. It's odd- we've encountered several cultures on our long march north that regard the sexual exploitation of woman as a cultural norm, yet would regard slaying an unarmed man as unspeakably vile. If I had been raised there instead of further south, I might now be sending in my boys to save the Gondorians and ignoring the woman. Which frankly is where the black and white morality falls apart.

I don't know what they were going to do with her- ravish her or torture her or what- but I am proud to say they never got a chance. On my command, Blink puts a quarrel through the chief uruk's forehead. Spike and Bop yelp their bizarre war-cries and leaped in immediately, carving up three of them. Spike covers his twin while Bop hauled the woman to her feet and they beat a hasty and triumphant retreat while me, Saintly and Reader shield-bash a couple of uruks who try to rush us to avenge their friends. It happens so quickly that Sapper doesn't even have time to uncork something nasty on them, so he entertains himself by giving a couple of them a magical hotfoot. How he howls with glee watching them hop around trying to extinguish their flaming ironshod feet...

Well, as you can imagine, this does not go over well. But then, we were better fighters and we had a wizard.

"What's your name, lass?"

She doesn't answer. She's a young thing, couldn't be much more than eighteen. Long brown hair; heart-shaped pale face; a gory apron covering up a simple light-blue dress; tanned hands callused from a lifetime of work. She wasn't no nobleman's daughter, not with hands like that. She's staring dully at the shouting uruks, sometimes lifting her gaze to the hospital that was being converted to a charnel house. She doesn't seem to hear me. More uruks are coming, drawn by their comrades' cries. Our situation is deteriorating rapidly- what the fuck had I been thinking? My little special squad is outnumbered ten to one, and more uruks are coming while we stand and jaw.

"Lass. We're going to fucking die here unless your mouth starts running. What's your name?"

She looks at me, and dear gods, she's like something out of the legends. In olden days, nobler men might well have battled through hell for a token of her affection. Heroes have downgraded in recent years; all she's got these days is a pack of sellswords willing to cut up some creeps. Her lips form the word slowly, like she has to think about it.

"Zimraphel."

"Repeat after me, Zim. I, your name."

She doesn't respond. I slap her upside the head. Blink is reloaded, and cursing me under his breath. We've formed a half circle, weapons up, and the uruks don't have the guts to rush us. Yet. This girl really needs to start listening.

"Come on, stay with me. I, your name."

"I, Zimraphel."

"Do solemnly swear..."

So, haltingly, I swear her in. I'm breaking protocol here- when we recruit, it's supposed to include all the officers and senior members of the Company- the Old Man, the Lieutenant, Bullet, Croc, Papa Jack, Sapper, and myself. But now she's one of us, and in the army of Mordor that means no one, not the uruks or the Easterlings, not the trolls or the Haradrim, not even the Witch-king himself can lay a finger on her without reprisals. The Captain made sure to put that clause in the contract. The Black Company is to be free from all molestation.

The crowd of uruks is coming closer. Sapper is whispering to himself, fingers writhing and wreathed with green flames. I have no talent in any sorcerous direction, but even I can tell he's concocting something nifty. The uruks start throwing rocks, which clang loudly off our shields. Reader knocks a thrown stone out of the air with his hammer, and it streaks off above the uruks' heads. I sheath my sword and raise my hand in the air, and soon the hubbub lessens a bit. I exit the shield wall, and bellow, "Which one of you fucking freaks is in charge here?"

A brief moment of silence, then renewed snarling and threats. I sidestep another thrown rock. "You boys screwed up worse than you know. The Nazgul are going to eat your livers for what you did here."

Nazgul. The magic word. Aggressive, hulking beasts are turned to frightened sheep at the mere mention of them. One uruk, bigger and broader than the rest, steps forward.

"I am Sarzan," he hisses. "I'm the fucking boss around here. Where Nazgul come on to this, fuck-face?" He didn't speak our lingo very well, exactly, though apparently he got the hang of cussing pretty good.

"You see this woman here? Huh? You see her? She's one of ours. She's *luftig-hai burzum*, do you comprehend me, boy-o?" That was the uruks' name for us- *luftig-hai burzum* roughly translates to Soldiers of Darkness. It is more amusing than it should be to watch his squinty little eyes grow wide. He barks out a harsh curse in the Black Speech of Mordor and spits to the side.

"So," I tell him, beaming at the yellow freak, "you dumb bastards just bought yourself a world of trouble. Brawling with your allies? Trying to murder a brother of the Company? Oh, the Eye will gnaw your bones, Sarzan."

He glares. I haven't seen such blatant hostility since... well, since Bullet confiscated Shaggy's hash. "She was tendering the pissing, rotting *tarks*. Giving succor. Wrapping maggot holes with clothes. She's not *luftig-hai*. Not with the Eye. She's the thrice-damned, everfucking enemy, and that is where you're the traitor."

"Bullshit," I boom. "She's taken the oath." The Captain would personally impale me if I had lied about her membership. There is a clear divide in this world between us and them, and anything to threatens that line is to be immediately terminated. We don't tolerate threats to our heritage. "She's been with us for years. Probably got captured and was forced at swordpoint to tend to the wounded." On the other hand, lying your ass off to save a brother is perfectly acceptable. I turn back and call over my shoulder, "Ain't that right, Zim?"

The girl clearly doesn't understand the legal niceties of Mordor, but she's a smart lass. She can sense that we're all that's between her and a messy fate, so she puts on her bravest mask and nods.

"See?" I tell Sarzan. "She's Company, through and through. If you insist on attacking us again, not only will we cut your throats, but the Dark Lord will call up all of your shades and torture them through-out eternity for your transgression." For all I know, the Eye can really do that.

Sarzan hems and haws, but we all can tell he doesn't have the balls to press us farther. We specifically point out that our protection does not extend to the wounded Gondorians inside, and that cheers him up a bit.

So, yeah. We saved a damsel in distress, and got away with it. I just know that the Old Man's gonna kill me for this.

4. The Pelennor Fields, Part Two

Now, the Captain had worked his way up through the ranks, first as the Sergeant, then Lieutenant. His body showed every fight he ever had, every mile he ever marched. He was a big man, had to be at least six feet three inches. His muscles hadn't deteriorated with age or rank, and were still infused with strength and tenacity, like an old tiger. But as any hunter will tell you, young predators are weak and stupid- it's the oldies who'll rip your guts out. This particular old tiger was two inches from my nose, towering over me, and in his eyes I could see every man he ever killed. It was not a pleasant experience.

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He calmly, fervently, and without pause or repetition tore me to pieces for twenty minutes straight. I just stood there and accepted it, like you pretty much have to do in that situation. But then, he told me that I may have endangered the Company by abusing my position as Annalist, and *that* got through. Like getting stabbed through the heart. I quickly clamped down on tears after that bolt hit home, and masked the fear and shame before they reached my face. Gods save me, I could handle any abuse but that.

Luckily, the Lieutenant popped his head into the tent at that point and told us that the Witch-king was sending for the Captain. The Captain growled, and told me in a deadly quiet tone of voice that this wasn't over. As he left, he stopped, paused and turned back towards me. He walked over to me very slowly, and planted himself right next to my left ear.

He said, too quietly for the Lieutenant to overhear, "I just can't believe you would do that to us. You've disappointed me very much."

Self-control. Self-discipline. Mental strength. Without these, you never leave basic training intact, let alone win on the battle field. Without these, I would have cried, right there, in front of both of them. But my mask remained in place. The Captain spun on his heel and left, pure professionalism. He hadn't ordered me to fall out or rest at ease, so I remained spear-straight, standing at attention in the Captain's tent. Outside, true night was falling, dimming the Witch-king's sorcerous clouds even further. Somewhere in Osgiliath, the trolls were hauling all the siege stuff we needed to break into Minas Tirith. The uruks were swarming off in the west. The Variags were circling the city, cutting it off from the rest of the world. None of that mattered to me right now. All I could think of was to remain at attention until the captain returned. Perhaps if he saw my dedication and obedience, he would forgive me. Perhaps if I was good enough, he wouldn't look at me like that again.

The Lieutenant entered. He was a self-assured man, possibly a former aristocrat. He had that air of effortless authority. I couldn't imagine how any nobleman could end up in a mercenary company, but that was the prevailing theory. The Lieutenant stepped in front of me, looking me in the eye.

"Haroun," he said. "God knows, you fucked up big. But you'll be alright. You hear me, son?"

"Yes, sir."

"I've had a word with Pork Chop. That girl of yours spent the last hour helping out in our field hospital. Stitching up cuts and staunching wounds, and the

like. Pork Chop says that she hadn't been there to help, Murky would likely have died. Once the Captain hears that, she'll be one of us as far as he's concerned. Just give him time."

"Yes, sir."

"You're a good man, Haroun. And you know what? I think that what you did for that girl was good, and I don't care who knows it. I wish I'd have been there to watch you show the uruks how the Black Company does business."

I almost cracked a smile. "Yes, sir."

"Just don't desecrate our sacred traditions again, and you'll be right as rain." He smiled at me, white teeth contrasted on a dark face. He snapped to attention, and in response I tried to stand even more rigidly. "Corporal Haroun! On command of fall out, fall out and go get some sleep, you'll need it. We'll all need to be in top form if we want to get over the walls tomorrow. Fall out."

I fell out as gratefully as any soldier ever did.

...

When I got back to the barracks, I was ambushed. Just as I entered the building- a former music hall, judging by the shape of the place- torches flared up and I got serenaded by a choir of grinning idiots.

"*Sometimes it seems like a beautiful dream,*" they sang in painful dissonance. "*The girl from the Wadi Hammamat!*" Saintly, Reader, Croc, Ali, and Crow. You utter bastards. I tried retreating outside to safety, but they piled on me and frog-marched me back inside. I struggled as hard as I could without hurting them too badly, but it's hard to punch your way clear when you're laughing that hard.

"*She's as lovely as a green parakeet!*" Saintly shouted happily as they spun me around in time with their singing. Of the lot, only Reader had the slightest musical ability, and he has more lung-power than skill. In any case, the point wasn't to make good music, it was to embarrass me, and in that they were succeeding admirably.

"*I awoke alone again, in the desert of my dreams,*" they continued, braying into my face, as close as they dared with me trying to hit them. "*A fertile oasis I have seen!*" When I escape, they shall all pay for this. I will invent new ways to punish them for their insolence.

At long last, they finish their song, and we all start cheering- they're celebrating a prank well pulled, and I'm celebrating the fact that they finally stopped singing.

"When Reader and Sainly told us about your heroic rescue," Croc announced, after striking a dramatic pose, "we all knew we had to greet you in the appropriate troubadour fashion. For what have we here, if not Ali ibn Jalawi himself returned from the grave? A true hero, pure of heart and noble of mind, ready and eager to right the wrongs, defeat the powers of evil, and gallantly ride to the rescue of the smokin' hot damsel in distress. Without a doubt, he is the best of us all and I would here acknowledge him as such. Gentlemen, I give you Haroun—may he score with that Gondorian bi-atch *tonight!* *Owww* yes!" Howls of raucous laughter, claps on my back. The atmosphere is awash with good will and good-natured insults, both of which are directed at me.

"Oh, Croc," I say. "You have a fly on your nose. Here, let me slap it for you..."

I would like to state this for the record— they didn't disapprove of my action— they were just bemused by it. Real heroics don't happen in real life, and when you base your entire philosophy on that, it can get fairly disconcerting to watch the good guys triumph over evil; or see justice given to the poor; or in this case, see the defenseless defended. When it does happen, the only response we have is practiced cynicism and well-honed sarcasm. No criticism from me, mind you— if Croc had been the one to ride to her rescue, I know I'd have been first in line to ambush him the next day.

...

That night:

"Psst!"

"Gah?"

"Is that you?"

"Ah... that depends on who you think I am."

"Haroun, is that you?"

"It is. That you, Zim?" I shift in my blankets so I'm facing her. I can only see the edges of her frame by the torchlight outside. Her hair is lit up by the fires and shining— the rest, inky silhouette.

"Yes."

"Hi, Zim."

"I just wanted to thank you for what you did for me."

"My pleasure. Then again, I hear you did your good deed for the day with Murky, so I reckon I should be thanking you."

"Murky? The man who was stabbed here?" She indicates her upper belly with a light touch.

"That's the one. Pork Chop says he'd have died if it weren't for you."

"You pick up a lot of healing lore if you spend a lot of time with my gran. Which I have."

"Wonderful. So you're fitting in alright. I'm glad to hear it."

She knelt down. She smelled like blood and fear and worse, but I'm pretty sure that it was just the apron.

"I would have thanked you before, but..."

She's close. Very, very close. Many of my fantasies have started out this way, but I can't tell if she was coming on to me, or just oblivious to it. Trying to work out which is taking up most of my brain power, so I repeat the last word I had heard. "But?"

"I was upset. Those soldiers I was tending... they were my countrymen. My fathers and my sons. When you told that orc he could help himself to them, you seemed to me to be a monster yourself. Can you imagine what it was like? Hearing your savior tell the ogre that he can slaughter your brothers? I couldn't even speak to you, let alone thank you."

I try to put myself in her position. How would I react if someone saved my skin and then allowed a pack of wild dogs to eat Sainly, or Reader, or Pork Chop? Well, I don't know how I'd feel. But I suppose I wouldn't be in a hurry to offer proper thanks either.

"I see your point, and if I could have saved them, I would have. But it was beyond my power. You understand?" I suppose I should admit that that statement was half bullshit— I really hadn't had the ability to save them, but it wasn't tearing me up inside or anything. But would it really help her in the slightest to know that? She was here, wasn't she? That meant she wanted some kind of closure to what had happened to her. Like I said, lying your ass off to save a brother is perfectly acceptable.

"I know that. And I think you deserve at least my thanks, even if you are a savage barbarian out of the distant Haradwaith." She sounds teasing, warm, removing any possible sting from the words.

"I may be savage, but I ain't from the Haradwaith. Where I come from, the Haradrim are called the Northern Tribes."

"Either way, you'll still be attacking Gondor tomorrow, yes?"

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"Well. Yes."

"You may be my enemy, but I owe you one." She got up and started to move away. "Bye, Haroun."

I get up on my elbows. All around me, the men of my section are snoozing peacefully, oblivious to our conversation. "Wait a minute, Zim." She stops and faces me, her arms clasped in front of her, leaning towards me slightly as though I'm the only thing that matters to her right now. "Breaching Minas Tirith is going to be rough. Real rough. We'll bleed more than any army has in the past hundred years. I may not make it. Some dart may fell me, or a Gondorian swordsman best me. For all I know, tonight is my last night on this earth. No more dreams of better days for Haroun. No peaceful slumber for him but the grave." I pause. "Will you stay with me? Let me face my death with a brave face and... pleasant memories?"

Silence. I can't even see her face, how she's taking it.

"Do you know," she says, sounding thoughtful, "Gondor's been in an active state of war for almost thirty years?"

"I've heard something of it, yes."

"Did you know also," she continues, "that every single man of my generation who's ever marched off to war has tried that exact line on me?"

Silence from me. She relaxes her stance, hand on hip, apparently amused as all hell at me.

"Hope you don't hold it against me," I say. "Beautiful woman like you, you just gotta take your best shot, you know?"

She laughs, low and wicked. "Good night, Haroun." And she's gone. Night and silence reign once more. Then Sainly opens his fat mouth.

"Bad luck, old boy. You rescue the princess and she don't even put out for you." All thirty men in the room release long pent up gusts of laughter.

"Fuck all you guys," I tell them, chuckling myself. "Just fuck right off."

...

Anyway, enough cuteness. Minas Tirith is waiting for us to bust down the door and start the hazing.

Minas Tirith is a fuck-off great city, with seven strong stone walls and over thirty thousand men committed to defending it. The name translates to something like "Tower of the Guard," and that's not the kind of name that you give to a pushover fortress. Word from above claims that busting a hole

in the walls themselves is impractical- it's made of some sort of special stone that can't be broken, or guarded by some major sorcery, or something. We'll be busting instead through the Great Gate. No word on how, mind. The Gate is solid iron and has a veritable death zone around it- anyone within three hundred yards of it can be hit by the ballistas, the trebuchets, and about ten thousand archers. Still, we "have a plan to deal with it." So, no sweat, apparently.

On the plus side, the first wave will be nothing but uruks and trolls. So that's a plus. It'll be the same strategy that we've been using all along basically- uruks soak up the damage and distract the other team, while we smite the weak points. In this case, that means we throw the siege towers against every inch of the wall and force them to spread their strength away from the Gate, then it's hey-diddle-diddle, straight up the middle.

As I am writing this, the trebuchets have started their preliminary shots. It's useless battering at the walls, so they're tossing fireballs over them into the city. Let their soldiers fight fires instead of us, by all means. Also, they've apparently been chopping off heads of fallen Gondorian soldiers and tossing them over the walls as well. Disgusting and vile? Yes, indeed. The only question on our minds is, will it in fact harm the enemy's morale or just steel their resolve further?

No way for us to know. But I just hope that the Eye didn't order that little tactic just to be a dick, because if it backfires we'll be the ones to pay for it.

We'll be starting soon. I'll write it up once it's over.

...

In those days, the Company was still in service to the Eye of Barad-dur. Except now we're not quite so bleeding enthused about it. We started the battle of the Pelennor Fields with almost 600 brothers. Six hours later, we stand 150 strong. It's been centuries since we have been so thoroughly reduced.

My predecessor fell in the fighting, making the Book of Haroun the second shortest Annal in our history. Now the Book of Papa Jack begins.

Jack's not my real name, obviously. The name I was born with no longer applies to me- in my clan, we are named according to our attributes, so our given names change as we do. My first name meant "Little Puma." When I grew into a man, it changed to "Tiger Hand", because I was the best unarmed fighter in my clan. When I joined the Company almost 20 years ago, I told them my name, and they told me that it sounded a lot like Slop Jack. The "Papa" was added later because I was the oldest

fresh fish they had ever seen, at age 40. Other than Sapper, who's in his early hundreds, I am the oldest member of the Company. I had been the corporal in charge of D Company. Once Haroun got promoted to Annalist, I got promoted out of the ranks to the position of Standard Bearer, which is mostly out of the way of fighting. At my age, I'll never complain for having to hump around and brawl on command. The Standard Bearer's only duty is to keep our flag safe and visible, and I like to think I did a good job of it in the short time I held the honor. Now Amin has the Standard and I have the Annals. Sainly inherited Sapper's protection detail, and is now scouring our depleted ranks to replace Reader, Blink, and Haroun. Spike will return to duty once Pork Chop is sure that his wounds will be safe from infection.

As I understand it, it is my duty to record every fight and job that comes our way, and to keep us connected to our history. In this case, that means I have to give an account of the battle at Pelennor Fields.

Most of the family that I have in this world died in that battle. I am truly not up for the task of explaining how they died, not now, so soon afterwards. Besides, I need to get a head start on updating the Book of the Slain, which is certain to cramp both my heart and my hand. So, a full description will have to wait. But first-

I have read through Haroun's notes. One of his first entries has to do with his last wishes should he be killed. I am prepared to honor his request.

Brother Haroun, we here record your passing and shall remember you. You die a brother of the Black Company, and we on earth await reunion with you when our own time comes.

I'll tell of the Pelennor fields when we stop and rest on our long and bitter retreat back to Mordor. As a company, we are battered, bloodied, and exhausted. Marching is the last thing we want to do, but there is no alternative. These uruks and Southrons and Easterlings are worse off than us, and they will assuredly stop and be slaughtered where they lay by the triumphant Gondorians if we weren't around to shepherd them. The curse of being an elite is that the better job you do, the more hell they shovel on to your plate.

...

So. The battle of the Pelennor Fields, A.K.A. the greatest cock-up in the history of warfare. Zim, our newest medic, has been sharing some of the religious beliefs of the Gondorians- standard stuff, really. Anthropomorphic gods of water, of war, of air, and that kind of thing. The staggering display of good fortune on Gondor's part is almost enough to

make a believer out of me. I mean, damn it, we had them dead to rights. They were screwed ten different ways from Sunday. And yet not only did they manage to hold us off, they sallied and crushed an army that outnumbered them ten to one.

All I'm saying is, divine intervention now has a definite argument in its favor.

The battle started off wonderfully. The Witching threw 50,000 uruks at the walls while sending Grond against the gate. It turns out that he and the other spooks had been supercharging this immense battering ram with sorcery specifically to knock down this particular door. It showed a pleasing amount of forethought on the part of the Eye of Barad-dur. The trolls pulled it forward into an arrowstorm, and gradually swapped enough blood for ground that they wedged it right up against the Gate itself.

I was at the Captain's side the entire time. He was decked out in his Gothmog armor- by tradition, ever since the days of Croaker, the Captain and the Lieutenant have had two suits of sorcerous armor. The actual battle magic on them is slight- just a few charms to repel arrows and turn swords, basically. Their true value lies in the fact that to someone unfamiliar with them, they are flatout scary- black chitinous spikes, glowing eyes like drops of lava, an aura of doom and gloom like all the denizens of hell have blessed this warlock with foul magicks. All illusions, of course. Psychological warfare. Make the other guys think they're fighting another Witching; or an Eye; or one of the Tervola of Shinsan. After all, nobody wants to fight against a big, bad, bloodstreaked warlock. In this case, the Captain named his armored persona off of a legendary prince of a demon race called Balrogs. Gothmog, Elf-bane. The Dread Oppressor. The Sunderer of Cities and the Slayer of Feanor. In short, this myth has a lot of power behind it for the peoples of Mordor, and we were more than happy to exploit that reputation. The Lieutenant has a similar armored persona which he calls Throatlitter.

An echoing clash of enchanted steel on mundane steel reaches us. Grond just gave the Great Gate of Gondor a friendly knock. The rain of arrows slow to a trickle. I imagine all of the defenders were sucked in and rendered numb by the spectacle, and while it's unprofessional of them not to have kept up the bow work, I can't blame them. I don't imagine any of them had ever seen a weapon of war like Grond. It was titanic, easily 50 feet tall and 300 feet long. I'm not sure of the exact measurements, since I was so far away, but you can take it as granted that it was huge. Not to mention that it was carved in the shape of a gigantic wolf's head, mouth frozen in a

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snarl with witch-fire in its maw. No, I can't blame the Gondorians for being awed by it.

The Gate collapses, cracked and vanquished. The Captain sends off a messenger, Redneck, to initiate the Company's advance, while above us all the Nazgul shriek and spread their magic. Things are looking smooth. God damn it, I am nearly 60. I have lived long enough to have developed some healthy pessimism.

As we advance, Sapper, who's marching side to side with the Captain, hits the ground and starts writhing, frothing at the mouth and trembling. Haroun and his boys look scared, like Sapper's gonna die and it's their fault, but I know better. What's happening to Sapper has happened before, just never in their line of sight. It's how big wizards contact little wizards.

Sapper stops twitching himself into a frenzy and lays there, breathing heavily and crying a little. After a short while, he gets up and calmly informs us that the Witch-king is ordering a general halt. He's ready to throw down with the Grey Walker once and for all.

In our opinion, this is macho bull crap. Just let us swarm the old guerrilla and chop him into fishbait, that'll solve the problem. But he's the boss here, and what he says goes.

Now, pay attention here, readers. This is where things go horribly wrong. We were located in approximately the center of the second wave, having quickmarched halfway across the Pelennor fields when the command came to halt. We were too far away to see anything from the wizard's duel except maybe if they started throwing lightning bolts at each other. This information is important, because if we had been on the right flank, we would have died to a man, and if we had been on the left, we would have survived mostly intact. As the Nazgul and the Grey Walker are squaring off, Haroun calls out to the Captain, "Sir! Cavalry, right flank!"

The Captain jerks his head away from the city gate. "Impossible," he whispers. "Oh, damn you, you Nazgul son of a bitch." Louder, he cries out in his steadiest and grittiest command voice, "Sapper, get over here! I need some of your hocus-pocus to see that far."

Out of nowhere, it seems, the enemy has produced 20,000 heavy cavalry and placed them at our right rear, poised to hammer us. We all run the mental arithmetic in our heads, and blanch at what our minds are telling us. 20,000 heavily armored men, all charging down hill, their long lances outreaching any halberds or pikes that try to ward them

off. We'll lose the whole right flank, maybe 50,000 uruks, right off the bat. The middle section, which includes us, gets to duke it out with them while they're disorganized, but if our ranks are frazzled by fleeing uruks, we'll be just as badly off-kilter.

"Left flank is our only hope," the Lieutenant whispers hoarsely. The Captain reaches the same conclusion.

"Sapper, contact the Witch-king, tell him to get his ass out of there and help us stem the tide." Sapper, his ordinarily ruddy face now pale with panic, obeys. He closes his eyes and drifts off into a trance as quickly as he can. "Aya, Croc, Redneck, run as fast as you ever have and make the uruks on the left prepare to receive cavalry. You have permission to use deadly force if their commanders contradict you." They run off, leaving their spears behind to run faster. "Ali, Hassan, Toad, fall back and order the Haradrim forward. Again, deadly force if necessary." The Southrons won't get themselves organized and on the bounce in time to stop the tall knights from plowing into us, but they should arrive in time to counterattack.

"Where did they come from?" Haroun sounded nauseous. I can't blame him. "Them Gondorians don't have that kind of cavalry. Only a couple hundred knights. Where..." Had Haroun been with us when the Keltoi Second Horse outflanked us, ten years back? I couldn't remember. If he was with us then, then like me he remembers with horrible clarity what happens to the poor bloody infantry when caught on open ground by heavy horse.

"The Rohirrim," the Captain says. His manner is brisk and confident, because he knows that if he shows any anxiety or uncertainty then panic is inevitable. The Gothmog armor helps a lot. "The Horse people to the north. Intelligence claimed that they were too ravaged by civil war to come to Gondor's aid."

Haroun laughs- an empty, dreadful sound. "Military intelligence, sir. Contradiction in terms."

Horn blasts! Screams in a barbarian tongue! The 20,000 horsemen start towards our right flank, slowly at first, gathering momentum.

I groan. Inexperienced cavalrymen charge haphazardly, depleting their steeds' energy and losing cohesion before ever making contact with the enemy. Not so with these fellows; when they strike, it will be as one whole, keen and prepared to deal death on a large scale.

Aya, Croc, and Redneck return. Redneck has blood streaming down from his scalp and all their swords are smeared with uruk blood. "The uruk regiments are reforming, sir. Slazari, the, uh, the uruk that's in charge now, he says he's forming in a crescent formation, bending his right flank back to connect with you. He requests that you relocate to the rear and interlock with him."

If Slazari survives the following fight, he'll advance far. Most uruks we've met don't comprehend strategy- the ones who do, tend to be valued more by the Eye. I envisioned the uruk's plan. Basically, we were abandoning the doomed right flank and reforming the entire line by bending it like a bow aimed at the Gate. With any luck at all, the horse boys will charge through our fellows and find themselves stymied by a proper pike wall that they can't find a way to flank, with us on the extreme right of that wall.

Ali, Hasan, and Toad haven't returned. We can only hope that no news is good news.

The Rohirrim collide with the uruks on the right, going through them like they weren't even there. One moment, there was a churning, savage horde of sallow little goblin-folk; the next, torn and shattered bodies being flung about like chaff in the wind. The Rohirrim maintain basic cohesion through the first seven ranks before starting to split up, and by that point our lads aren't even fighting any more. They're just trying in vain to escape the terrible lances and swords of the triumphant cavalry. It was flat, firm ground, and offered no opportunity for escape. The horsemen must have laid awake at night during their training, dreaming of fighting battles as easy as this. For them, it wasn't warfare; it was target practice.

Slazari's boys couldn't get in position in time- it is a complicated thing to shift troops around on a battle field like pieces on a chessboard, and the uruks are not known for their discipline. But we have established a basic line of defense, dissolute as it is. The horsemen see our makeshift line, decide there's no point in picking on infantry who might fight back. They fall back, rejoin and redress their lines.

"Oh, no," Sapper wheezes. He looks like he's about to cry. "They'll be charging again, soon. Oh, fuck me-"

"If they strike here," the Captain says, loud enough for the troops to hear, "then they'll break on our spears and decide to aim somewhere else. We're the Black Company, boys, and when it comes to fighting, we're always outnumbered but never outfought. Bullet, get our crossbowmen arranged for supporting our infantry. Any cavalryman who has kept hold

of his lance is a priority target." A man on horseback with a sword is a threat, but it's not too bad if you're arranged in a square. That same man with a lance can trot just out of spear range and poke holes through you.

A man in the ranks starts puking from fear. Any other time, he'd be getting catcalls and jeers, but not today.

The Rohirrim turn around and charge into the rear of the uruks and the base of the walls of Gondor. They seem to judge that easing the strain on the defenders is a higher priority than kicking us while we're down.

I would estimate that their second charge slew about another 40,000 uruks and drove another 5,000 towards us. Slazari and his boys gather up most of them and integrate them into their lines. We take advantage of the time that the slaughter is giving us to quick march forward to straighten out the line.

The Captain's on edge. Ali, Hassan, and Toad still aren't back yet. We have no way of knowing whether the Haradrim are coming to the rescue or not. We turn our heads over our shoulders but we can't see clearly enough, and Bullet shouts at anyone who breaks battle discipline. He wants us focused on the task at hand, and he's right to do so. But this not knowing is driving us insane.

Story time temporarily on hold. Bullet is yelling at me to get up off my ass, that we're on the move. I'll continue when we stop again.

5. The Pelennor Fields, Part Three

So. The horse-lords of Rohan had broken our right and savaged our forward units. In these one-sided fights, they had barely suffered at all- perhaps three dozen men killed and another hundred or so unhorsed. And once they finished off slaughtering the uruks near the walls, they reformed and held fast on their left flank. A brief lull in the fighting commenced, as both the enemy and we tried to get into position to attack each other.

"Now what the hell are they doing?" the Lieutenant asks. He is looking good in his Throatlitter outfit. With any luck, the horse boys will think that as well. We all shrug our ignorance.

The enemy had sallied. They were pouring out of their broken fortress, lining up in cohorts gleaming silver. Under ordinary circumstances, I wouldn't think they had much of a chance in a straight up slugfest against us, but our line, solid and firm though it seems, is shaken and unstable. As an

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army, we have no fire in our bellies- the cavalry has doused it. Now, the other team is looking to break us for good. Well, so be it. We have reserves, and they don't. A straight up slugfest it shall be.

Now, if I'd been the commander of the other team, this is what I'd have done- I'd send what cavalry I had down to the field to get in contact with the heavy horse, and get them back into position on the right. I'd take advantage of the pause to refortify my broken Gate and sweep the debris clear of my walls. Then I'd sit back and twiddle my thumbs, 'cause there wouldn't be a whole hell of a lot we could do then. Any attack on Minas Tirith would be disrupted and thrown back by the damn cavalry, so we'd need to neutralize them first. But how? We have no horse. The only thing we could do is set up a huge shieldwall facing north and try to ram a horde of uruks through the walls in the south. And every trebuchet and ballista on the walls could pour crunchy death into that shieldwall's ranks. If I was in charge, that's what I'd do, because that would have been tactically sound and possibly unbeatable.

But no- they sallied.

I think it's a cultural thing. The Gondorians can't resist plowing through the weakened ranks of their enemies, even when it would be smarter to hand your opponent enough rope to hang themselves with.

"Sir! Sir!" Hassan has returned at last from his rendezvous with the Haradrim.

The Captain, his eyes blazing witch-light, pumps Hassan for information. Are the oliphaunts coming up? Where's Ali and Toad? What's happening with our scattered forces to the rear?

He informs us: the war-mumakil are on the way; Ali and Toad wanted to try riding them into battle; and fucked if he knew.

The Captain sends him back to the Haradrim with instructions to focus our oliphaunt strike on the right flank, where the bulk of the enemy cavalry has clustered. Hassan speeds off.

We start feeling better about ourselves. After all, our Captain is snapping out instructions left and right, and men are smartly obeying. Clearly, things weren't going wrong at all.

Sapper snaps out of his trance. "Hey, boss! Counterattack on the way!" The Nazgul were preparing to strike directly against the enemy forces, and required a general advance to reinforce them. Sapper quickly starts his exercises to commune with the Nazgul again.

Some of the advance units of Southrons and East-erlings collide with the Rohirrim. Our boys get trashed. The King of Hammad al Ghul is slain in the midst of his Invincibles, and this sends whole sections of the Southrons back to the protection of the slower-marching mumakil.

"Damn it," I hear the Lieutenant whisper to himself. "Stop trying to duke it out piecemeal. Get your fucking act together, then strike."

And then the fucking Lord of the Nazgul went and bought the farm, and that threw us all off-kilter.

Oh god damn you, Bullet, don't make us march anymore. We're tired, and there's no sign of pursuit outside of a couple dozen Gondorian light cavalry. My old bones can't handle much more of this, so let us stop and rest a while.

...

None of us actually saw the death of the Witch-king- we were more concerned with beating back the Gondorian line, and anyway he was on the other side of the battlefield. But we saw the effect it had on our allies, and from that point we were on the brink of collapse all the way back to Osgiliath. While we're stopped I'll interview Sapper about it, since he was the only witness, technically.

Our pet wizard is not looking good. He's pale and haggard, sweaty and gasping. If he was anyone else, I'd say he was about to keel over, but Sapper been through more shit than a fertilizer salesman. His history throughout the Annals indicates he can take a forced march as well of any of us.

Here's how Sapper describes the death of the the Lord of the Nazgul:

"I was in his head. Do you even understand that? I was here with you lot, talking and planning and marching, but that was just my body. My spirit, my *chi*, was being held inside the soul of the Nazgul. It was not imprisonment, exactly, but the creepy bastard made it clear to all of us that it could turn into that if we didn't obey. It was a cold, dark, tormented land in there, Jack. The Witch-king was not a happy man. I could sense that, in life, he had been the chieftain of a mighty tribe, and he yearned to return to his people again- to protect them from any threats, to help them prosper. But that damn ring of his...

"So. I was in his head, where I could to a certain extent see what he saw and sense his orders to me. I wasn't alone in there- I could feel the presence of the other wizards in our host. There were Black Numenoreans, the sorcerous colonists from across the sea. They once ruled this land with an iron fist, reveling in cruelty and opulence, until their cousins the

Gondorians expelled them. If you could sense their hatred and lust for power... There was about a half dozen minor shamans and *Shaghun* marching with the Haradrim and Easterling factions, and a couple of uruk adepts. We wizards were spread across the host, the nervous system through which the Witch-king could command with unheard-of rapidity.

"Now, he had read the signs, consulted the dark and terrible spirits from Outside, and had received a prophecy. He knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that no living man could slay him. Not any of them. You understand that, Jack? If you are a man, and you are alive, then Fate itself has decreed that you can't ever kill him. That's one hell of a confidence booster, let me tell you. He was all set to devour the Grey Walker once and for all when the Rohirrim struck. He got warnings from the uruk bone-chewers on the right flank, so he had to call off the duel with the enemy to save his army. People wonder why, if the big-shot wizards are so powerful, they don't just hammer down any and all obstacles with no fear at all. After all, they're invincible, yes? Why show fear at all if you know you can't be beat? Well, the thing about immortality is, it can work against you in really bad ways. For instance, if the host of the Witch-king had been scattered and the man himself captured, they couldn't kill him, true. But they could coat him in molten silver, wait for it to harden, then toss him into the deepest part of the bay. He might spend untold millions of years screaming in agony, hoping against hope that someone, anyone, would dig him up and crack him open again. Except they still remember he's down there, so of course ain't no one's going to free him. Maybe he's gotta wait until the coast shifts and a new civilization arises, and even then maybe they don't find him. This is why I fully intend to die someday. I've never made no deals with anything that has a claim on my soul once I check out, so unlike a great many sorcerors death has only the normal terrors for me. A lot of these modern day wizards swap their soul for some real power, and then find out that they can't afford to die. Not ever.

"So despite his seeming invulnerability, the Witch-king had a moment of panic when he saw the horse-man appear. Even if he himself wasn't captured, what the Lidless Eye would do to him if he lost this battle would make capture seem merciful. In the interest of self-preservation he took to the sky to counteract them.

"His plan was simple and direct- kill the Rohirric king. He knew we couldn't kill enough of the horse-men quickly enough to stop them from rampaging through us all day, so he struck where the enemy is always most vulnerable- the morale. Make a big ostentatious show about slaying their leader, show

them how weak and fragile they are, how powerful and invincible we are. Idiots think that warfare is killing the other guys. But like ourselves, he was wise enough to know that warfare is making the other guys run away.

"It worked, to an extent. The Witch-king came at the King like a bat out of hell on his *Gharashni*, scattered the Guard, and killed the King's horse. So far so good. I could see through his eyes, Jack. Feel his triumph, his joy, his relief at fulfilling his Master's command. No watery grave for him. No decade long torture sessions in the Tower of Barad-dur. I could see the King of Rohan trapped beneath his own horse with a clarity that you mundane types could never replicate. The Witch-king went in for the kill, but there was a snag. One man refused to run. His horse may have had bolted and thrown him, but he picked himself up, grabbed a shield and a sword and stood resolutely between his fallen King and the Lord of the Nazgul. Ballsy move, but a retarded one. Like everything else that happened that day, the other guys did something very stupid that turned out to be devastating.

"There was banter, I remember that. You know the kind I mean. The Witch-king says, 'Back off.' The Rohirrim says, 'Fucking make me.' 'I'll jack your shit up.' 'Oh, yeah?' 'Yeah!' Standard stuff, really. Same posturing that goes on between kids and warriors alike. But there was a... complication. This soldier says just one thing that changed the whole game. It knocked the Witch-king flat on his ass, metaphorically speaking.

"Turns out, that soldier was a woman.

"Yeah, I know.

"These northern peoples are pretty bloodthirsty, you know. They live and breathe warfare- they gotta. Otherwise they would have been conquered by the Dark Tower of Barad-dur ages ago. I guess if you give a nation enough wars per generation, even the women will pick up swords and wade into the melees.

"Now, remember what I said about the Witch-king? That no living man can slay him? Yeah, prophecy can seriously fuck you over. The Laws of Divination and Conjuring have the same mindset that lawyers do. Abruptly the Witch-king was staring into the face of his own mortality, but let's give credit to the old terror. Even after that particularly nasty shock, he fought anyways. A lot of the older spooks of the world are inherently cowards, withdrawing the second that they encounter a threat that might actually leak through their defenses. Not so with him. He stepped up, man, you know?

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"Almost won, too. He had the Rohirrim bitch on the ropes for a while, but he got blindsided by a second loophole- a sneaky little halfling stabbed him from behind. After all, halflings aren't *men* per se. Male, yes. Man, no.

"Halfling. Race of people up north, about three and a half feet high? Shaggy feet and curly hair?"

"Never heard of them, huh? Not surprising. I only know about them from some obscure references in the Great Library of Umbar, and from the surface thoughts of the final moments of the Witch-king.

"One moment he was almost in the clear, safe from death, about to smash the impudent mortal with his mace, and then turn and destroy the army of Gondor. Then, a blinding pain in his knee as an ensorcelled blade plunged in...

"After that, oblivion.

"I returned to earth, got up off the ground, wiped the saliva from my chin, and told the Captain that we got trouble."

...

"Captain, we got trouble."

Eyes swivel away from the enemy ranks and onto Sapper. The little wizard is in full panic mode, breathing hard, eyes wide. To anyone who didn't know him, he looked like he was in a rage, but that's just how Sapper expresses his fear. Hurredly, words bumping into each other, he tries to explain that our Dread Captain had fallen.

He mightn't have bothered. Around us, the uruks are breaking- screaming in fear and panic and being routed by nothing at all. We all instinctively figure out that the Nazgul's berserker spell had been broken, and there is only one way that could happen.

Here's the creepy part- if they'd done the smart thing and stayed on the defensive, we could have organized ourselves and stayed in the game. But because they recklessly charged out from behind their walls, they were able to commence with the slaughter. It's like they knew that we were going to break before the Witch-king ever died.

I mentioned the theory of divine intervention before. Papa Jack the life-long skeptic calls bullcrap. Papa Jack the survivor of the Pelennor Fields is a little more open minded.

The Company loses two hundred men in that short retreat. We have to heel and toe it to avoid being surrounded, and we can't count on Slazari to keep his men in line to support us. We fight in perfect formation while retreating over three hundred yards. Anyone else would have broken, but we are

the Black Company, and we do not break. We stay calm, we snarl and tear at the enemy like clockwork devils, and we bleed like stuck pigs. Our crossbows can keep the enemy from closing in with enough cohesion to seriously threaten our line, but that's about the only advantage we have. Sapper is hurling lightning and fireballs whenever the enemy gets close enough.

I am on the front line marching back, all the way. Underneath my elderly exterior, I am still Tiger Hand, and the Gondorians who get close enough to threaten my brothers find out my Name the hard way.

A couple of squads of archers try to close in to kill our crossbow men, and a missile duel commences that is short-lived but intense. We drive them off and continue our retreat, but we lose a dozen brothers. I believe that Haroun, were he present, would want me to note that this is where Blink died. He was always very conscious of the safety of his men. Blink caught an arrow in his right eye, dead before he knew it. If only all battlefield deaths were that clean.

The Haradrim with their oliphaunts catch up with our retreating forces and rally them. Ali and Toad get to ride in and play the hero. We check the enemy's forward advance under a rain of arrows and drive them backwards.

The Captain orders Croc, Redneck and Hassan to the Haradrim forces, and tells them to link up with Ali and Toad and tell them to act as mobile defensive positions, and having done that, to take field command of the Southrons and Easterlings still in Osgiliath and use them to batter holes in the Gondorian line. The general plan he has come up with is to circle around the mumakil, allow the other team to break on our defenses, and then counterattack once they've been thrown back. It's a long way back to the city from our position near Osgiliath, and they'll be exhausted- too exhausted to run fast enough, perhaps. Win big enough here, we might not even have to lay siege to the Minas Tirith- there won't be enough defenders to cover the Gate.

So followed about ten to fifteen minutes of unrelenting and unimaginative bloodletting. It felt like longer, of course, but it always does when you're in the middle of it.

Haroun would have liked me to note that this is where Reader died. Three Rohirrim targeted him specifically for his stature and role as a linchpin in our line. Reader slew the first rider with a single blow from his warhammer, knocked the second's spear away with his shield, and got run through by the third. I was next to him on the line, so I saw

the whole thing. He was avenged, if that means anything. I speared the rider's horse and while he was trying to get himself untangled from his dying steed, Aya Bastard split his skull.

After that brief but spirited melee, the tables turn. The enemy has given us his best shot, and hurt us worse than we thought possible, but we survived it and now we have them outnumbered on open ground. They have no stone barricades between us and them, no high ground, no advantages other than force of arms. So we pour into them, gladly swapping blood for blood and straining at them to break and turn their backs so we could swallow them whole. Croc, Redneck and Hassan fling their new commands into the Gondorian flanks, are beaten back, and try and try again. As Haroun so astutely noted, the swordsmen of Rhun and the savages of Far Haradwaith are mere battle fodder, to be slaughtered wholesale, but killing them in droves tires out the Gondorian swordarms. Toad and Ali keep the Haradrim organized, pressing forward inexorably. The enemy has no strategy for dealing with the great monsters, and most importantly the damn horsemen can't get their steeds anywhere near the men fighting under the oliphaunts' protection. The Gondorians can only stumble back to the Gate of Minas Tirith, leaving a steadily thickening trail of dead men and screaming wounded. Victory, it seems, is ours.

But of course, we didn't win. You can probably tell from the fact that I'm telling this story while we're retreating back to Minas Morgul with our tails between our legs.

As we pressed forward, dashing the military might of Gondor through sheer numbers, we were reinforced further. The Black Ships of the Corsairs of Umbar came up the Anduin. We broke off from the retreating Gondorians to weigh our new position. We did the mental calculations and arrived with glee at our conclusions. There were about fifty ships, each of which could hold more than a hundred fighters- and we knew from our time in Umbar that every man jack of them could hold his own in a melee. They did not understand about shield-walls or maneuvers or anything like that; they were strictly raiders and skirmishers. But in their own specialized field, they were the undisputed kings of mayhem. They were all tough as nails and tested in at least a dozen minor battles each- moreover, they were fresh. *They* haven't been humping and brawling all day long. Even better, we could see that they would arrive on the extreme left flank. One quick march could get them in between the other team and the city.

The Captain immediately sent out the word- every

unit hit 'em hard. Press them, harry them, give them no chance to break off and get home to dig in. Now is the time for the big push. Give it everything you've got.

The sturm and drang of battle escalated. The enemy sensed its own demise, but as Sapper said, these northerners are raised on warfare. Finding out that their cause is lost only made them heft their shields and dig in for one massive last stand.

Well, that's fine. *Once the Corsairs come for you, we all think, we'll see just how defiant you are.*

The Captain needs someone to fill the Corsairs in on the battle plan. All his usual messengers are out egging our allies on, so I get the job. Since Sapper is fairly well protected behind the whole of the Company, he doesn't need any protection, so Spike and Bop are sent with me in case the Corsairs don't feel like playing well with others. We are sent with a detachment of Slazari's folk to rendezvous with the pirates.

There was a *slight* problem.

The lead ship unfurled its flag- the silver tree of Gondor.

Jaws drop. Uruks hiss and growl in confusion and dismay. Spike, Bop, and I stare at it, minds working.

"They must have captured it from a Gondorian regiment downstream somewhere," Spike says.

"Yeah, obviously," Bop says.

"They must be flying it to demoralize the enemy," I opine.

We look over our shoulders towards the battle in unison.

"Of course," I note, "it's backfiring. The other team seems to be taking heart from it."

"Ha! They must think that help is on its way," Spike says.

"Dumbasses! Just imagine that somehow the Corsairs decided to backstab us, seize this dock, and... fall onto our flank..." Bop looks suddenly thoughtful.

We all peer at the ships. Something seems off.

"How come none of those Umbar pirates are brown?" Spike asks. His normally dark skin is now an ashy grey.

"They're all white boys," Bop adds uneasily.

We all pause. The truth sinks in.

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"Oh, shit," I say softly. "Not again. Oh, shit."

Spike nods his assent. "We better get the fuck out of here."

"Do we warn Slazari's boys?" Bop asks.

"No," I tell him. "If they're still hanging around when those marines come, they'll buy us time with their blood. Leave 'em to it."

I don't think they liked it, but they saw the wisdom of it. We got half way back to the Captain before our side was dealt its death blow.

Of all of us here, only Sapper has any idea of what hit us once the black ships with white men touched shore, and he ain't sharing. He only notes that in this ancient and bloody world, there are mysteries that history has forgotten; untapped areas of power that we today cannot imagine. All he will say is that we were driven off by one of the elder horrors that time forgot, and that he's pretty sure that Gondor could only use it once. Being deprived of his professional opinion, all I can say is that it was similar to the fear-spell that the Nazgul were so fond of, except much grander in scale.

The hosts of Mordor were abruptly terrified, driven almost to insanity with fear and panic. The army of Gondor and her allies had a goddamn field day, smiting us hip and thigh.

This is where most of our casualties came from. Haroun died somewhere in this shitstorm, but I didn't see it, and everyone else was too busy overdosing on fight or flight response to notice it either. However, three separate eyewitnesses claimed to have seen him lying in a pool of his own blood. We can't reclaim the bodies of our brothers from this battlefield, so no details of his death are forthcoming.

We are now legends in the army of Mordor. We alone stood our ground and did not break under the tidal wave of deadly steel that swamped us. Our allies whisper that we are immune to magic, that we are without fear, that we are blessed by Morgoth. Bullcrap, all of it. The fear spell hit us as hard as anyone else, and you'd better believe we got scared. The only difference is this: we have had the correct response to most any situation mercilessly drilled into us by Bullet. When the fear hit, we did the right thing, and 150 of us survived because of it.

Mind you, the battle wasn't over, technically. Countless uruks, Easterlings, and Southrons got caught with their backs to the river and had to fight to the death. Suicidally brave squads of Gondorian archers got in close enough to our oliphaunts

to shoot them in the eyes. One by one, the only bastions of defense we possessed were killed and the troops under the umbrella of their protection were scattered. That's how we lost Ali and Toad. For that matter, most of the men we sent out to neighboring units died with their new commands. The fighting continued for hours yet, but it was bloody, pointless, and predetermined.

Spike, Bop, and I had to hit the ground and play dead to avoid death or capture. After the main host of the enemy passed us by we tried to cross the Anduin, but were caught by a group of lolly-gaggers-tall, grim, weatherstained bravos from up north. We beat them off, but Spike got stabbed multiple times in the course of it. We had to drag his sorry ass back to safety overnight. We rejoined our fellows the next day in Osgiliath, right before we had to withdraw into the trenches of Ithilien, and from there to the safety of Minas Morgul. Pork Chop says that Spike was more corpse than living man when we brought him to the makeshift field hospital. However, Zim apparently has the magical power to heal dinged-up soldiers, and kept him stabilized during the 100 mile march to Minas Morgul.

Oh, hell, that reminds me. Rumor has it that Haroun and Zim were sweet on each other. I hope I'm nowhere nearby when the news is broken to her.

...

So, that's the story of the Pelennor Fields. May future generations of Company men learn well from our defeat, and so avoid it in their own time.

6. Water Sleeps

I am reduced to scribbling on spare pieces of parchment, because we've been betrayed.

The Annals are gone, stolen, held hostage.

It's my fault. I didn't do anything wrong, but I'm the Annalist, and the Annals are in danger, so it's my fault.

Uruk troops out of Barad-dur came for our Annals after we'd collapsed in our bunks in Minas Morgul. They slew Aya Bastard and Croc, who were on duty guarding them. They died fighting; we found them in pieces surrounded by a nice, thick ring of dead uruks.

Panic-stricken and terrified in ways that no Gondorian sorcery can replicate, we tried to contact the Captain, but found they had abducted him too. They had taken our Old Man alive, but several nail-biting hours later they sent us his head, and a message.

The Lidless Eye, it seems, had not given us permission to leave the battlefield. We had been under orders to take Minas Tirith or die trying, and then we had ordered a full retreat. For this, it seems, we merited a Mordor-style purge.

The Captain had taken command and ordered the withdrawal, so the Captain must be culled like some surly warchief of Mordor. We value our heritage more than life itself, so our history and identity was to be held to ensure our loyalty. The war against Gondor wasn't done and the Dark Lord had need of our services, but only on his terms.

With the strike of a single sulfur stick, he can destroy us- erase almost a thousand years of Company history. What are we? Mere mercenaries? No, we are the Black Company, and we stand on the shoulders of giants. Our giants are threatened now. There is no move we can make, no stratagem we can adopt, no option to take but full obedience to the Eye.

But I remember, from the Annals; the story of Sleepy's guerrilla campaign against the Protector. I remember our defiance, our stubbornness, our absolute refusal to accept defeat. I remember that as long as we draw breath, our foes had best be wary. We hereby declare ourselves to be the Eye's most bitter enemy.

Water sleeps, O Lord of Barad-dur. Even water sleeps, but the enemy never rests.

7. Military Coup, Part One

My wrist is killing me. I have been trying to recreate the Annals from memory, wracking my mind and cramping my hand.

Hopeless. A thousand years of history, over 150 separate Annalists, and I had had only a few days to study them up close. Yes, I've marched with the Company for almost twenty years- I am familiar with the major epics of our forerunners. But, god damn it! Can you write down with perfect word accuracy every bloody history tome you've ever seen?

I've been putting my head together with Sapper. We would have included Bullet as well, but he's busy being the new Lieutenant; the Lieutenant being the new Captain. Not that any of us can bear to call them by their new rank.

But me and Sapper, well, we've been around the longest. We've heard the stories of the Pastel wars, the Battle at Charm, the Matayangan Invasion, and so on. But it is even worse with two memories than with one. For instance, in the Book of Croaker, the

Annalist describes the Black Company's service in Beryl, which had directly led to our service with the Lady. I distinctly remember him starting off that volume talking about the various ill omens in the city- Sapper is equally sure it starts with a description of a Company squad clearing out a tavern of rebels. I am positive that the hellish siege at Dejugore occurred during the fight against the Protector- Sapper guarantees that it happened in the Shadowmaster campaign.

And, obviously, we can hardly look it up and see who's right.

He can remember a great deal I can't; I can recall things he doesn't. But when we both remember two different stories... And there are vast tracts of Company history where neither one of us can recall a damn thing.

It's useless, anyway. The men are rocky, scared. Merely replacing the Annals won't be enough for them, they need the originals. Because the originals were actually there, at Juniper or Nochrarn or Hollegrad; or at least were recopied and translated from the originals. They're not simply bits of parchment with information written on them; they are history; they're *us*. The remnants of the Black Company can't be placated by any sloppy, incomplete travesty of its heritage.

I'm having trouble sleeping at night: sometimes I think I can actually hear the screams of terror and anguish of our fallen forefathers, for the Book of the Slain was lost as well. It was the only immortality that they ever got, and it was taken on my watch.

I hope there is no afterlife. If there is, I fear I will be confronted by my predecessors, and I will merit whatever they do to me.

...

The Lieutenant, Bullet, Sapper, Saintly, Salim, and me have found a quiet place to discuss our predicament. We are meeting in an barrack room originally intended for a company of Easterlings that got wiped out on the Pelennor Fields. The location is good- no snooping uruks; only one entrance in or out; just one small window too cramped to crawl through. Sapper's already checked for magical surveillance. Arrowhead and Bop are guarding the door, and they're both in an uruk-killing mood.

We are as sure as we can be that not a word of this discussion will be heard in Barad-dur.

"The most direct route," the Lieutenant is saying, "is to locate the Annals and launch a raid to recapture them."

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"I doubt that the Dark Lord will be so stupid as to allow us to discover the location," Bullet retorts. "The son of a bitch has us over a barrel, and he likes it that way. If we want to find them, we'll need to spend a lot of time and effort, which is going to be way too obvious."

"After which, *shing!*" Sainly mimes chopping his head off. All of us turn and glare at him. He shrugs. Sapper starts to call up his famous hotfoot spell until the Lieutenant shushes him.

"We need different plans," the Lieutenant says. "Brainstorm, just put ideas on the table. We don't care if it sounds stupid, just fling out whatever's on your mind."

"There is another idea..." Salim begins. He hesitates. He knows that he's the newcomer to the old hand's table- the quiet, respectful Salim gets to replace our slain Croc. He's still unused to command and responsibility, and he's not sure if he's supposed to be proactive here or what. Salim's only been with us for about five years, less than some, but he's intelligent, meticulous, and is held in high esteem by every man in the Company. And if he tends to go into a cold, calculated berserker rage in the middle of battle, well, we'll just have to live with that.

We all encourage him to spill it.

"Well, I was thinking," he begins. "There probably isn't much we can think of that the Eye hasn't considered. He must have known he was playing with fire when he choose to fuck us, yes? So I say, we wait him out. Once the hosts of Mordor pour back across Ithilien and destroy Gondor, he won't need us as much. I don't think he'll ever relinquish us now that we're under his thumb, but if we can lull him into a false sense of security... we spring our raid and run north in the aftermath of Gondor's fall. That's my plan- bide our time, and strike like lightning once the Eye starts to forget that we're dangerous."

Sainly starts to say something about sitting around on our asses, but the Lieutenant shuts him up. "This is brainstorming, save the criticism for later," he is told.

"Any other ideas?" the Lieutenant asks.

Damn it, this isn't right, and we can all feel it. The Captain used to *tell* us what the plan was. Lieutenant, I know you're new at this, but we need you to grow into you role as quickly as possible.

"I have one," I say. "Minas Morgul is the center of a nation-wide spiderweb of communications. We have gold aplenty, and a steady parade of low-life uruks passing through, right? Spread the word. Anyone

who gives us the location gets thrice his weight in war-booty. There's bound to be at least a few uruks out there who are dumb enough to cross their Master for a pile of cash, and all it takes is one guy who overheard about where the *luftig-hai burzum's* history wound up."

Several other plans were advanced and duly recorded. They weren't particularly realistic or helpful, so I won't bother to write them down.

The whole conversation took a more... *interesting* turn when Sapper stood up from his seat and made his pitch. Silence descended across the circle. Say what you will about the little spook, Sapper has real stage presence.

"You're all thinking way too small," he says. He's grinning wide, like a frog who got lucky last night. "How do we escape. How do we find our Annals. How do we sneak around with sufficient slyness to survive. Well, I say, we don't. I say," he continued, leering, "that we play for the biggest stakes imaginable."

"I'm not sure I'm going to like this," Bullet mutters.

"Dispose of the Dark Lord. Seize control of his armies. Rule Mordor."

Cricket. Cricket.

The Lieutenant chews his lip awhile before responding. "Sapper, you've gone off the deep end, haven't you."

"No, seriously, hear me out. The Eye is deeply, deeply unpopular. His defeat at the Pelennor Fields has destabilized his control. We can take advantage of it. We can *overthrow* him. If he didn't have a demi-god's power, his subjects would probably tear him to shreds with no prompting from us at all."

"A demi-god's power," I say. "Surely, you see the flaw in your pitch."

"Listen, damn it. My point is that without that power, the Eye *will not be obeyed by anyone*. His reign collapses the second he does."

Sapper looks around triumphantly, like he's made some kind of telling point. We do not respond, save for Salim who raises a single eyebrow.

"Don't you get it? If we can find the Dark Lord's weakness, we can strike at the heart of our problem. You see, our dilemma is not that we can't find the Annals, that the Annals are too well-guarded, that we are under surveillance. Those are symptoms. Our dilemma is that we are on the wrong side of an insane psychopath at the head of a rising nation.

And until we remove that obstacle, we will fail in everything we do."

"It's insane," Bullet growls. "We can't pull that off. We're not fucking djinni, Sapper."

"We can't pull any of these plans off," Sainly says. Like Sapper, he's smiling ferociously. "Like Salim said, the Eye has probably anticipated our every move. We might as well pick a plan that's too audacious to be foreseen."

Sapper, Sainly, and Salim are for it, because they are clearly crazy. The Lieutenant, Bullet, and I are against. We prefer Salim's original plan of picking our moment, but they insist that if we wait until all external enemies of Mordor are eliminated, then our problems will expand, since the Red Eye will be the undisputed master of about half of the continent. We admit this is the case, but active sedition could obliterate us instantly.

We go over the same ground, run the same arguments, and make the same rebuttals well into the night.

...

May God above help us, because we are going with Sapper's plan. The Lieutenant has decided that if we're going to try to shrug off the yoke of Mordor, then we might as well strike at the root of it. And if it works, it will make one hell of an addition to the Annals.

I'm still against it. Sainly says that's because I'm an old man with no fire in my belly. I can only respond by saying that all of the reckless and headstrong men I knew in my youth are cold in the ground, while I'm still around.

So. Staging a military coup in a totalitarian state run by a mad-dog sorcerer. Harder than it sounds, and it sounds impossible. Where the fuck do we begin?

Bullet suggests that we should first secure Minas Morgul, since it's no good inciting rebellion in far off lands if the guy next door rats you out.

That seems as reasonable a place to start as any. Sainly and Sapper handpick a crew of cut-throats and get to work weeding out anyone that seems unusually loyal to the Eye or without enough spine to back our military coup, while the Lieutenant starts an underground recruitment drive for possible allies. Bullet and Salim, meanwhile, start spreading the gold around the incoming and outgoing regiments, trying to ascertain our Annals' location.

I'll update here as they progress. I suspect that this notebook will be added to the Annals when we retrieve them.

When. I didn't even think before I wrote that. Perhaps I'm more optimistic about this business than I thought.

...

Slazari is with us. One quick 15 minute chat with the Lieutenant, and he'll support any move we wish to make. Most uruks are cowardly and mean, but our boy Slaz has guts, has brains, and is seriously pissed at how the Eye handled the Pelennor Fields. Moreover, he knew that no uruk would have gotten out of there alive if it weren't for the Captain, and he almost couldn't believe his squinty little eyes when he saw how the Eye purged us after.

To the foolish, random killings are the sign of a strong and terrifying lord. To people like Slazari, all they indicate is that the lord is scared and weak.

And to people like Slazari, when the guy in charge is weak, it's time to chop some heads. The social habits of the uruks are working in our favor.

With Slazari working with us, we suborn more uruk warchiefs. You see, if the Lieutenant were to sidle up to a fellow captain of Mordor and says, "I say, isn't this a wonderful day to betray our Lord and Master?", the uruk would turn him in without a second thought. But when a well-respected warrior like Slaz is clearly shown to back us up, well, the dynamic changes. Now, it's not a lone nutcase spouting dangerous and foolish talk. Now, there's an organization in place. We can almost see the gears in their sordid brains turning- if this coup goes successfully, and I'm not in on it, what happens to me? If I try to turn them in, how do I know my superiors aren't in on it? Betraying ol' Slaz and the *luftig-hai burzum* could be my death sentence. Better by far to give my support now and wait and see what happens.

Obviously, their support isn't worth anything if we're caught- they'll drop us the moment we appear weak. But we've set the motion in progress, and pretty soon that well-spring of resentment and bitterness that runs so deep in Mordor will start to snowball into a genuine revolution. In the few days since the *luftig-hai* conspiracy was first implemented, we've turned almost half of the warchiefs stationed in Minas Morgul.

And on the other end of the spectrum, there have been a lot of fights recently between Company men and the uruks. The official explanation is that the uruks go up to groups of armed men that outnumber them four or five to one, without bothering to

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arm or armor themselves, and start pointless fights. The men, we claim, were drinking. Things got out of hand. What? Our boys had no wine anywhere nearby when the fights start? Well, they were drinking before they saw the uruks. Huh? The men weren't staggering, or puking, or doing anything to indicate intoxication? Well, pal, Bullet teaches *our* men good balance in their daily training. Curiously enough, almost all of the troublemakers come from uruk companies we haven't corrupted yet. And even more curiously, after those fights end, the companies that they belong to develop a proper revolutionary fervor.

Anyone who tries to run away and tell someone outside of Minas Morgul about what's happening here gets labeled a deserter, and is promptly executed. Soon, the masses will go with us simply because it'll be easier than *not* going with us.

You'd think that all these fights and desertions would be reported to Barad-dur. You'd think that it would look suspicious, like the Company is conducting little purges of their own. That someone upstairs would notice *something*.

You'd think that, but Shatarz, the head uruk who reports directly to Barad-dur, is one of us. This makes culling the loyal and intimidating the fence-sitters astoundingly easy. In fact, the folks at Barad-dur sent a terse letter of approval to Shatarz, congratulating him for taking a firm stand against cowardly deserters and troublemakers.

Bwa ha ha.

The Tower of Minas Morgul is a hotbed of treason, though nobody on the outside seems to know it. It looks exactly the same as it did when we arrived, but you'd better believe that the undercurrents are shifting away from the Red Eye and towards the Black Company.

We have no such luck in finding the Annals. Not all the gold in our treasury can loosen anyone's tongues. Either nobody in any regiment knows where they are, or no one is stupid enough to risk the Eye's wrath in telling us.

...

The conspiracy is deepening. We've turned everyone in a position of authority, and now the revolutionary rot is creeping down into the ranks. We keep hammering at their natural resistance to rebel against the Eye, reminding them about their use as battle fodder and the low regard in which they're held. We tell them, follow us. We're your friends, we're your natural allies. To those bastards upstairs, we're all expendables, pawns. Why should we allow this to stand? Better by far to fight for

the right to decide our own fates than to be sacrificed for nothing on a General's fancy. The sooner the Eye falls, the sooner we can all live free.

Also, the sooner you commit to us, the bigger your cut of the spoils will be.

It is with a mix of pride and guilt that I report the Slazari and his brothers Gulbrog and Gothga are the three newest brothers in the Company; for the moment, they alone are deemed trustworthy enough to not betray us. The pride is because for the first time since I've replaced Haroun, I feel like a proper Annalist. Guilt, because I'm supposed to have all newcomers swear on the Annals...

It's amazing how disaster changes us. Had any of the yellow freaks tried to join before Pelennor Fields ripped us apart, we'd have turned them down flat. Now, we all rejoice to see new blood in our veins. Slaz, Grog, and Goth (as they are now known) are welcomed like heroes, especially after Bullet tells carefully crafted tales about how they stood firm by our side while the hosts of Mordor fled. They receive offers of bottles of wine and moonshine from the boys; they're invited to the tonk games and are mercilessly cheated until they figure out how to play properly; they're included in the bitch sessions that develop whenever the men aren't working on anything in particular.

The Lieutenant and I agree that they'll fit in just fine.

...

Life is complicated. I've known this for decades. The moment you think the sailing is smooth, a maelstrom will up and wreck your ship and send you to your watery grave. Or so I assume. I've never been out to sea. Maybe sailors' lives have no twists to them. I'm sorry, I'm rambling. Let me just say it flat out.

Zim cut Shaggy real bad in an attempt to escape. He was on guard duty and she stuck him in the armpit, where he was unarmored, with one of Pork Chop's scalpels. Then she tried to make a run for it. She missed the major veins, but he's in bad shape through blood loss and shock. Apparently, the only reason she stuck around to start with is because she thought she owed Haroun, but once he died she figured she had no ties here. She hasn't said a word since our uruk allies on guard duty brought her back to us, so I don't know her exact motives. But I doubt she had intended to slice anyone up on her way out.

God only knows how she figured to escape from this fortress, cross Ithilien alone and on foot, and reach her haven in Osgiliath. I guess if you put enough pressure on someone for long enough, they

stop making good decisions. I can't imagine what it must have been like for her, delivered into the hands of her country's enemies, alone and friendless save for a band of cutthroats like us. I can't blame her for trying to desert us. I suspect that I would do the same, were I in her position.

Nonetheless, it hurts. We're a brotherhood. For the most part, no one deserts. When they do, it's a slap in the face to all of us. But then, all of us made our choice when we joined up; Zim didn't. She was a conscript, practically. A lot of us in the Black Company were conscripts in other armies before we found our home here.

I don't know what the Lieutenant is going to do about this. The punishment for murdering or attempting to murder a brother is death, but I doubt it will come to that- there are extenuating circumstances galore. So what the *hell* are we going to do with her?

Perhaps if we had a proper Annalist, someone who could have inspired Zim and shown her the history and heritage that she's now a part of, then maybe she wouldn't have tried to escape and slice up Shaggy. If I thought anybody in this ragtag Company could do better than me...

...

She's been respectfully imprisoned in the same barrack where we decided to stage our coup against the Eye. As before, Arrowhead and Bop are guarding the only door. They keep their faces studiously blank as I enter.

"Has she said anything yet?"

They shake their heads solemnly.

"Alright."

She's not looking good. Her hair is bedraggled and has small clots of blood embedded in it. Souvenirs from her time with Pork Chop? Or is it from Shaggy? She is sitting very still in a bunk, head hanging, hands clasped tightly together on her lap. It's clear that she's been crying.

"Ho, Zim."

She looks up. She slips on a ghost of a smile, tinged with sadness and anxiety.

"The Lieutenant sent me down here. We sort of need to figure out what to do with you."

"I understand."

"Well, I don't think so. You see, Haroun kind of made a mess of things when he recruited you. The rules of enlistment are quite clear on the subject. There is to be no coercion of any kind during the process. By placing you in a situation where you were forced to choose between death and the Company, he trampled all over our sacred rites. And those rites are there for a reason- they help prevent people trying to desert us."

"Don't blame Haroun for that, Papa. You should know it wasn't his fault. He's not the one who put me between a rock and a hard place. In fact, he's the one who pulled me out of it."

"I know. But nonetheless, boundaries have been broken, procedures abandoned. Up till now we've ignored the situation, since you seemed to be fitting in alright. But now, we need to settle it. We can't have you cutting up brothers trying to get back home. And it's making us all very uneasy to keep a member of the Company under armed guard. We need a solution, Zim. We need to find a way to redeem you and bring you back into the fold."

"Alternatively, you can kick me out and return me to Gondor."

I sucked spittle between my front teeth in that certain way that means, *Well, you see...*

"Well, you see, Zim, that's not exactly possible under the present circumstances. For obvious reasons."

"Yes," she said bitterly. "You must, of course, obey Sauron in all things."

"Who?"

"Sauron."

"Who?"

"Your master. The Dark Lord of Barad-dur."

"God damn, that's his name? We've always just known him as the Eye. What's it translate to? I'm not familiar with your northern tongues yet."

"It means, 'the Putrid'."

I smirk. "I think I understand why he doesn't want that particular name bandied about," I tell her. Then I do a double take. "Wait, what do you mean, 'we have to obey him'?"

She eyes me strangely. "Haroun told me that the Black Company backs the highest bidder. Sauron is the highest bidder. Hence, you have to follow his commands. Hence, you cannot return me to my homeland. Did I stutter or something?"

I eye her strangely right back. "Has no one told you, Zim?"

"Told me what?"

"The rape of the Annals. The Captain's murder. The grand conspiracy. Ringing any bells?"

She knew about the Annals and the Captain's death, but somehow she had been left completely out of the loop on the military coup. No one had bothered to tell her that Gondor was our secret though uninformed ally. No one had mentioned that our express goal was to chop the bogeyman of her homeland into fishbait.

She had simply put in her time in the hospital with Pork Chop, steadily suffocating from being surrounded by southerners and uruks and other traditionally hostile types. Then, one night, the pressure snapped her and she pulled a blade on poor old Shaggy.

Well, she's in on it now. Once we get a chance to contact Minas Tirith, she'll be a valuable asset, and until then she can stitch up Company men who got into "drunken" fights with loyal uruks.

We're still unsure about whether she is a Company brother or not. And yes, I know that she's a female, but she's still referred to as a brother- it's tradition. But whether she is one of us or is not, her goals and ours are aligned now. We'll work out the details of her irregular enlistment once we find out if we survive with the Annals intact.

I report Zim's newfound zeal to the Lieutenant. He simply grunts acknowledgment and carries on with what he is doing. I think he's getting the hang of being Captain now- he doesn't freely express his thoughts to his subordinates anymore, and and he's starting to cultivate the image of a dashing warlord in complete control of everything around him. He has the right face for command- handsome, cruel, and composed. Now his attitude is catching up with necessity.

Things are, in general, looking up.

...

Trouble. One of the Nazgul is coming to review the troops. We received word from the Tower.

Damned if I know how we'll play this. All it will take is a single soldier breathing a word of the conspiracy to have us slaughtered wholesale, and the Annals burned.

If this my last entry, I just want to say that all I ever wanted in this august Company is to serve to the best of my ability and not fuck up too badly.

8. Military Coup, Part Two

"Yo, Papa!" Sainly shouts cheerfully about two inches from my left ear.

Through an immense act of willpower, I manage to keep my eyes closed. I was trying to get some sleep, head down on a old wooden table in what has become the rec room of Minas Morgul, and interruptions were not to be welcomed. It was a lazy afternoon, with no regiments coming in, so my usual duty of trying to bribe my way to the location of the Annals did not apply.

"Papa papa papa papa papa! Hey! Papa Jack! Up and at 'em!"

I spring up swiftly, slinging my cloak from my shoulders and towards Sainly's face. Had it connected, it would have wrapped around his head and allowed me to boff him three or four times while he was blinded and disoriented, but he sways back and my cloak flutters far off target. He favors me with the smuggest smile I've seen in over fifty years.

"So close," I mutter. I drop back to my rest.

"Sorry, old boy. I'm can't help being quicker than a mongoose crossbred with a cobra."

"Good for you. Good night."

"Come on, there be death and blood and real wild times to be had! Do you want your life to pass you by?"

"My life has been a never-ending party since before you were born. Now leave me be. Sleeping."

Sainly sighs. "Alas, Papa, duty calls you. The Lieutenant says you're coming with me."

I jerk my head up. "Eh?"

"You know that Nazgul coming around later today?"

"Aye?"

"Well, me and a few of the boys are going to lay the final groundwork for his arrival, and the Lieutenant figures you'd better be there to capture the experience. You know, for posterity."

I softly bang my head against the tabletop. "Shit. Don't want to move. Want to stay here and sleep."

Sainly chuckles. "Come along, now. Check out just how badass old Sainly can be when he starts up his mojo."

We get up and go to it.

"Fill me in, then? I'm not intimately familiar with your little terror campaign."

Saintly shakes his head. "Hold up. The briefing will commence once I got my crew together. Yo, Sapper! We need to deal with Crashbang today, come on!"

Sapper is across the room, bleeding silver in a game of Tonk with a few off-duty brothers. You'd think a man that age could work out how to cheat at that game by now- I mean, he's had over a century to work out how. His fellow players call out good-natured curses at me and Saintly.

"Come on, man! Just give us another hour, we'll have him covering the drinks tab for the next decade!"

"Hey, Ghazi! Sleep carefully tonight, you hear?" Sapper calls back. "It would be a damned shame if a tentacled horror from the Outer Regions somehow got conjured straight into your blankets. Alright, I'm here. We ready?"

"Not yet. Still collecting my team."

He continues calling out names- Bop, Arrowhead, Kisander. Word around the mess hall has it that Saintly wants Arrowhead and Kisander to be in the new and improved Sapper protection detail, with the third man yet to be chosen.

"That should be plenty," Saintly says. "Oh, wait. Bop, nip off and get Goth and Grog. We could use a little uruk back-up. Meet us in the conference room."

Having assembled in the barrack room, Saintly quickly organizes us into a half circle around the table with him at the head.

"Right," he starts. "Now, I've worked with many of you before, but not all. So let me say this right up front- for the duration of this op, I am your Lord and King. If I tell you to charge the enemy unarmed and naked, you bloody do it. If I order you to retreat while we're still winning, you run like a coward with his legs set on fire. If I order you to jump, your head hits the ceiling before you ask me how high. The Lieutenant put me in charge because he knows that when I run things, no brother gets hurt through blatant stupidity. So obey me the same as you would him, the same way we would have obeyed the Captain. Goth, Grog, I hate to put you on the spot like this, but you've never fought alongside us. Can you obey orders even when they may not make sense?"

Goth nods sharply. "When Chief gives order, pissant *snagas* snap to it."

"That's what I like to hear. Now, for the most part, we have the fortress of Minas Morgul pretty well covered. There isn't much resistance to our little rebellion. What resistance there is is revolving around the uruk warchief from out of the Lithlad. I can't exactly pronounce his name, so I've labelled him Crashbang."

"Krauchbangh," Grog offers.

"Yeah, that's it. Crashbang has a group of loyalist uruks holed up near the Fifth Tower, where there's a bottleneck designed to slow any invaders. It also makes it difficult to sneak in and assassinate them like we prefer. Most of the loyal soldiers left in the fortress are with him. As of right now, we have them sort of blockaded in, with guards on all entrances to the tower, so they can't escape easily and we can't reach them easily.

"Lads, this cannot stand. It's one thing to back them into a corner and then forget about them, but we can't possibly explain to the Nazgul why we are constructing barricades on the inside of the fortress. We need to sort these bootlicking dumbasses out today. Me, now, I wanted to toss a few dozen jars of naptha inside and throw some torches in after, but the Lieutenant nixed that. We cannot afford to leave any sort of mess to arouse the Nazgul's suspicions. For the moment, at least, that includes wiping them out in pitched battle. Everybody clear so far?"

We nod and grunt our assent.

"So what we're doing is, we're going to do a sort of mix of diplomacy and assassination. We'll throw up the white flag, tell them we just want to talk, then we do our damndest to convince them to join our revolution. When they refuse, then either Sapper burns Crashbang to a crisp or Arrowhead puts a bolt in his forehead, then we renegotiate with the survivors. The way we hear it, Crashbang is only holding them together by force of will. If he's dead, they won't be a problem at all. Hell, half of them are probably trying to figure out how to desert to our barricade without the other half catching them. So, we clear? We don't bust any heads till they refuse to give in."

"How many of them are there?" Arrowhead asks.

"More than five, less than a dozen. Beyond that, we don't know."

Nod, nod; grunt, grunt.

"Then let's get started. Everybody go out and grab your equipment. Meet me here again in a half hour."

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All I'm using is a buckler and a *kukri* knife. Pretty simple. I've used my half hour to add this entry to my notes.

...

"White flag!" Sainly hollers. "White flag means parley! Ceasefire! Come on!"

He retreats out of range. The loyalists have good aim, strong arms, and a ready supply of rocks fallen from the ancient stone walls. Sainly is now sporting a bruised cut on his left cheek, what might be a broken finger, and a rising temper.

"Bastards!" he hisses to me. "No good, sons-a-bitching, uncivilized bastards. Fucking finger. Ouch."

"There, there," I soothe him. "Who's daddy's big strong little man, huh? Who's a tough boy, then?"

He cocks his head and stares at me. Then he gets it. "This is because of how I woke you up earlier, isn't it?"

I nod solemnly. "What goes around, comes around, Sainly."

"Why couldn't we have burned the little bastards out, huh? Things would have been simpler. Tell the fucking Nazgul that one of Sapper's experiments got out of hand."

"Focus on the task at hand, O Terror of Minas Morgul. Go ask Goth or Grog how uruks negotiate, because clearly a white flag isn't doing the trick."

"I knew that," Sainly says. "I knew to ask them. Go teach your grandma to suck eggs, Papa." He stalks off towards Goth and Grog's position, pouting. Having authority is new to him, and he likes the feeling of power too much to take criticism or advice well. With any luck, he'll grow out of it.

Me, Bop, Arrowhead, and Kisander hang around. They're packing short swords and large shields, except for Arrowhead, who inherited Blink's high-tech crossbow. We stand there, staring into the darkness that leads to the Fifth Tower. We can see the huddled form of an uruk near the door. We know, from Sainly's unintentional recon, that there are another two of them standing guard alongside him.

Sainly returns with the uruk brothers.

"Yo, Papa! I found out how uruks negotiate!"

"How?"

"Both sides send the oldest member of their tribe to talk one-on-one. That way, in case of treachery, they don't lose a young, strong warrior."

"What!"

"And," he hastens to add, "if there is no treachery, you got you're smartest and most cunning uruk negotiating. 'Cause, you see, no uruk can survive that long without being sharper than a needle. If there's treason, we remain strong- if there ain't, we gain concessions. It's a win-win situation."

"Yeah, for you it is. For the oldie, it's a win-lose situation."

"Well?"

"Well bloody what?"

"Hop to it, old man."

"Aha. Aha. Ha. No."

"Oh, come *on*, Papa! We'll be ready to back you up if anything goes sour."

"No."

It turns out that, just as Sainly had told the lot of us earlier, the on-site commander outranks the Annalist.

Damn it.

"Hey, Sapper! Give Papa Jack your rock of death, will ya? We got a pack of loyalists to deal with. Make sure you tell him how to use it."

I narrow my eyes suspiciously. "Rock of death? This is what?"

"He'll explain. Go! Go! Forward, for the glory of the Company!" Sainly was one snarky little cuss.

So. Through the shadowed doorway into enemy held territory. Past the three tense looking uruks gripping scimitars. Into the core of the cancer that has held Minas Morgul for far too long.

I'll write the rest later. Sainly is telling me that the Captain is waiting to debrief me.

...

I was in a massive open area within the depths of the Fifth Tower. I imagine that in the event of invasion, this would be the area where you place reserves to support the other troops, as there were multiple exits leading towards different parts of the wall. Also, its size would allow it to double as a stockpile of food, arms, and ammunition. There were no supplies there now. Just four uruk minions, one uruk warchief, and one Annalist. I stood still and tried to exude fearlessness and confidence.

Krauchbangh was big. There was likely some troll mixed up in his lineage. By normal human standards, he was merely larger than normal at five feet ten inches, weighing in at 230 pounds. By uruk standards, he was a giant. Ugly, too. He had blackened fangs jutting out of uncomfortable angles from his dull red mouth; greasy, thin, sparse hair; and of course, yellow skin. And that's just what Mother Nature did to him. After she had misshaped him, he looked like he had sass-talked a sword blade three or four times. Gnarled scar tissue was webbed across his face and skull.

Plus, his breath stank.

"Greetings, Krauchbangh," I say, bowing from the neck and not the waist. I want to give respect but no submission- showing weakness in an uruk's den is like swimming in shark territory with open wounds. "I am the Mouth of Gothmog, Lord of the *luftig-hai burzum*."

Krauchbangh grins, showing the full range of black teeth filed to points. A slimmer, shorter uruk to his right steps forward.

"Krauchbangh does not speak Common," he hisses. "So I am his Mouth. You speak through me, southlander piss stain maggot breeder." The other uruks laugh. Standards for uruk wit are low. Possibly below ground level.

"Oh," I say. "I'm going to set you on fire, Krauchbangh, and dance in your ashes."

Ol' Crashbang makes a gallant effort, but he can't hide the surprise and aggression that flickers in his eyes.

"Oops! Gave yourself away there, Krauchbangh," I say. "Dispense with the lackeys. Let us talk, one warrior to another."

Krauchbangh snarls something in the Black Tongue to his would-be translator. The littler uruk shrinks away, cowed.

For the life of me, I can't imagine why he would pretend not to speak Common. Perhaps he thought that there was some advantage to be had in making me strain my message through a translator.

"My boss wishes to find a way of ending our little war here without wiping you out."

Krauchbangh's voice is low, almost too low to believe. Like one of those giant trumpets that some of the Haradrim favor. "I am a servant of the Lidless Eye. I am the Lord of Blood. No Southron sellsword can stand against me. You signed your own death warrant when you rebelled. Piss drinking maggot fuck, if you keep standing there shitting arrogance,

I give you a red, red smile on your filthy throat." The uruk minions try their best not to show their nervousness, but even I can tell that they don't precisely hold to this version of reality. They know, even if their boss doesn't: they're outnumbered exponentially, and even if the *luftig-hai burzum* are put down it won't help them at all.

"Personal insults do not help the negotiations," I say. "Now, I'm on your side, Krauchbangh. My boss is a violent man. He wants to burn you lot out and spit on your corpses. But I tell him: those uruks in there? They're the cream of the crop, the roughnecks. They're the ones who lasted the longest against the odds and they still refuse to give up. So I say, why not get them on our side?"

"Treason shit motherfucker. I'll jam my sword through your belly and out the back," Krauchbangh says, calm as you please. "We are *uruk-hai*, and that means we're the cruelest, the hardest, the best. You come after us, we'll tear your eyes out and eat them as crows do. We fuck your offer. Fuck you, old maggot. The Eye sees all, and sees our defiance. He is coming for you, and he'll rip your guts out and feast on them in front of you. Like a pig." He oinks hoggishly for effect.

May I just take this moment to note that I really, really dislike Krauchbangh, and just about every other uruk that has lived in Mordor for any length in time. They are cruel, stupid, ignorant, and more gratefully they never let up on the profanity. Now, I've been a soldier for over half my life, and I've cursed more than my fair share, it's true. But these Mordor uruks... they exist with nothing but crudity and hatred in their lives. I reckon it warps them. Never ending curses flow from every uruk soul, and the very act of cursing the world that wrought them corrodes them from the inside out. And the worse off they are on the inside, the more they lash out at anything around them. Soon enough they are sullen, vicious, dull-minded and borderline retarded.

They are *hell* to negotiate with.

I should mention that Slaz, Goth and Grog were all born and raised outside of the Eye's immediate control, up north in the Misty Mountains. So my ire is not directed at them, my unorthodox new brothers. It is tightly focused on the asshole in front of me. It pleases me to think that he's going to die soon. But before I am allowed to kill him, I must first obey my orders to try to convince him to defect.

"I can guarantee your safety," I say. It's possible my voice dripped with boredom at this point. I knew what his answer would be, I just didn't know in what profane manner he would cloak his refusal.

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"Fucking Southron, *tark*-screwing, mercenary shit," Krauchbangh spits. Emboldened by my lack of response, the four uruk lackeys join in and jeer, shouting insults and shoving me back and forth between them, like I'm the weakest member of a pack of children. One of them jabs me in the stomach with the hilt of his knife, and I simply absorb the blow; I have on a leather jerkin and it doesn't hurt me much.

I retreat a few paces, orienting myself so that they're all arranged in front of me again, ignoring their snarls and laughs. I have to raise my voice over the uruk's din. "Final answer, Crashbang?"

Whimsically, I decide not to give him a chance to respond. I slip my hand down my jerkin, and grasp the smooth ebony stone that was hanging around my neck on a length of twine. Sapper's "death stone", to be precise. I know nothing of magic, but as the little wizard had put it, it takes enormous levels of strength and skill to climb to the top of a mountain, and almost no effort at all to fall back down. Sapper had pumped some sorcery into the little rock, and now any idiot could trigger it. I concentrated on Krauchbangh- the scarred up face; the bulging muscles; the tube of fat around his waist; the inky dark teeth; everything. This part was the equivalent of aiming a crossbow at someone, Sapper had said. By thinking hard of one person in sight, that lets the magical doohickey know where to unleash the power.

I spoke a single word: "*Burn*." This, of course, was the equivalent of pulling the trigger of a crossbow.

Krauchbangh goes up like a vat of naptha. I can see most of his face, the tips of his hands in the air, the toes of his boots on the floor. Everything else was crimson flames.

He shrieks and rolls on the floor, and strikes himself trying to extinguish the flames. Vain and useless. Sapper is nowhere near the level of Sauron the Putrid, or the Witch-king, or any other heavy hitter. But even he can do a fire spell that won't be put out by bare hands and by "stop, drop, and roll."

It takes only seconds for Crashbang the Unpleasant to burn to death.

His former minions stand horrorstruck, staring at their warchief wreathed in fire. My *kukri* had been taken from me as I entered the Fifth Tower, but I am still Tiger Hand. I need no shard of sharpened metal to fight.

I grab the nearest of them from behind. I first break his wrist, then his upper arm. I then kick his kneecap out of alignment and then strike at his throat with stiffened fingers. Not knowing uruk physiology, I could not be sure that the strike to

the throat would be a death blow, so I rendered him incapable of fighting before going for the kill. The other three don't notice as he drops to the floor and gurgles his last. I scoop up his scimitar and slay another, spraying black onto the dull grey walls. The last two see me at work and scamper off. They have no interest in fighting a man who can set his enemies on fire, and who they only outnumber by one.

This was technically against orders- I was supposed to fry Krauchbangh and then renegotiate with the survivors. But until I knew how the survivors stood, I refused to stay in an unfriendly environment while outnumbered four to one.

I head towards the nearest wall. I crouch down with my back to the stone, sword held in front of me. There are still up to eight other uruks lurking around the Fifth Tower somewhere, and I don't know what their reaction to Krauchbangh's death will be. Best to just sit tight with my eyes peeled and await retrieval. Sapper will have sensed his death stone going off, and is supposed to be leading Saintly's platoon right towards me as I sit.

Krauchbangh's body is still burning, but it has lessened to the intensity of an average campfire.

After Saintly's boys find me in there with the three corpses, we set out together to search for the remaining loyalists.

We don't get so much as a scratch, and what little destruction we cause to the infrastructure- burned holes in the walls, bloodstains, and the like- is easily cleaned up. Had we tried to barge in without assassinating Krauchbangh first, the uruks might have fought back with strong leadership and caused untold destruction. There would have been obvious signs of small-scale warfare.

We take no casualties and take no prisoners.

In my humble opinion, this mission was a limited success.

...

The Lieutenant chose not to chew me out. Apparently, he had no high hopes for Krauchbangh to join us. He only wishes that we had left a few of the underlings alive to enlist with us, but he is glad none of us got hurt trying to accomplish it.

So that's something.

...

Nazgul came. Suspected nothing. We're marching out soon, headed for the Black Gate up north. No one knows why. Shatarz will be given another of Sapper's magic thingamabobs so we can communicate with him long distance. He'll be left in charge

here at Minas Morgul, or wherever the troops under his command go.

I'm rather glad that we're not being hung wholesale. Anticlimaxes are to be welcomed when you're playing for high stakes.

9. Cirith Ungol

Cirith Ungol is a minor fortress a half day's march north of Minas Morgul. To approach it from the east would require an attacking army to breach three walls and three tall towers- so basically, no deserters from Mordor could get through. To approach it from the west would require an attacking army to march up a long, narrow, and damn near vertical staircase leading to the gate. Having seen it, I can attest that a juvenile street gang at the top armed with nought but rocks could hold off an army ten times their size. And if you did reach the top, there was some kind of psychic barrier that would stop you anyway. You could still be shot, of course, but you couldn't advance past the enchanted Watchers. And trying to bypass the fortress, we had been assured, was an equally bad idea- there was a labyrinth of caves on both sides that was guarded by *something* that Grog and Goth didn't want to talk about. Judging by the fact that "Cirith Ungol" translates to something like "Path of the Spider", I think it could be safely left to the imagination. The idea of a horde of waist high spiders swarming in those creepy caves is unnerving.

Somehow, while we and the hosts of Mordor were out on the Fields of Pelennor getting our noses bloodied, enemies had entered the Tower, shattered the enchanted Watchers, slaughtered all the uruks stationed there, and vanished without a trace. The same Nazgul that ordered us out of Minas Morgul to the Black Gate had also ordered half a platoon led by Salim to retake this fortress. There were fifteen of us and we commanded about a hundred uruks. Our orders were to find out what had happened here, report it, and regroup with our Company. The uruks would stay and become the new garrison. All of the uruks were secret rebels, so we now controlled two of the entrances into Mordor. I'm not sure to how much use these advantages have, but it's better to have it than not.

Kisander is a bright boy and he has a reputation as a hunter. It has become a fad in the Company to come up with increasingly exaggerated tales of his exploits- "Kisander once tracked an eagle on a cloudy day with his eyes closed;" "Kisander once shot a single arrow at a dragonfly from twenty miles away- the arrow hit the bug five times;" "Kisander

hunts djinni for venison- he likes their meat because it tastes like fear." And so on. Kisander's real talent in life is looking at what *is* and figuring out what happened that resulted in what he's looking at. This applies just as much to old battlefields and enemy movements as it does to the habits of wild animals. If anyone can figure out what happened here, Kisander can.

We don't know yet *what* happened, but it left uruk corpses strewn haphazardly over the whole damn fortress,

"So, Brother Kisander," Salim is saying. "What can you see?"

Kisander glances up, grinning boyishly. He was on all fours and had been crawling around for the last hour.

"Would've been more convenient to have come round here just after it happened. It's been what, two weeks since the this place was raided? Lot of clues disappear when you wait that long."

"Live with it," Salim says, smiling.

"Yeah, yeah. I've had a look around. Come on!" And he jumps up and quick-walks into the barracks room. We sigh, roll our eyes, and follow him.

Kisander skips over some inert bodies and positions himself next to one of the bunks.

"Check this out!" he proclaims, pointing up at the ceiling.

All our eyes swivel upwards.

"It's a bloodstain," I say.

"Yes," Kisander says, "Way to state the obvious, Papa. This, right here. This is where the fight started."

Salim frowns. "How the hell did the enemy get in here?"

Kisander does a doubletake. "When this guy"- he nudges a yellow corpse slightly- "got his throat cut, no enemy had entered Cirith Ungol. Purely internal affair."

Salim stares upwards. "So how do you know that this is where the battle began?"

"Hell, it was obvious. I checked out the remains of the Watchers- the rubble was covering up the pools of blood and some of the bodies nearby had gravel stuck in their wounds. Clearly, then, no enemy had broken in until after they died. Therefore, it was uruk on uruk at the first. I made a guess that the room with the most bodies was the starting off point,

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since once things got heated one side would have broken and left casualties in a long trail. So I snoop around, yeah? And I see this little fella," he said, pointing up at the blood stain. Kisander can get slightly weird while talking about his passion. "If you'll observe, there's only one smallish blot of black blood here, and sprinkles around it. So, the carotid got cut and it sprayed up, yeah? So why didn't more blood hit the ceiling?" He looks at us questioningly. "Well?"

I raise my hand. "Because... uruks have low blood pressure?"

Kisander smacks his face with his palm, leaving a smear of black blood in his hair. "No."

A grunt named Azez speaks up. "The uruk was sitting down when the blow was struck."

"Exactly! And I tell ya, no uruk is going to be sitting down sedately if there violence in the air. So! The first strike was a sneak attack, and resulted in a brawl- there was the Morgul reinforcements on one side, about forty or so of them, and the local garrison on the other, about twice that."

Kisander dances towards the center. "Note the way that those wearing Morgul colors and those in Ungol colors are roughly divided left and right. The Morgul boys got their asses kicked, but they slaughtered plenty of the other boys before retreating out into the courtyard, where uruk archers loosed shafts indiscriminately into the crowd."

"What was the fight about?" Salim asks.

"I'm... working on it. Anyway, come along. "

Step by step he walks us through it. To a tracker, I suppose, it must have been fascinating, but to me it was simply boring. Who needs to know every single move and ambush in a minor inconsequential squabble that took place a fortnight ago? Eventually he brings us back to the courtyard where the Watchers met their doom.

"So," he continues, "We've seen the Ungol uruks and the Morgul uruks wipe each other out. Now, by this time, I reckon there's only four or five uruks alive in the whole place. Maybe two or three alive on either side. They've survived one hell of a brawl, so we can assume that either these guys are the cowards who skulked around the edges... or they're the meanest, cruelest, strongest of the lot. Or both. We are after all talking about uruks."

Neither Slaz, Grog, or Goth were present, so he didn't feel the need to throw in a "present company excepted."

"Here is where enemy action first took place," Kisander says, gesturing towards the shattered statues in the courtyard. "After the battle was pretty much burned out. Someone... or *something*... broke the Watchers to rubble.

"I wish to hell Sapper was around to tell me what could do that. I ain't no sorcerer, I don't know these things. However, based on the evidence before us we can make a few educated guesses.

"Whoever did it had access to a fairly potent source of Power. That either makes him the Grey Walker, an Elf, or someone who's had dealings with the Grey Walker or the Elves. No one else we know of on the Gondorian side does magic.

"Whoever did this did this had wide feet. Check the footprints. The prints themselves are slightly wider than normal. This generally indicates a good-sized adult, right? But his stride, man- short and stunted, like he couldn't swing his legs very far. So a child-sized adult. To me, this says dwarven warrior.

"Just what a dwarf is doing alone in an enemy fortress armed with elf magic is beyond me. Don't elves and dwarves hate each others' guts? Still, what do I know, I'm just a dumb-ass grunt."

We all stare around us at the scattered bodies and the shattered gate. To us, it was merely a bloody mess lightly sprinkled with rocks. To Kisander...

Well, you know what they say. Kisander can see in the dark, because he sliced the dark's belly with a hunting knife and poked around a bit.

Salim is saying, "So, where did the dwarf go?"

Kisander stares blankly. "How should I know? You interrupted me at about this point, and I never got to find out."

Salim pinches the bridge of his nose, closes his eyes, and breathes in deep. "Then, why don't you go on and find out."

"Right-o, sir!"

After a few false starts, Kisander leads us to the main tower. Inside was a long winding staircase, dimly lit and bloodstained, and at the top was a ladder leading up into what we assumed to be a torture chamber judging by the reek.

"Half a sec," Kisander says, and crawls up the ladder. Me, Salim, Azez, and Ghazi cool our heels at the bottom of the ladder while Kisander stomps around upstairs, humming cheerfully to himself.

"He's a good boy," Salim says, gazing upwards. "But he's too upbeat. We're a hardcore band of mercenaries, we got no business singing lovely little songs to ourselves with big smiles on our ugly mugs."

Ghazi cracks a smile. "Yeah. He needs to develop some fucking cynical world-weariness, like the rest of us."

I nod solemnly. "There is no cheer allowed in this outfit. Only bitterness, hatred, and aggression."

Azez jumps in like he was waiting for the cue and sings a snatch of a marching song from our last campaign. "No fucking sport; no fucking games; no fucking fun; the fucking dames, won't even give you their fucking names-"

We all shout the ending, "*-in fucking Umbar!*" We don't exactly erupt into gales of laughter, but we all grin to each other and chuckle a bit. It's hard to believe that we had thought our last war was a rough one.

Ghazi hisses in a mock-sinister tone, like a stage-play villain. "We have no blood running through our veins in the Black Company. Our hearts pump naught but fermented spite and asp venom."

I chime in again. "I'm not cynical all the time. I only get moody when I'm not stabbing motherfuckers in the face and desecrating their corpses."

Kisander shouts from the top of the ladder. "You guys are sick, you hear me? Sick, sick, sick! Oh, hullo!"

"Come on, get down here already!" Salim calls. "We're bored as hell down here."

"Hold up! Hold up... I think... the son of a bitch must've ran. Must have. Only explanation." Kisander's muttered words echo down towards us. Kisander descends the ladder. He stares blankly ahead, lips moving, hands held awkwardly at his side. He looks down the stairs, back up the ladder. He squats down, pursing his lips. He drums his fingers on the floor, heedless of the blood puddles.

"Either he's about to get an epiphany and run out of here," Ghazi stage-whispers, "or he's about to start banging his head against the wall in frustration."

"Ten silvers on an epiphany," I whisper back. "Five-to-one."

"I'll take that bet," Ghazi says. "You don't know Kisander like I do. When he gets latched on to something, the slightest little setback drives him crazy-"

Kisander bounds up and beams at us. "Got it!" he declares proudly. "Follow me!" And he's off again, down the stairs.

On the way down, Ghazi pays up, spitting against the stone wall as he does so. He's been lucky at Tonk recently so he has currency on him.

"Remember," I tell him, smiling gently as we jog. "The only time Kisander ever gave up is when he was trying to think up something more badass than he is."

"Prick," Ghazi mutters.

We always hate Bullet for running us ragged, but then come times where it is of material benefit to us. Osgiliath and the Pelennor Fields, for instance. The seizing of al-Qats. The march through the hell of Gorgoroth.

The epic-sized run up and down the fucking Tower of Cirith Ungol. The Black Company knows all about cardiovascular shit.

"The thing is," Kisander pants as we trot after him, "after the main show, there was a minor altercation up here. An uruk was chased up these stairs, probably by the dwarf. He reached the top, and then things get confused for me. I *think* that he had a conversation with another uruk up there, as there's indication that he paced around. At one point he adopted a fighting stance. Uruks tend to do that a lot in any conversation. But I couldn't tell which of the prints my running uruk was reacting to, since there were a lot of them all mixed up from before the battle broke out. Like I said, if I could've been here right after it happened... ah, hell with it.

"The uruk I had been tracking is dead up there, and I think the dwarf killed him. But I couldn't figure out what happened to the other uruk, the one that was up here. He must have ran off away from the dwarf, but where to, eh? Where to?"

He looks at us inquisitively, as though he was actually expecting us to answer.

"He must have tried to escape into the Plateau of Gorgoroth, trusting to his superior knowledge of the local area to allow him to escape. He needn't have bothered. The dwarf was here to rescue the poor dope getting flogged to death. Blood, red blood, all over the damn place, splashed in ways that could only be done using a whip. And when the dwarf exits, he's helping someone who's staggering. Or, possibly, he was here for something else entirely and got sidetracked by the human whipping post. Doesn't matter.

"So," he says as we reach the edge of the fortifications overlooking Gorgoroth, "where's our missing uruk? Out there, buddy boys, out there. He's obviously dead, since he never reported this and hasn't been caught. But once we find his remains, we'll find clues."

"I love clues," he adds, eyes shining. "They warm me up inside."

...

We found the uruk's corpse. It took three hours of scouring the surrounding area, but we did it. Kisander almost pisses himself with joy. He really enjoys being correct.

Wild animals and the dry sun have rendered his mortal remains into something as sickening as it is puzzling. Salim reckoned that he died of sunstroke, but Kisander pointed out that dirty cloth wrapped around his arm, and figured that he died of blood loss, possibly shock. But who cares how the poor bastard died? He was holding something inedible and unperishable with him- a *mithril* coat. Small, designed no doubt for a child or midget, but undoubtedly the real deal.

Mithril is as valuable as it is useful- completely invulnerable, resistant to magic, never rusts, never wears, never lets you down. Forge it into a sword and it will cut through steel like cloth. Smear a thin layer of it on your breastplate and it will never be pierced. *Mithril* is the closest thing non-wizards have to magic.

This coat, if sold at fair market value, could hire us for a decade. Shit you not.

Not that anyone would actually sell it. It was priceless in the purest sense of the word, in that it was impossible to put a tag on it.

At least we know now what the fight was about. God knows I'd be willing to pull a knife on someone to own this.

Of course, we gave it up without a fuss to the Nazgul, who shrieked off with both it and our story to the Eye.

Let's see. Shit tons of gold, or a chance to ingratiate ourselves with the upper echelon of Mordor? As much coin as we could spend, or a fighting chance to recover our Annals?

Gee, let me think about that.

10. The Plateau of Gorgoroth

We're camped out on the Plateau of Gorgoroth. It's almost exactly as dismal and depressing and miserable as I recall from the first march through, almost two years ago.

Gorgoroth is a desert wasteland, but without the purity and austerity of the Haradwaith desert. You picture a desert, you think bright sun beating down, tan sand dunes, howling winds and unforgiving miles to walk with no food or water source for miles. And this certainly describes Gorgoroth accurately. But it does not convey the sheer godawful misery of the place. Gorgoroth is diseased, if it is possible for a terrain feature to be diseased.

You got clouds of poison gas seeping up from darkened pits. You got unhealthy weeds that look like they grow on unclean meat, not water. You got bleached bones of the poor dumb-asses who came before you.

Then there's rumors of foul beasts that hunt by night and are ever hungry. You hear stories about whole companies of uruk troops found in the wilds, drained of blood and splayed out on the ground, still in their ranks and files

Every man jack of us hates Gorgoroth with a passion.

It's not a region that a mere fifteen guys would ever choose to march through alone, but then, if Fate ever took our preferences into account we would have won on the Pelennor Fields.

Our fire is set up and blazing strong, though few are awake to watch it. Azez is on watch with Web-foot on the perimeter. Sainly and I are sharing a flask of Noose, a homemade moonshine so named because all it takes is one drop and you're dead.

Sainly is staring into the fire. "You ever wonder just what we're doing here?"

"Sometimes."

"I do. I am. I mean, here we are, fighting the good fight, and part of me feels like everything is worthless. Like all our honor and courage and so on is just so much bollocks. You know?"

"Don't let no one else hear you say that."

"I know, I know. It's just... Alright. The Red Eye is uncontestably evil and a bastard now, yeah?"

"Sure."

"So when we were kicking ass and taking names in Osgiliath, we were, you might say, the bad guys."

"I could make an argument or two against that."

"Yeah, but, I mean. We were advancing the cause of relentless evil, and it's only after we were personally screwed that we decided to fight him. So all this about our heritage in danger? Our Company history in danger? Bollocks. We were willing to sell the whole damn world down the river because we were too lazy to distinguish between basic right and wrong. It's getting hard to remember why I'm a brother here, Papa. When we had the Annals, it was easy; us against the world, the outcasts looking out for each other, comrades and brothers together as one, and so on. But the more I think of it now, the less I care about what happens to us. We deserve whatever the world does to us for being what we are." He trails off. He spits a stream of alcohol into the flames, and they rise up spectacularly for a moment.

I start speaking almost without meaning to. "When I was a young man- just, like, 15 years old- I was betrothed to a woman I loved."

"Oh?"

"We were together for just five years. I was young, strong, rich by the standards of my tribe. I could give her anything she wanted, and frequently did. She was drop dead gorgeous, with wisdom and grace in abundance. A perfect wife, aye, but even better, a good woman. I was very, very fortunate."

Saintly doesn't have a clue where I'm going with this, but it's night and the poison fumes from the blasted landscape are swirling lazily in front of the moon and everything is relaxed. He doesn't press me to get to the point, like he normally would.

I continue. "We had two daughters. Lovely girls. We named the older one Silk Fingers, and the younger Diamond. They were aged three and one, respectively, when I got my poor ass drafted."

Saintly inhales sharply, "Ouch."

"Don't I know it. My tribe, well, we lost the last war against the Tellemite empire. Every ten years the Imperial horseman would ride into the village, bold as brass, and pick and choose which ten percent of us would be volunteering."

"Life sucks when you're the one on bottom."

"Yep. After my ten years were up, I came home to find my wife had died years before. Plague. My daughters had been adopted by the chief. I saw them just the once before I left again. My Silk Fingers was getting betrothed to the chief's son, and

my Diamond was there too. Dancing the Dance of Impending Love."

Saintly twists his face in disgust. "Ew."

"What?"

"She was getting betrothed at 13? Fuck, man."

"She wouldn't be getting married till she was 15, dumbass." I swat at his arm.

"Alright, alright. Betrothal ceremony, go on."

"I was in attendance at the party. My daughters didn't know me, they thought I was just another returned vet. But they were sweet about it, man. You know? Silk Fingers offered to fill my cup herself. Me! A man she thought she had never met before! God above, she was so brilliant that night. My chief, he was good at raising kids. Of course, he had over twenty, so I guess he got more practice."

I pause, lost in thought. Saintly abides.

"Both my daughters got renamed that night. Silk Fingers took on part of the aspect of her fiancée's name, so the future wife of Oaken Arm became Oak Leaf. Diamond so impressed everybody with her dancing that she became, simply, Dancer."

I drink from the flask, choking slightly on the burning liquid. "I left the next day. I didn't know them, nor anybody else in my hometown. They didn't know me, they didn't need me, and I didn't want to depend on nobody's charity. My darlings were in good hands, and who gives a good god damn about anything past that? You know? I just gave what was left of my pay to the chief to thank him, and told him that if my daughters ever asked after me, I had died in the wars but had loved them very much. The last thing I saw before I left my village was the Tellemite cavalymen drafting a new crop of young men. Lined 'em up, picked 'em out, told 'em where to show up the next day. I stayed long enough to give the fresh fish some pointers and tell them that it wasn't the end of the world. I wound up here in the Company about ten years after I started wandering."

Silence once more. Then Saintly asks, "So what was her name? Your wife?"

"Didn't I say? She was Turtle when I met her, but she became Fragrance once she married me." I smile.

"Fragrance, Oak Leaf, Dancer, and Papa Jack. I got ya, I got ya." He nods to himself a few times. "So, what connection to my impending nihilism does your story have? Not intending to be insensitive or nothing."

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"When I got drafted, I lost my family. Losing my family *fucked me up*, here," I said, tapping my heart, "and here," tapping my temple. "If Fate had given me a chance to be restored to them while I was in service to the Tellemites, I would have done anything, fought anyone, marched anywhere to be with them again. I would have risked anything to be back where I belong. And if at anytime in my attempt the thought had struck me that trying to get back to Fragrance was vain, or stupid, or just so much bollocks, I would have banished that thought from my mind as unworthy of a warrior finding his way back home. Because when something precious has been taken from you, nothing else in the world matters but getting it back."

Saintly nods, slowly. "I got ya, I think."

Saintly pokes the fire with his sword, his mind elsewhere.

"And keep in mind," I add. "If we get through this intact, and the Company marches free once more, it will be made of men who remember how it felt to have served wickedness. I'd like to think that we'll be a little more wary of serving Dark Lords. Stick with robber barons, petty tyrants, pirates, and the like. The small scale villainy. That seems to be more our speed."

Saintly snorts. "Unlikely."

"Unlikely how?"

"Haven't you ever read the Annals, Papa? The Company always seems to end up fighting for the stronger side. And like you probably know, the stronger nations tend to use conquest as a crutch. Therefore, we'll sign on with the 'bad guys' more often than not. Therefore, we'll keep on serving the Saurons of this world from now to the day we end."

"Hmm." I can't think of any response to this line. I never knew Saintly harbored any moral objections to mercenary work.

Saintly is looking out on the full moon, but talking aside to me. "I ever tell you? I use to be quite the revolutionary in my youth."

I bark out a laugh. "Says the wee lad of six-and-twenty. Wait till you're staring 60 in the face, you'll look back where you are now and think you were a toddler."

"Yeah, yeah. Old man Wisdom comes a-knockin eventually. Yada yada yada. Anyways, in my youth, I moonlighted as a king-killer. No shit, Jack. Saintly the Assassin. Saintly, Scourge of Tyranny." He gets up and adopts an exaggerated kung-fu stance, striking out at invisible opponents.

I yank him down by the cuff and we collapse back in our seats.

"Saintly, Spanker of Satraps," I suggest.

"Heh. That was quick on the uptake, mate. Yeah. Like you, my country got whupped in the last war, so we were getting curb-stomped day in day out by this nasty group of motherfuckers called the Moabs. The slimy, thieving, murderous pricks. Hate them. Hate them, hate them, hate them. Fuckers. Anyways, we were getting the food taxed straight out of our mouths, you know? Like, the Moabs weren't interested in enriching themselves even, just as long as we had nothing they were happy. Their whole tax scheme thing was designed to hurt us, not help them, ya know?"

"I don't know the specifics, but I know the mindset. Go on."

"So me and a couple friends, we decided to do something about it. I got this kick-ass little sword made, like, a foot and a half long, and got in a special sheath that went on the inside of my right thigh, yeah? 'Cause all the soldiers in the Moab army, they were right handed. I'm ambidextrous, so fuck them." He chortles. "So whenever they checked for weapons, they would only check on the left hand side. You see?"

"Got it. Undetectable weapon poking into your sack. Continue." I lean back. Saintly's stories are usually good, and this was proving to be no exception.

"I sent a message to the Moab king, this obese motherfucker who decided that he would set up his summer home in the heart of our conquered nation. Just to rub it in that we were his bitches. And I ain't kidding about obese, Papa, he must've weighed almost 400 pounds. On his little 5 foot frame. Short, fat, fucking bastard. Anyway. I convinced our representatives to send me with the monthly tribute, so I got in his presence easy as pie. The guards searched me thoroughly- by their standards. That means, they didn't leave a single inch of my left hand side unsearched. Because they're unbelievably stupid. Of course, they had kicked our asses in a military campaign just eight years previously, so I supposed that makes my side reformed idiots at best.

"So, I was in the Moab king's presence. I give him our tribute, bowed down and groveled like a tenant before his landlord. I praised his name, and licked his boots, and swore everlasting fealty to him and his descendants."

I smirk at the image of Saintly groveling to anybody. "So you were a sneaky little commando even before you met the Company."

"Where do you think I got the job training? I says to him, I says, 'I have a message for you, my king.'

"He says, 'What is it?' "

"I whisper in his ear that I have found a traitor in his midst, a snake in his bosom. One of his courtiers is plotting his demise. If I tell him aloud in front of everybody, then all members of the conspiracy will go to ground and he'll have to spend the rest of his life rooting them out."

"Yee-haw," I say. "If something's worth fighting for, it's worth fighting dirty for."

Saintly giggles drunkenly to himself. "I love being me, you know? I fucking love it. Sly as foxes and deadly as nightshade. Hoo ah!"

I nudge him. "Go on."

"So I'm alone with him, yeah? He's slobbering all over himself with greedy, you know, with, like, intensity. God, I'm smashed, I can't talk straight. So he's, you know, all fired up to find out who the traitor is.

"I look him right in the eye. I say, 'I have a message from the Lord my God, Eru Illuvatar.' I draw the sword, lefty style.

"You should've seen the look in his eye. *Swoosh!* Instant terror. Blubbing, whimpering, pants-wetting fear. Ha! I stuck him like the pig he was. The whole eighteen inches went in, and his blubber flopped over the handle. He was that fat, man. You couldn't even see the pommel."

I burst out laughing. "Gross! Ugh!" I measure out eighteen inches from my body. A foot and a half doesn't seem too long until you apply it to body width. I imagine being so damn fat that a short sword would disappear into me. Bullet would probably have a heart attack and then kill me, bloodily.

"I leapt out the window, hit the ground running, got to the local friendly guerrillas before the king's guards knew they had failed their master. I told my boys to mount up and get ready for round two. The rest was, hell, just a straight up military campaign lasting about three months. We slapped the Moabs around, kicked their asses out, then counter-invaded. Those were good times," he reflected wistfully. "Real good times."

"So how did you end up with us?" I ask.

"It's complicated. But hey, Papa, my main man, I'll tell you this," he adds, black eyes glittering strangely in the firelight. "The weeks leading up to my little foray into monarch-poaching, I felt like I was being guided. Like when I was on patrol with Sapper and Haroun and the rest. Someone infinitely superior to me, like the Captain, would tell me where to go and what to do. Exactly how I achieved my mission was up to me, but the impulse to do it was irresistible. That how I felt when I plunged my lefty sword into that Moab pimp's belly. Like I was just a sword in someone else's hand. It's also how I've been feeling since we've got back from Pelennor. Like someone's been setting things up for us to take down the Eye, just like I took down the Moab king."

I sit still as stone. "I didn't have long to study the Annals. But I remember from the readings that Wallace did. Kali. Shivetya. The Lady and the Dominator. The Star Rider. The Company has a long, proud history of being jerked around by gods and devils. Is that what you think is going on here? Some old terror from ancient times is making us its cats-paw?"

He frowns, shrugs. "I don't know. It would make sense, I guess. The Red Eye has been around forever, apparently. He must have made *some* supernatural enemies in that time."

"Damn it," I mutter, more to myself than him. "Things are more than bad enough just trying to lead a military coup against a warlock warlord. Complications are unwelcome."

"Still, doesn't really change anything, does it? We still have our objective, we still have our obstacle. If we knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that we were getting manipulated into fighting Barad-dur, would we really abandon our Annals just to spite our puppetmaster? Of course not. We'd still carry on."

"I suppose. Anyway, it's still fairly unlikely. Conspiracies are bullshit more often than not." The fire's dying down. We pile on a few more chunks of wood.

"True," says Saintly. "But remember what I told the Moab king before I wasted him?"

"The one-liner?"

"Aye."

"I have a message from the Lord my God, something something yada yada."

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"Eru Illuvatar. Yeah. My country has whole pantheons of gods to worship, mostly imported in from our neighbors. We got battalions of gods, we got oceans of idols and buckets of spirits. Calling any one of the gods Lord is slightly blasphemous to the rest. And even if it wasn't, we don't have any god named Eru Illuvatar. In fact, I have no idea why I invoked the name of non-existent deity when striking down my people's oppressor. Unless... there was an actual god named Eru, like, in real life. Pushing me. Forcing my jaw up and down and throwing his voice into my mouth."

A haunted look crosses Saintly darkened face, followed immediately by a mix of rage and fear.

"I could feel- and I am feeling- my fucking strings getting pulled, and I don't like it. But like a good little puppet, I'm dancing anyway."

Papa Jack the life-long sceptic says bull-crap. Oh, I'm sure that Saintly is catching bad vibes from something, but that don't mean it was a god. Lots of sorcerors who live long enough become dark gods in their own right, but they're not actual deities, they don't count. Just because something's using us to whack the Eye doesn't mean a thing.

But Papa Jack the survivor of the Pelennor Fields is a little more open minded.

We sit in comfortable silence, contemplating uncomfortable futures until the fire burns down and we go to our blankets.

11. The Sea of Nurnen

For reasons unknown, the Gondorians are counter-invading Mordor, rolling up the paths from Osgiliath up to the Black Gate to the north. After we rejoined the Company, we were instantly sent packing, off to the Black Gate to prepare for the confrontation.

I have no idea why the ravaged armies of the western nations are attacking a foe standing on strong walls and outnumbering them 200 to 1, but nonetheless, they are.

If rumors are accurate (and sometimes the grapevine is fairly knowledgeable), the "enemy" comes in two flavors: the force out of Gondor and her tributaries number 6,000 superb foot soldiers and 3,000 cavalry; and the force out of Rohan is 3,000 elite cavalry.

12,000 warriors. 12,000, in total. There are at least 150,000 uruks that can be mustered to the defenses of Mordor at this very moment, with untold more able to reach the defenses before the Gondorian coalition reaches striking distance. What the hell are they thinking?

Stupid bastards, get back to your walls! We need you intact when the revolution comes. They've been marching through Ithilien as bold as you please, routing the few outposts we had and proclaiming that the new king of Gondor was coming to hammer our faces in. It turns out, the reason we had been ordered out of Minas Morgul in the first place was to give the other team some bait to swallow. Had they taken a shot at charging through our former base, a host of uruks could have whipped down from the north and cut them off from supplies and reinforcements, leaving them to wither on the vine and be starved into submission. The Eye could have ended the war in a week had they occupied that death trap. But they were canny, or as canny as that load of bloody idiots can be. They kept marching north, swatting aside all the feeble resistance and reoccupying their lost lands.

And always, always shouting for the armies of Mordor to make way for Lord Elessar, the new king of Gondor.

There were very unkind words said of Elessar in our camp, I'll tell you that. The fool is going to get the only allies we have inside of a thousand miles slaughtered because he is incapable of grasping the rudiments of military strategy. All he's going to accomplish is making the Eye in Barad-dur stare intently at him for a couple of short weeks, after which will be naught but death and pain, the vast majority of which will be inflicted on him.

Goddamned *fool*.

...

Our Annals are located at last. Bullet offered a bribe to the right Southron- our spy laid a finger on the exact location; the vault in the Tower of Grufoz, the northern-most port of the Sea of Nurnen. The Sea of Nurnen was, in our humble opinion, the only part of Mordor worth actually holding onto. The water there was undrinkable, but enough silt and other fertile funk got swept into its deltas from the Ephel Duath mountain range to make the surrounding areas viable for food production. We passed through the southern parts of Mordor on our way up two years ago, and we had all agreed it wasn't a bad place to live, provided that one does not mind a boot heel out of Barad-dur on the back of one's neck all the time.

The Lieutenant, Bullet, and Quartermaster have their heads together, trying to work out how to organize supplies for the march south. For there is no doubt in any of our minds that we were on the bounce. Our salvation is in sight, and there's not a one of us who's not eager and willing to get through Gorgoroth and lay siege to Grufoz.

Except, possibly, a few of the fifteen man team that were at Cirith Ungol. We had just *walked* through Gorgoroth, and now we have to about face and march right through it again. We weren't too pleased with the challenge, but we can't deny it's a prize worth suffering for.

...

We had been bogged down in intrigue and planning and such for the last few weeks, but now things are almost moving too quickly for us to handle. Slaz, Grog, and Goth had been given whole companies of a hundred uruks to command, and our revolution had seeped into their ranks almost from the word go. All three are coming with us, bringing the Company up to 450 fighters- much closer to its original strength. This is undeniably good news, but before it was a moderately sized group trying to sneak out of the front lines to desert- now it's a small army.

If the Lieutenant wasn't in his Gothmog armor in almost all of his waking hours, I think he would have ripped his hair out in frustration. We can either escape with a small and weakened force, and thus have serious difficulties taking the Tower of Grufoz. Or we can take enough warm bodies to get the job done and maybe have to fight our way out of here.

The solution, of course, is that there is no solution. No right answer. Only a host of bad ones.

The Lieutenant decides to bring them along, not necessarily because it's a smart move but because Slaz, Grog and Goth are brothers of the Company, and that means they deserve a chance to retake the Annals.

And that's when the ball really got rolling.

Shatarz, the former commander of Minas Morgul, saw that we were preparing to move south, and assumed that the revolution was on. He sent out word to all the cells inside the Morgul army and started drawing supplies to go with us.

We try to explain to him that this was our personal mission, not the revolution.

"No," he says. "You go now to seize Grufoz, yeah? Face-fuck the filthy slugs down in Nurnen, yeah? That's revolution business. It's on."

He laughs his big belly laugh, repeating to himself, "It's on, it's on, it's on."

The Lieutenant tries to explain again, taking off the Gothmog helmet to talk face to face. "This is not the revolution. Shatarz, this is a raid, alright? We bust down the door, kill any witnesses, grab the Annals, and we're gone. We're not setting up shop there."

"Why not?" Shatarz's eyes glint suspiciously at us.

"Because we'd be outnumbered 100 to 1, for starters. We can't provoke the loyal uruks until we're ready for them, and right now is not the time."

"Who cares about being outnumbered?"

The Lieutenant and Bullet exchange glances. Had they picked an idiot to ally with?

Shatarz sees their uneasy glances. "Listen, listen, *luftig-hai*. I was Morgul commander for years, fuck yeah? I ran a fortress. Fucking understand?"

He waits for a response, switching his gaze back and forth from each of us. No response is forthcoming. Shatarz sighs.

"Morgul commander deals with supplies. Food, water, arrows, whetstones, boots, cloth, armor, fire oil, axle grease, paper, everything. Endless fucking supplies, fucking day in day out; supplies bullshit. But I am a veteran of the motherfucking Mines of Moria. I laid siege to that dwarf stronghold for almost a year. I saw how it worked, even if that *snaga* Urburz up in Barad-dur didn't. We had food- nasty food, maggoty bread, but edible. The dwarves did not. We could drink good water till we were slaked; the dwarves could not. When we broke a sword, a new one was issued, because we could trade with the shitbrain goblins up in Gundabad. The dwarves had to pick up shovels and rocks when their weapons broke. We could shower them with arrows, because we had tens of thousands of them, and could get more as we needed. They had to conserve the few that they had. We killed them all, trapped them like rats in a pit, because we had all kinds of shit to consume and *they did not!* Do you not understand? If we dominate the southlands around the Sea of Nurnen, who gives a flying fuck how many of them there are? They may have more warriors, but we will be eating three meals a day, and they'll be eating dust and bitter air."

The Lieutenant's eyes widen. Evidently that tactic hadn't occurred to him. Possibly because he was still envisioning 150 of us against 100,000 of them, and hadn't considered exactly how to use the rebel uruks we had amassed. "How many uruks can we muster on short notice?"

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Shatarz hisses approval. "Just under 10,000, not counting you."

I laugh aloud. "10,000. Well, I'll be damned."

Bullet grunts an inquiry. No one can communicate without words like he can.

"When Soulcatcher almost destroyed the Company, we got whittled down to the size of a street gang. We spent a decade just scraping by; sneaking around to scrawl insulting messages on back alley walls, kidnapping her sycophantic lackeys, and so on. Sleepy resurrected the Company by recruiting the Children of Hsien, and we returned to seek vengeance upon Taglios and Soulcatcher. By the time our new army met hers, we were almost exactly 10,000 strong."

The Lieutenant cocks his head at me, drumming his fingers on his ebony helm. Then he says, "Well, let's hope that history repeats itself."

...

We wait until Shatarz procures the supplies we'll need, then set off. We take as much as we can carry and still be able to quick-march. We have a great deal more than we need, because our entire strategy will depend on the hosts of Mordor starving to death before they can beat us. We manage to put a moderate dent in their stockpiles. Every little bit helps.

We hit the road and never look back. Sapper had been preparing for the occasion for weeks and had been producing some kind of magical caltrops to lay behind us to slow down any pursuit. He had more or less taken over the armories of Minas Morgul and started producing them nonstop since he came up with them. He would take a small sliver of iron and put a little bit of mojo into it- enough to make it self sustaining from now till eternity. He would then take it and a few thousand more just like it and scatter them along our back trail- anyone who stepped on or near one would get zapped hard enough to knock them flat on his ass and stay there for a good long while. It could be lethal if they get zapped multiple times or if the guy in question is unlucky enough to make direct contact with the sliver, but it's purpose was not to kill outright. An uruk who got zinged with the sliver might lose his foot, or be rendered partially paralyzed, or break every other bone on his left side, or any of a dozen other effects that Sapper dreamed up.

A dead man can be stripped of his gear and abandoned. A wounded man has to be carried and cared for. Once the pursuers start racking up casualties, they won't be able move as quickly as us. And once they get popped by them five times in the first ten

miles, they'll start slowing down to check for metallic slivers before rushing ahead. And since Sapper's caltrops are so small and hard to notice, and can be covered with dust or pebbles while retaining effectiveness, they'll still get stung even if they stop and look around for them.

Oh, Sapper, you are an evil genius. This is why we keep you around.

We reckon that, between the Gondorian invasion, Sapper's tricks, and the general unpleasantness of Gorgoroth, we'll get across the desert lands and entrenched in Nurnen before any significant counter-attack gets underway.

...

The commandos who are to ride ahead of the main body are as follows:

Saintly, because skirmishing and raiding are his speciality.

Bop, because both Saintly has worked well with him before.

Arrowhead and Kisander, who will provide any long range slaying needs; Arrowhead being armed with Blink's old crossbow and Kisander being a dab hand with a longbow. Kisander will shoot the lighter missiles faster while Arrowhead uses the slow-reloading ballista.

Grog and Goth, because they can move about more freely in the open, since the inhabitants of Grufoz are overwhelmingly uruk.

Paleboy, Mahmoud, and Landshark- three men with no speciality other than basic infantry, but we anticipate that stealth and sneak attacks will only get us so far into the Tower of Grufoz before it will come down to which side can kill the other more effectively. To that end, all three were chosen for their ferocity and aptitude for violence. Paleboy in particular has a bloodthirsty streak a mile wide.

Nine men- make that seven men and two uruks- no, make that nine Black Company brothers should be all we need to seize our Annals and hold them; at least, hold them long enough for Salim to show up with the reinforcements. If Saintly fails to reach the Annals in time, then the commander in Grufoz might set our history alight once he sees Salim's boys charging.

They can do it. Saintly's bravos are sharp as blades, sly as snakes, and strong as lions. I know they can do it.

But there is a world of difference between being able to do something, and actually succeeding in something. You ever watch a duel to the death between equal swordsmen, you know that either man *can* win, but it's a certainty that one of them *will* lose.

I dislike wagering my family's present, past and future on whether nine guys can infiltrate a defended position, no matter how much confidence I have in their ability.

...

The commandos set off hours ago. I should have been with them. I'm the Annalist, it's my job to watch after the Annals, isn't it? I can help. I'm Tiger Hand, for fuck's sake, I can slay as skillfully as any of them. Who cares quickly that I'm too stiff, sore, and aching to move quickly and quietly...

I am so sick of being an old man. I can still feel every cut I've ever got, like my skin is stretching tight anywhere that I've been scarred. Every broken bone that I ever mended now throbs, reminding me that I'm slowly dying, and that one day the sun will rise and the earth will turn and my brothers will go about their business, but I will not be among them. I'll be lying still and cold, and my face will be slack like an idiot's. And that's not even counting all the shit that's going on on the inside of me, either. Heart and liver and lungs and kidneys and eyes; so many ways for my body to fail me at critical moments.

I am too goddamn old and too goddamn worn out to be of any aid to my endangered Company, and I think that this fact alone hurts me worse than the merely physical pain of aging.

...

"Papa?"

Zimraphel is standing there, in the entrance of my tent, the setting sun lending her slim body a certain flashing glory, and obscuring all but a glimmer of it. She really was a looker, our Zim. She reminds me a little too much of Oak Leaf, but I can survive that. Tonight, though, she looks more scared than pretty.

Not a good sign. In the short time I've known her, she's always had a good reason to look like that. I beckon her inside my own private quarters.

"Zim, dearheart. Better get in before the sun sets all the way and you freeze to death on the spot." An exaggeration, but not by much. Nights on the Plateau of Gorgoroth are vicious.

She favors me with a bright, yet strained smile as she steps inside the warmth of my tent. "Can I talk with you?"

"Of course. Just sit yourself down on my comfy Annalist's chair. I'll take the footstool." Since I'm about half a foot taller than she is, this puts us approximately face to face. "What's up?"

She pauses for an instant, then what's on the inside spills out quietly but intensely. "Shaggy's dead I killed him and I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry." Tears threaten her eyes for a moment, but Zim has had a lot practice controlling her emotions.

I admit that when I first heard her say this, I assumed that she had tried to knife him again and succeeded. Not so, as it turned out. Shaggy picked up some kind of infection on the ride through Gorgoroth- the bandaging that Pork Chop stuck on him was good, but apparently not good enough. Open wounds on this hellish plateau are deadly.

"But I killed him," she says, eyes wide and jaw clenching. "I stabbed him, back in Morgul. If he hadn't been wounded that disease couldn't have infected him. I killed Shaggy, Papa, and I'm so sorry."

"You've taken good care of him, yeah? While he was laid up in the medic wagon?"

"Of course. Least I could do."

"Did he seem even slightly resentful towards you? You know, 'Argh, ye bitch, yer the one who put me here!' Anything like that?" I take care to exaggerate Shaggy's voice to ridiculous levels, to avoid giving offense. Zim doesn't laugh at my imitation, but nor does she collapse into tears. I'll just have to accept that as good enough.

"No," she says. "Nothing like that. Except one time he joked that I was either the best knife-fighter of all time, by catching him by surprise, or the worst, since I couldn't even kill him. I'm pretty sure he was joking, except it wasn't exactly funny. But..."

"But there was no malice on his end, was there?"

"No, I guess not."

"If Sapper took up necromancy and brought his spirit here, do you think he would rage and curse you and blame you for your prowess with a scalpel?"

"No."

I spread my hands, as though to say, *Well then.*

She leans her head forward, clutching her temples in both hands and hissing out a sigh. "I know it's not my fault. I get that, I'm not a fool. But nonetheless. My stupidity back in Morgul cost him his life. Whether he holds me accountable or not. So... It's as though I'm trying to get someone to accuse me.

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It's like I want someone to acknowledge my part in this stupid, petty tragedy."

"Ach, well. Probably won't happen. If anything, the Lieutenant might chew out Pork Chop for not checking his bandages, but I doubt it'll happen. Disease carries us off without consulting us first, and every soldier accepts that as, well, as just the cost of doing business."

I scoot my footstool closer to her and grasp her hand. "I don't have any great insight to give, nor any magic incantation to make you feel less responsible. Just know that no one here will be angry with you, because no one here has cause to be angry with you, and holy shit wait a minute."

Her hand is very warm. Unless she's been holding it over a bonfire for the last ten minutes, she's feverish as all hell. And there was me thinking her sweat came from the afternoon desert sun.

"Shit." I place my hand against her forehead to double check.

"Papa? What's wrong?"

...

"Fever. Fucking hell. I think you picked something up on the plateau. Come on, up, up. We need to get you to Pork Chop."

Pork Chop confirmed my diagnosis.

"Yep, It's a fever, alright." Pork Chop nods to me appreciatively- as though from one medical expert to another.

"I just *told* you that."

"Yeah, but you didn't know that it was the same shit we picked up the first time through."

I think back. "Oh. She got whatever killed Wallace?"

"Yep. You, me, and the whole Company are immune to it, and the uruks don't seem to be able to catch it. But she wasn't with us then. Fair game for the disease."

"But you can keep her alive, yeah?"

Pork Chop eyes me suspiciously. "Is that a trick question?"

"No, I honestly want to know."

"Of course I can fucking keep her alive. The first time around, me and Sapper stopped the contagion dead in its tracks without any warning or information. Now that I know how to treat it, she's going to be fine. Why would you ask me such a stupid question?"

"I don't know," I say. "I suppose I was worried about her."

"Yeah, well. She won't be dancing about on street corners or going back to the shieldwall anytime soon." He cackles. "But she'll make it through with little to no fuss. Relax, Papa. She's in my care now."

"What you were telling me was comforting until that last part."

My wit is rewarded with a small pity-chuckle and then he tells me to get out of his tent before I contaminate his working environment.

...

Two days later, Saintly's squad returned from their raid.

We had not been idle in that time. Bullet started up a rudimentary training program for the uruks, so that they could use combat expertise instead of brute savagery. Trench systems and stone walls were put up. Sapper scattered his caltrops randomly to the north to fuck up the inevitable enemy advance. Maps were made of the surrounding areas, plans to seize the farmland and food stockpiles and enemy fortifications were made. None of it involved me, so I sat in my tent and brooded.

The first I knew of Saintly's return was when he showed up at my tent entrance. He was still travel stained; dust and grimy sweat lay heavy on his face, and he looked like he had just ridden through a duststorm.

"Papa Jack." His voice cracked from thirst.

I spring awake on my bunk and take in his appearance. I try to feign nonchalance. "Saintly, didn't know you got back. How'd you do?"

Saintly's eyes water and he turns his face away. "Papa..."

I feel cold grease churning in my belly. "What?"

"We failed." He shook his head. "I failed. The son of a bitch uruk in charge of Grufoz had orders to burn them if any trouble developed. I couldn't find the... I couldn't find the fucking vault in time."

"No," I breathe. "Oh merciful god, no." I feel tears well up. I don't even try to fight them as they roll down my cheeks.

Almost one thousand years of unbroken brotherhood and heritage. Up in smoke. Wasted. Like they had never even been. Once the current crop of the Black Company dies off, we will not even be remembered. I have dedicated almost a third of my

life to the Black Company, and we died under my watch.

"It was horrible," Saintly continues, staring into the tent wall. "I got there just after the uruk lit the fire. I had to watch the paper burn, and burn. I choked on the inky smoke as I slew that fucking pyro. I'm sorry, Papa. I'm sorry."

"I..." What could I tell him? It's alright, it's not your fault? Fuck you, Saintly, you incompetent fool? There's nothing. No response is appropriate.

"With these hands, I held the ashes of yesteryear," he says, gazing at his filthy palms. "I held the future in my hands and I didn't react as the ashes burned me. I just stood, and surrendered myself to the eternal night. Oblivion is the best I can hope for." His lip quivers and his voice shakes.

Kisander bounces in, grinning widely. "Hey, Papa! How's it hanging?" Then he notices Saintly's stantensed up and breathing hard, on the verge of tears. "Whoa. What's his problem?"

Something clicks. I gaze intently at Saintly, who now flings his arms upwards toward heaven and wails. "*The very stones cry out for mercy upon us! Yea, the sands of time have run out, and we are left as helpless babes, alone and abandoned in this heartless world, and left to fend for ourselves without the nurturing wing of the Black Company!*" He sinks to his knees and beats his chest.

I calmly draw my *kukri* knife. "Saintly. I suspect that I'm about to kill you messily. Is that going to be a problem?"

Kisander giggles.

Saintly grasps my shoulders and swells his chest in a very nearly convincing display of grief and sympathy. "Oh, Papa. Of course you out of all of us are hurt more by this terrible news. You have been driven mad with grief! You can no longer tell between friend and foe. Papa, it's me, Saintly! We can still remain together, bound by the ties of brotherhood, and warmed by our memories of our days of marching under our Standard."

"You got the Annals, didn't you."

He grins wide, like a frog. A bastard, son-of-a-bitching frog who deserves to be hung slowly. "Oh, yeah. Piece of cake."

"They're right outside the tent entrance, aren't they."

Kisander nods, beaming.

I sigh. I walk outside and study the old wagon that we keep our very spirit in. I lean into the wagon, touching the old papers and breathing in their scent- musty and old, yet oddly refreshing. I return to my waiting, smirking, soon-to-have-their-asses-kicked brothers.

"That," I say with as much dignity as I can muster, "was not funny, Saintly."

He shrugs cheerfully. "That's what you might call a matter of opinion."

12. The Battle of Mordor: Preparation

The first thing to do after the return of the Annals was to officially promote the Lieutenant to Captain.

Bullet would also be making Lieutenant, but we'll still be calling him Bullet. His *nom de guerre* is too fitting and too firmly ingrained to abandon upon promotion. Oh, when he's parading the men they'll say "Yes, Lieutenant!" instead of "Yes, Sergeant!", but when they talk about him around their campfires he'll still be Bullet, after the lead ammo he used for his sling when first joined up 18 years ago. His name fits him too well to abandon.

Not so with the former Lieutenant. He's the Old Man now, until the day he dies. He gave up his former name and became universally known as the Lieutenant last time he was promoted, and he'll be doing it again now. For that matter, I can barely remember what his name was before he was Lieutenant.

Now that we have Annals to swear on, we have ourselves a little ceremony in the courtyard of the Tower of Grufoz. Amin, the Standard Bearer, holds his charge rigidly vertical, our black flag snapping to the west in the harsh wind and then fluttering down limply. Our shattered ranks, just 134 men including the three uruk brothers, stand at attention- shields exactly parallel to their bodies, spears planted in the ground and tilted at 15 degrees. Right hand on moldy papers, I ask the Lieutenant and Bullet if they are dedicated to the survival and prosperity of the Black Company; they say they are. I ask if they are able and willing to command and lead their brothers wisely; they say they are. I ask them if they would be willing to sacrifice themselves for the good of the Black Company; they say they would. I declared them the Captain and the Lieutenant respectively, and we pack up the Annals and fall out.

God, that doesn't even begin to describe what really happened that day. We were resurrected, just like the phoenix of lore. From the ashes of our time

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in Barad-dur's service we now arise. The Company is safe again, and this is where we formally shut the door in the face of yet another threat to our existence, mark it as read, and stick it in the Annals where all such threats belong. Our defiance lies not only in our force of arms, but in this simple, seemingly redundant ceremony.

If I were in a poetic bent of mind, I would say that our very souls swam freely in our ancient ways and familiar pomp.

Good thing I'm not poetic.

However, just like in real life, for every silver lining there's a dark cloud; morale plummeted immediately after the ceremony. I would even say that, based on the faces I could see, our lads had their spirits dashed *during* the ceremony.

Every one looked tired; pinched faces and weathered skin and sour mouths. That was the big difference from our lives before we came to Mordor. Every one of us looked the same way I feel every morning. Like they were in for a long, hard day and they didn't want to move, because if they moved they would have to start it now. Between the blood-soaked ground at Pelennor and the Eye's betrayal, we had been put through the wringer, and we all knew that the worst may be yet to come. We had previously pinned all our hopes on recovering the Annals, now that we have them everyone's wondering just what exactly we had been hoping for. As the men stood there watching the promotion, I could almost read their weary thoughts:

That's it? That pile of paper? How are we going to win with that, how will that save us?

It won't, I would have replied. Only we can save ourselves. Oh, it may mean that a handful of survivors can take the Annals off the battlefield and rebuild the Company for posterity, but that's not much comfort to these painfully young men who suddenly realize that the path they've been walking isn't a paved road, but a tight rope.

I think what it comes down to is, for the first time the rank and file have a clear view of what we upper ranks have been planning all this time. And since we've been fueling our schemes with nought but desperation and hope...

Still, they're Company to the core, all of them. They'll stand firm when standing's needed.

...

The ancient training drills of the Black Company resound once more, this time from the mouths of uruks.

"Left!" Bullet bellows.

"*Easy!*" the uruks holler back in unison as they run grooves into Bullet's makeshift boot camp in the fields outside Grufoz.

"Left!"

"*Easy!*"

"Left!"

"*Easy!*"

Pause; "Right, left!"

"*TOO easy!*"

Bullet's a big believer in the "never say die" routine; that is to say, if the troops under his command continually reinforce to themselves how tough and brave and intelligent they are, they will tend to act tough and brave and intelligent when it counts. For instance, this group of uruks has been running non-stop for the last hour, shouting to themselves how easy it is.

To the south of Bullet's position, Salim is taking a more bloodthirsty route, with the uruks doing the counting off;

"*One!*"

"Let the bodies hit the!"

"*Two!*"

"Let the bodies hit the!"

"*Three!*"

"Let the bodies hit the-" "*-FLOOR! One!*"

Whereas Kisander prefers rhyming whilst running;

"I want to be an uruk ranger!"

"*I want to be an uruk ranger!*"

"Fill my life with death and danger!"

"*Fill my life with death and danger!*"

"Uruk ranger!"

"*Uruk ranger!*"

"Death and danger!"

"*Death and danger!*"

"I want to be a battle medic!"

"*I want to be a battle medic!*"

"Score some funky anesthetic!"

"Score some funky anesthetic!"

"Battle medic!"

"Battle medic!"

"Anesthetic!"

"Anesthetic!"

I tell you, sitting in the shade with a cup of cool water is even better if you also get to watch about a thousand guys getting their asses whupped, while you just stretch out and relax. With age and rank comes privilege, and I don't mind admitting that I'm enjoying it more than I should.

The thing is, despite the fact that uruks are tough, fit, and physically powerful, in every battle we've ever seen them in they die like suicidally depressed flies. Bullet is trying to work out a way to give our uruks a fighting chance. Apart from the general conditioning, which they handle just fine, there's also the weapons training.

Most of the uruk recruits came prearmed with small axes, scimitars, and short spears. They know how to use them well enough, but they rely on ferocity and brute strength too much. A slim wee punk like Kisander or Webfoot can outfight any uruk we have, simply because they've had proper instruction and precision drilled into them for years. We don't have years, we have a week at best. So we make do with what we got. Specialized instructors interview each and every one of the recruits and find out what each is using. Then they show the uruks four or five simple yet effective strikes that the users need to practice.

And practice.

And practice.

Seriously, two hundred yards to my left there are four hundred uruks practicing the same five axe swings over and over again. Behind me are three hundred spearmen who are getting the command "Strike feet! Strike thigh! Strike torso! Strike face!" imprinted on their minds. Soon, their instructor will start fucking with them, barking out "Face! Feet! Feet! Torso! Feet! Thigh!" as rapidly as speech will allow. Any uruk who fucks up too often gets to duel their instructor with the wooden training swords, and our drill sergeants know precisely what they're doing when it comes to fencing.

The uruk recruits will be slaying invisible opponents until Bullet finds some good target dummies to use. We tried using blocks of wood, but not only did they not last long at all, they also dulled and dinged up the uruks' shoddy weapons in the bargain. So while Quartermaster scoured Grufoz for

appropriate material for target practice, and also decent weapons to use, Bullet tried rigging up some loyalist corpses onto poles and letting the recruits hack at them. But since the bodies didn't even last a quarter hour before falling apart, well, they'll just have to envision their opponent in their mind's eye until further notice.

Most of the training can probably be glossed over, since the specifics of the training we're using are in the Annals somewhere, but there is one episode that I think pretty much captures the semi-transformation from slave race to Black Company brothers the uruks are struggling to make.

I was nearby when Bullet stopped his company for a water break. The uruks fall on the small pond, slurping and gulping and sucking and splashing.

"A good sign," Bullet tells me, gesturing towards the writhing mass in the center of the pond. "Means I'm finally starting to tire them out."

"A good sign," I tell him. "But still not a pretty sight."

"Aye. Fall in!"

They fall in. Sort of. They never actually learned the basics of falling in and standing elbow to elbow at the position of attention, but the point is that they're in front of him, attentive, and listening for orders. I suppose that's what counts.

"How was that run, lads?"

One particularly ugly uruk near the back pants out, "I'm fucking fagged, sir!"

"Don't call me sir; I'm not an officer, I work for a-" He stops short. "I *am* an officer, ain't I? You just lucked out, boy! One way or another, 'I'm fucking fagged' is incorrect. Pump out fifty push-ups for being a such a fucking *snaga*." That order, had it been given after a run like that to a new recruit who's out of shape, may have been harsh and unforgiving. You can't expect boots to have the same capabilities on day one that they need to have by the end of training. However, if given to an uruk with the biceps of an ape and the hardness of a small bull, it's more along the lines of a practical joke. Either way, the uruk gets down and starts counting them out.

"So, how was that run, lads?"

Uneasy silence. Then;

"Easy!" one growls.

"What the fuck? That sounded like only Zar spoke up! How was that run?"

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"Easy!"

"How easy?"

"Too easy!"

"That is fucking correct! Come on!"

And he and his uruks started their run again. I suspect that Bullet's purpose here is not necessarily to beef our uruks up, but rather to discover what their limits are, so that we have a better idea of what their physical breaking point is. It wouldn't do to hurl them into the fray when they're just about to collapse, nor to allow them valuable rest time in battle when they're are still going strong.

Apparently I have a masochistic streak; I decide to burn some weakness off and go running with Bullet's troop, on the grounds that I have nothing better to do. That's why I was on hand when Zar screwed up.

During a pause in the cadence chanting, Zar pipes up in the back of the formation. "Sir!"

"What do you want, a fucking break?"

"No, sir! I was just wondering sir, if it were possible, if we could-"

"Will you fucking spit it out? If we lose our cadence because of you, your mates are going to suffer for it."

"Can we do an uruk marching song instead, sir? One that a lot of us know by heart?"

Trot, trot, trot, trot. Bullet mulls it over. "Alright, Zar, my lad, you're Acting Sergeant for the duration of your little sing-along. Break out of formation and run where I am now."

As Zar starts running in the platoon leader's position, I hear Bullet mutter to Zar, "I'm only allowing this because not many of your comrades have a fucking clue what initiative is. You stick your neck out like that, it makes me think you got potential. Don't prove me wrong, boy." Then louder, "The company is yours, Acting Sergeant!"

And, hoo boy. It turns out that uruk marching songs are not up to Bullet's exacting standards. Nor to mine, come to that.

Here are the lyrics, as best as I can remember them:

*"Where there's a whip- there's a way!
Where there's a whip- there's a way!
Where there's a whip-
We don't want to go to war today! But the Lord of the Lash says, nay nay nay!
We're going to march all day, all day, all day.*

Where there's a whip there's a way.

*A crack on the back says, we're going to fight!
We're going to march all day and night, and more!
For we are the slaves of the Dark Lord!"*

If these Annals have given you any idea of Bullet's character, you know exactly how badly Zar just screwed up.

The song is jaunty, though, I'll give them that. Very energetic, very bouncy. I could see myself eating up the miles with a melody like that, and when sung in the uruks' deep voices it packs a certain punch. But the lyrics, man, the lyrics are fucked up in ways uncountable.

I think the only reason Bullet didn't halt the column after the first line was because he was convinced that he must have been mishearing the words.

"Company," he bellows, "halt!"

The ranks shuffle to a confused and uneasy stop.

"What. In the motherfucking hell! Was that. Anyone?" He gazes balefully at his uruks, daring someone to answer him. No one is foolish enough to open their mouths. "Where there's a whip there's a way. Fucking hell. Zar. Come to me right now."

It turns out, uruks don't show fear exactly the same way we do. They do that same sort of hunched over look that we do, like you're expecting something to be thrown at you. But they also have a habit of twisting their neck down to protect the throat with their jaw line. Also, their eyes don't get wider when scared; they squint. Until Zar approached Bullet, I didn't know that about uruks.

"Zar, I really need you to understand this," Bullet tells him in an almost conversational tone. "In the Black Company, we do not whip our brothers into battle. Do you comprehend?"

Zar eyes are almost entirely shut. "Yes, sir!"

"Do you understand why?"

Zar visibly strains to find an answer that won't fuck him over. If he says yes, and is told to elaborate, he's screwed. If he says no, he is screwed anyway. He decides that honest ignorance is a better shield against Bullet than pretended knowledge. "No, sir!"

Bullet's hand whips out like a viper and snatches Zar ear. He pulls the uruk close, very close. "Because that's that's how conscripts fight. That's how the weak fight. That's how *incompetents* fight. Did we fucking conscript you, Zar?"

"No, sir!" Here, at last, was a question he knew the answer to.

"Are you a fucking weakling?"

"No, sir!"

"Are you a fucking incompetent?"

"No, sir!"

"Then why, little uruk, do you feel the need to be fucking whipped into a fight!"

"I do not, sir!"

"Oh, fucking hell," Bullet sighs. "I do believe that it's time for an object lesson."

Bullet runs them all the way back to the training base. Then he runs them back to Grufoz. Then he runs them into the Tower armory.

"Papa," he addresses me calmly, ignoring the gasps and moans from the uruk company. "Do us a favor and go in and liberate about ten spears and twenty leather thongs from Quartermaster, will you?"

When I come back out with an armful of polearms, Bullet drags Zar back out.

"Papa, throw Whipmaster here a spear."

Zar catches it one-handed, suddenly looking very worried. His neck is so tilted I'm worried he'll break it on accident.

"Zar," Bullet says in a clear, loud voice. "Break that spear. Go on, do it."

Warily, the diminutive uruk snaps the shaft across his knee.

"Well done."

A chorus of nervous laughter from the ranks- more from tension than amusement.

Bullet grabs two spears from me, binds them together with the leather thongs.

"Here," he says, shoving them roughly at Zar. "Break these now."

Zar brings the pair down as hard as he can on his right leg and abruptly has to hide his pain. The spear closest to him had splintered slightly on his femur, but the outside spear was untouched. He brings it down again, and again, and again, wincing each time, until both spears finally break. Zar pants heavily, shaking out his leg and letting the pieces fall to the ground.

Bullet takes the eight remaining spears, ties them together one by one by one. Once they're all attached, he rolls them all up and binds them into one thick, unwieldy mass of shafts.

He tosses the bound spears on the ground in front of Zar.

"Now break these."

Zar stares at the bunched up spears. He swallows, averts his eyes from Bullet, and says, "I can't, sir."

"You all take a good look at this, now," Bullet begins. "In battle, your friends will *depend* on you. If you choose to save your own hides and fuck your buddies... then you got no fucking place on the battle line! Not with us! But if you consider your buddies' skins to be more valuable than yours, and you're willing to risk life and limb to keep them safe, then you and whatever army you're fighting for will be fucking invincible. On the Pelennor Fields, when the Northern marines came and drove us back towards Osgiliath, we survived because not one of us was willing to abandon our brothers to their deaths. But your former army, well, you had to get your backs striped to even turn up. Of course the armies of Mordor broke and ran. They were conscripts. Every man jack of you wanted to stay alive and to hell with the guy next to you. *That is why we walked off that battlefield alive and 200,000 of your former comrades did not.*"

He stabs a finger out towards Zar's face. "Every time the lash comes out, you cut all the leather thongs and march into war as single spears. That is why you uruks die so fucking much. So stop reinforcing bad habits and *stop singing that hideous song*, you get me? Get it through your thick fucking skulls that you are *luftig-hai burzum* now. And you'll be marching into battle because if you don't, your brothers will suffer without you. Fall in. We're not running back to base, we're bloody sprinting."

The story of Bullet's spears got around quickly.

The next day, I heard a platoon of recruits singing a modified version of the inciting song:

*"Where there's a will- there's a way!
Where there's a will- there's a way!
Where there's a will-
We can't wait to go to war today! And the Luf! Tig!
Hai! say, fuck yeah yeah!
We're going to march all day, all day, all day!
Where there's a will there's a way.*

*A clap on the back says, we're going to fight!
We're going to march all day and night and more!
For we are the slayers of the Dark Lord!"*

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I reckon that Bullet must have gotten a kick out of that.

...

They may have nifty new Black Company badges (black background, white skull with vampire fangs, crimson flames in its mouth), they may have half a week's boot camp under their belts, and they may have been really inspired and shit, but the uruks aren't ready. Not by a long shot. But ready or not, the enemy was coming anyway.

A moderate sized host came down from the north, moving aggressively and speedily, aiming to take Grufoz before we got any hardcore defenses set up. They ran smack into a huge field of Sapper's caltrops, paused, and reconsidered. When they tried to flank us on our eastern side, they hit a decently prepared trench system that they couldn't punch through immediately. At which point they discovered that just because *they* couldn't move through the field of magical death doesn't mean *we* can't. Salim slammed a thousand uruks into the back of the enemy host, and then linked up with the defenders in the trenches. They hunted anything not wearing a flaming skull all the way back to the edge of Gorgoroth. Salim returned with tired soldiers and blown horses, still grinning like a madman. Losses on our side were relatively light.

That bought us a few days to prepare further. Salim celebrated by chopping off all the heads of the enemy soldiers fallen on our turf and planting them on a vast line of pikes, faces turned north. Let the next army know what's going to happen to them.

The bodies we'll use for target practice, for however long they last.

...

Prisoners of war are turning into an unexpected boon for us. There are quite a few of them; men, elves, and dwarves, all stuck in what amount to death camps. Oh, the Lidless Eye doubtless got some production out of them at little cost. But just like with the Moabs in Saintly's past, the point of the operation was not to profit Mordor, it was to make the prisoners suffer.

We saw men so skinny and malnourished that we honestly thought at first that the Eye was using necromancy to raise dead men from the ground. Their eyes had that thousand yard stare, like they were still gazing into the abyss they had been thrown into. Their midsections were missing four inches per side, and I wish to god I was exaggerating.

We're soldiers, and we've seen some of the most horrible things that people can do to each other. And hey, maybe we've even participated in it. But once we saw what the Dark Lord had done to these poor fuckers, our desire to ram some steel into his Eye is renewed and invigorated.

The men, mostly Gondorian peasants and colonists, are in no condition to fight for us, willing though they no doubt are. After we ease them back to a diet of more than scraps of pig slop a day, they can do some work for us. Every essential job done by a death camp survivor frees up an able-bodied uruk to be given a sharp stick and placed on the front line.

The dwarves and the elves, on the other hand, are a little more hardy and durable. Indeed, the elves appear so calm, collected, and graceful that we can hardly believe that they ever set foot inside one of those stinking hell holes. Yet the humans assure us that many of the Elder races had been mentors to them when they first arrived. Elves are deceptively young looking, it appears.

We've heard stories about the prowess of the elves and the toughness of the dwarves, so we offered them a straight up deal. If they fight under our command, then once we whip the balls off every army that the Dark Tower sends against us they can leave as they please. We've handed over a few cart loads of captured arms and armors and form both races into the Auxiliary Corps of the Free Army of Mordor. The Auxiliaries number just under five hundred, but I think it's safe to say they'll be worth more than mere numbers on the front lines.

...

Webfoot pitched an interesting idea to the Old Man, one which will likely prove pivotal in the coming campaign. Webfoot had seen the inventory lists that Quartermaster had drawn up, and noticed that we had a small fleet of commercial ships on hand.

Webfoot was a marine, a fighting man who grew up on the waves south of Umbar. He knew how ships worked, and he knew how to launch raids in an amphibious environment.

Give him just four hundred fighters, he says, and the enemy will never rest easy within ten miles of the shores of the Sea of Nurnen.

The Captain looks over the maps we've made, hard eyes scouring our future prospects. He's known from the start that our northern line will be pushed back, and I knew he had been searching for ways to counter-attack afterward.

He gives the go-ahead to start it up.

Webfoot grabs any Company man who has had any experience at all on the sea and gives him an instant promotion in the Navy of Free Mordor, and then starts recruiting uruks. He starts his pitch by saying he'll only accept the toughest, nastiest, craziest recruits available; pissants and weaklings need not apply. Once their pride has been challenged, he takes pains to explain to the applicants that their mission will be to raid and terrorize the enemy on his own territory- his marines will always be outpositioned and outnumbered- he can only make use of the baddest motherfuckers around. At which point all the recruits try to assure him that they *are* bad enough motherfuckers to make the cut...

Soon he has to start turning them away in droves, lest his ships capsizes from the weight.

Clearly, Webfoot missed his calling in life. He should have been a mountebank hawking snake-oil in the market, not a grunt in a mercenary outfit.

...

Our advanced scouts inform us that the Eye is fielding an enormous army and heading our way. Mixed force of trolls, uruks, wolf riders and Easterlings.

Wolf riders. For fuck's sake. We didn't even know that you could *use* wolves as cavalry. Maybe we wouldn't have gotten our asses kicked at Pelennor if we had had some goddamned wolf riders to counter the Rohirrim, but hey, what do we know about waging war?

Anyway, the enemy numbers almost 65,000 warriors, as best as our scouts can estimate.

We infer from the relatively low number of enemy troops that the Gondorian coalition hasn't been crushed. If they had already been slaughtered, then the Eye would take all 200,000 of his boys up north and bring them down on us.

But still. We're outnumbered six to one, and you'd better believe that makes us a little uneasy.

But we have Bullet's training to improve our boys fighting ability. We have Webfoot supporting us on the open sea. In the Annals we have almost a millennium of military tricks, advice, and strategy.

Aye, fuck 'em. We may face horrific odds, deadly hordes of bogeymen and slaving beasts, but they will be facing the resurrected Black Company.

13. The Battle of Mordor: Conflict

In this last period of calm before the storm, the Captain wants me to be absolutely clear on how the recruits fit into our ranks.

They are not Black Company brothers. Not yet.

They are on probation, so to speak. We are not willing to open wide and swallow 10,000 untested soldiers just fill our vacant ranks, no matter how much they are needed. And yet, we are not willing to go without them. So we've promoted them all to the rank of brevet-private and told them that if they don't disgrace themselves (and if they're still alive) by the end of the campaign, they will be sworn in without reservation. If they die, they will be posthumously promoted to the rank of private, and their name entered into the Book of the Slain.

Quibbling? Splitting hairs? Maybe. But we have always and we will always draw a clear line in the sand- if you're on one side you're one of us, if you're on the other side you ain't. As of right now, the uruks are standing directly atop the line, but the distinction must still be observed.

...

First contact, in the plains in between the shores of the Nurnen and the Plateau of Gorgoroth. Salim and 500 of his boys in the trenches against about 200 trolls and 2,000 wolves. The wolf riders couldn't flank us, because their steeds absolutely refused to go anywhere near Sapper's caltrops, which were still present from Salim's previous engagement. Nor could they break the lines- couldn't even get near the lines, in fact. All they could do was sit around and snarl at us, and hope they can rush any gap in the line and so savage everything in their path. Lucky for me, since being just five miles behind the lines means I would be in their path, they must rely on the trolls to break Salim first.

Salim holds the line for five hours straight, swapping axe blow for club smash, raining arrows on them as they retreat and as they advance. Quartermaster procured six ballista and had previously sent them up to the front with untrained crews and plenty of ammo. The ballista can only shoot twice a minute, but each shot can instantly kill a troll. They don't always find their target, and when they do it's not always fatal, but a half dozen of those big bastards dead every minute is nothing to sneer at.

Slaz and another thousand uruks burn every acre of farmland between Salim's lines and the fallback position to the ground. They booby-trap every source of shelter they can find, they poison every well, they dismantle every potential fortification to prevent it being used by the enemy.

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Scorched earth policy. After all, we're gambling that they will all starve before they kill us.

After there is nothing but smoldering ashes and blasted landscape in between Salim and safety, they go and relieve him.

Salim has lost a third of his force, but the trolls are in even worse shape. They are in no condition to do anything to disrupt Salim and Slaz from retreating at their leisure. As we withdraw, the frustrated wolves charge them head on. They are checked because Slaz had the foresight to arrange his boys into square, hoisting a bristling hedge of spear heads in all directions. The wolves ain't stupid enough to hurl themselves headfirst into a pike, and their riders can't get close enough to slash at the pikers, our crossbowmen and archers having made a point to target the ones holding bows first. They wheel and turn, churning up dirt and soaking up damage and circling the formation trying to break in, until our archers sting them enough to force them back to the captured trenches.

Once the wolves retreat, Salim orders his men to break formation and drag the wolf carcasses into the square, because the enemy can eat the dead wolves and we want them hungry.

Plus, after a fight like that, he's of the opinion that his boys have earned some steaks tonight.

Over all, it wasn't exactly a victory, and it wasn't exactly a defeat. They wanted to advance, and they did. We wanted to delay them and bloody them, and we did. Both sides achieved their objectives. This was nothing more than the opening moves in what was shaping up to be a long and bloody chess game. White sacrifices pawn for a forward position, and nothing more. Not that we'll be spinning it that way for general consumption. As far as our army is concerned, we just dealt the other side a body blow they'll spend months recovering from.

Still, now we have a rough idea of what our uruks are capable of. And the closer to Grufoz they get, the harder our defenses will be to crack.

Let the game begin, O Eye of Barad-dur. Come to us, and we'll show you the cost of murder and betrayal.

...

Just a general update. The enemy is pushing forward, we're slugging them in the nose and backing up. Nothing unexpected, nothing significant. The enemy is starting to slow down because they're marching on empty stomachs, but they're still getting supplies off of Gorgoroth, but that will get more and more difficult as they get further from their supply bases.

...

Yesterday, Sapper got his own private moment of glory.

We established a temporary stronghold in the plains of Nurn- a really sweet area. We held a low ridge that was steep enough to knock the wind out of anyone marching up it, and the ridge allowed us to shift units around out of view of the enemy. We could sally from any section of our line with no forewarning, and repel all but the most determined of attacks. Our ballista, now increased to 15 engines and placed on the high, flat hilltops, can reach out and touch anything they damn well pleased. The only real problem was the ridge's flanks. There was nothing to prevent the other team from just walking around our west or east and continuing on towards Grufoz, so this spot was purely short-term for us.

Ghazi was in command of a detachment on a certain hilltop, and he dropped the ball.

It's not his fault. He's a ranker, a grunt. He never even made noncom before promotions in the Free Army of Mordor were handed out like candy. Ghazi was placed in a bad situation and had to make a choice, left or right, and no one can blame him for choosing wrong.

Trolls and uruks were pouring up the slope at him, and his unit engaged them. He was so focused on his little area of the battlefield that he neglected to realize that the units to his left and right were withdrawing. The messenger from Salim never reached him, due to some sharp-eyed sniper on the other team. But his real mistake was when he realized that about 1,000 enemy fighters were descending on him from all sides. He should have disengaged and gotten the fuck out of there, but he curled his flanks in and formed square.

When they finally knocked the enemy back, Ghazi had lost over half his force, almost fifty men. He then tried to make a fighting retreat and rejoin his buddies to the southeast, and found himself unable to withdraw due to being the target of a three-pronged attack. Any attempt to fall back would likely have broken the inexperienced uruks. They simply had to stand their ground and die. This is where Sapper came in.

Sapper sees that some of our boys were in deep shit, so he works fast.

He grabs ten jars of olive oil from the supply wagon, which had been confiscated from a farm nearby.

He waves his hands over them, whispering, "Hocus-pocus, Alakazam!" or whatever he says to get the magic flowing.

He goes up to the nearest company, tells them that they are under his direct command now.

They rush up to a hilltop overlooking Ghazi's plight.

Sapper's new command hurls down the ten enchanted olive oil jars onto the enemy ranks. The uruks of the Red Eye recoil and look up, and see a wildly grinning midget flipping them off, with just 50 very nervous troops backing him up. Obviously, I cannot know with any certainty what went through their minds, but I imagine they were enraged at first- this fucker throws shit at us, and challenges us? Let's chop this little prick into jerky.

Then, I like to imagine that the smell of what they've been doused with sinks in; it smells suspiciously like naptha. Few have seen what the Harad fire can do to people, but most have handled it personally; it's stored in great quantities in every fortress in Mordor.

I genuinely enjoy envisioning the scene. First they snarl savagely upwards at the wizard, preparing to charge, and they sniff themselves. Then they sniff themselves a little more carefully. Then they look up again and the wizard *is now juggling fireballs*.

They retreat. Oh, I can pretty up the language, give long and snarky descriptions to their fear, but that's what it ultimately comes down to. They smell the "naptha", and run for their lives.

Sapper's been running around a lot, making his special little caltrops and helping construct defenses. He exhausted, but I imagine a minor spell to change something's scent is a great deal less taxing for him than lighting up a holocaust of destructive thaumaturgy.

I mention this not only to give all due credit to Sapper's quick thinking, but also so that future brothers of mine can put this trick in their arsenal. All you need to pull it off is a minor sorcerer, a smallish quantity of liquid, and balls hanging down to your knees.

...

Saintly took off last night. He took Sapper, a newly back on his feet Spike (no Bop, though; he had landed a commission in the Free Mordor Army), Arrowhead and Kisander, and about 50 uruks. He then hared off to do what he does best- raid and terrorize his enemies until they are too ragged to think straight. He and his bravos were stationed on the extreme right flank, near the Lithui River to the north. They followed the river upstream and then headed west, cutting in behind the army of Mordor as wide as possible.

Bullet lets me in on the plan almost as an afterthought for posterity's sake. Saintly won't be engaging regular infantry if he can help it. Instead he'll wait for them to move further south towards Grufoz and then move into position near the Plateau of Gorgoroth; there's a narrow section in between mountain ranges that he intends to patrol regularly. He's going to burn supply trains and ambush messengers as soon as the other team gets settled into a routine.

They've been planning it since the beginning, Saintly and Bullet and the Captain. They've set up food caches in the Ash mountains, and in addition Saintly's crew will dine heartily on any food they capture. Saintly, in case my descriptions of him have been unclear, is a very resourceful fellow. He'll be out of contact with the Captain until the end of the campaign, but then again he's not a man in need of constant supervision.

We'll miss Sapper, though. Wizards are in short supply. But he'll do more good as a force multiplier in our little guerrilla band than in the wide open battles that are coming up.

...

March and countermarch, defend and withdraw. It's starting to wear on us. The casualty ratios favor us, because we're better trained and are using tactics more sophisticated than charging headlong at the other guys. But we're in the same basic position that the Gondorians were in, in that we can swap five of their guys for one of ours and still lose.

But fuck the odds, says I. The Black Company is slyer, meaner, tougher, and nastier than Gondor could ever be. If they could beat Mordor, so can we.

...

And now we're settled in at Grufoz. We don't intend to stay long.

You see, Grufoz is only useful in that it has lots of armories and a sizable population, most of whom lit out east somewhere once the revolution stormed through. If you destroy the armories, it's not actually profitable to spend lives and time to take it. There once was useful farmland in the surrounding area, but now not only are there no farmers around to sow and reap, we've burned the crops down.

Grufoz is functionally worthless, but the enemy host *thinks* it's essential to seize it no matter what the cost.

As any con man worth the name can tell you, there's nothing sweeter than charging a man an arm and a leg for sweet fuck all.

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The plan is, we dig in, stand firm long enough to force them to commit reserves, then bug out lickety split. Then Salim slides about 2,000 men into their flank from down south. We kick the door in, kill anyone we find, steal anything useful, then vanish back south. At which point, they will either commit down south and so extend their lines of supply even farther; try to cross the Lithui river and carry on down the eastern shore of the Sea of Nurnen; or stay in place, psychologically paralyzed and uncertain, slowly starving to death. We're hoping they try to cross the Lithui, because then not only do their supplies get stretched paper-thin, they'll also have to cross the river itself, which Webfoot will enjoy immensely. We anticipate them heading south towards the Ephel Duath river. No matter what, we're ready for them.

...

Grufoz fell, much sooner than intended. They brought up a heavy hitter sorcerer who blazed a breach through the stone wall and then sent in the trolls.

The sorcerer was both human and white, as far as we could tell. That likely means Black Numenorean. That likely means centuries of perfecting his art and honing his skill. It's just as well we sent Sapper away- he would have been massively outclassed, protection detail or no.

Webfoot evacuated the lot of us, four hundred at a time, dropping us off ashore to the south and then going back for more. The street to street fighting was in our favor, since the troll companies had all gotten mauled coming in through the gap in the wall. Only uruks were trying to break our improvised lines near the docks, and they all had to be whipped into the fight. The Black Numenorean hadn't wanted to close distance on us and risk getting sniped or skewered in such a narrow fighting area, so he sent in swarms of battle fodder to do his dirty work instead.

Still, casualties on our side were light. Meaning only about 600 of us fell to about 1,400 of them.

600. Six percent of our total number died in a single day. Not very encouraging.

A defeat, though not a fatal one, I would say. We had intended to cost them time and effort, and force them to commit more heavily to the north, and we failed.

And on a completely separate note, I hope that the salt air doesn't ruin this document. I should probably make a copy of it once I get inland.

I imagine that we'll be setting up new lines down in the cities to the south. Our flank by the Sea of Nurnen won't be easily pressed, because of Webfoot's presence, so we can commit troops to the center and left. It's a very good thing that Quartermaster found and constructed so many shovels, because we're certainly using them a lot.

It will take a while for the other team to work up the energy necessary to attack. Saintry's started his little guerilla campaign, so they've been missing a few meals lately, running low on arrows and can't replace their worn out boots. It's hard to march on an empty stomach and in crappy boots.

...

A few quick strikes and counter strikes to the northeast. We had them on the run, chopped them up good and sent them packing, then got struck full on by a battalion of wolves. I can't learn the details because there are few to be had- nothing but terse messages from our troops out there on the left flank. We've hurt each other bad, that's all I know for sure. We only withdrew from the fight when that son of a bitch Numenorean showed up and uncorked a few surprises on us.

The exact second the Captain found out the heavy hitter was miles to the north, he struck out hard at the troops opposite him on the grounds that we might as well get your licks in in while the rate is cheap. Get the message across that every place that he is absent from is in peril. Run the little bastard ragged trying to be everywhere at once.

Webfoot decided to go for broke and raid Grufoz, which had no defenses against naval attack, because before we came along there was no enemy on the water to defend against. He unloaded his men onto the docks and scattered the surprised guards. He then tossed about a half ton of stockpiled food in the ocean and then hightailed it before reinforcements showed up. On the way back to southern waters, he stops and launches raids inland, ambushing enemy troops on the march and raking them viciously. And then looting their corpses for any food they were carrying.

His marines are now unbearably smug, but in a good way.

...

"So what's it like?" I ask Angnar in our camp near the Duath river. "Working with uruks. Fighting alongside them. Aren't you bitter enemies, or something?"

Angnar is the capo of the Auxiliary Corps- an elf. He's short, but not as short as an uruk; thin as a spear; blonder than any human would have a right

to be. He has also spent the last five centuries suffering in the labor camps, so it's a little disconcerting when he turns his empty, haunted gaze on you.

"A little," he says, shrugging. He is graceful in his every movement; like watching a panther wade into a pool. I would judge him to be a very dangerous man with whom to start any kind of shit at all. I was glad that he and his elves and dwarves were on our side. "I've spent so much time dreaming about killing them all, it's been a difficult adjustment to make."

"And yet you wouldn't know it to look at you."

"There's precedent for it. Orc and elf side by side on the line," he says in his light, almost musical voice. His soft blue eyes fall on me, giving me the chills. I'm not sure if Angnar has been rendered permanently scary-eyed from his time in torment, or if all elves are like this, or if Angnar is a psycho even by elf standards. Angnar has the same look that sharks do- cold, emotionless, black as pitch. Yes, I know I just wrote that his eyes are blue. But under the blue, there's nothing but night.

"Really?" I cock my head. "That's news to me. You hear them talk about it, elves have been hunting uruks since eternity began."

"True, true," he sighs. He gazes lazily at the uruks who have split themselves into small groups around the campfires. We can't hear their conversation, but having been in their situation for forty years straight I know what they are talking about- old friends, their chances of winning tomorrow, how much they hurt, how they wish they could expect some goddamned support from the idiots over in wherever. Well, actually, I suppose Angnar might be able to hear them- elves are gifted like that. Angnar quirks a corner of his mouth up. "The current crop of uruks know nothing of the past. They have no history, not the way we do." He laughs shortly. "The way we do. What a foul jest. I haven't had a people to call my own since Mordor was established so long ago. I've had to make my own family out of my unfortunate comrades in suffering."

"I hear that."

"Orcs and elves once fought together. There was an immense battle, long ago, far away to the north. Beyond the Misty Mountains. The Noldor had been waging war against Morgoth the Enemy for centuries. They were mighty, and proud, and skilled in combat. But they were complete and utter dunces. Brains made from gravel and spit." He giggles unexpectedly. For a guy with such a pleasant sounding lilt in his voice, his laugh sure is creepy. "They kept fighting each other instead of the Enemy. They kept

preferring to live comfortably on their new estates instead of bringing the fight to Morgoth. This went on for a long, long time. Longer than you can easily comprehend."

He leans back and takes in the night sky, made dull black because our fires drown out the stars. He lets out a breath I don't think he knew he was holding.

"*O Elbereth Gilthoniel!* I haven't seen my stars for so long," he chokes out without the slightest sign of self-consciousness. "The air here is as bad as the inhabitants." He then goes silent, brooding. "I wish I was a mortal. Life would be so much more tolerable."

I raise an eyebrow. "I wish I was immortal. Life would be so much longer."

Angnar giggles again. I remind myself to stop amusing him; it's just not worth it. "This *is* funny, isn't it? Two races, each yearning for the gift the other has been given. We, the gift of everlasting life. You, the gift of death."

"Gift, hell. You grow into a fragile old man, and then you try complaining about everlasting youth."

"You experience five centuries of unending grief and torture, and then you try complaining about dying of natural causes."

"Touche."

He falls silent, sitting still. I prompt him, "So?"

"What?"

"The story. The Enemy, the stupid-ass Noldor. The uruks and elves fighting together."

"Ah." He gathers himself up and goes back into story-telling mode. "After many, many years of conflict and indescribable idiocy, the free races banded together to put the Enemy down once and for all. This time, they were going to retake the Silmarils or die trying."

"Silmarils?"

"Three brilliant jewels of ageless beauty, beyond any price. Morgoth stole them from the Undying Lands centuries before. In them, it is said, you could still see the unbroken glorious light of the newly made creation. That's what the Noldor were supposed to be after, but as I said, they were fools. In that great battle, every race was divided right down the middle, for Morgoth was a cunning Lord and had been working in the shadows to disrupt the alliance against him. He corrupted men, and dwarves, and

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elves, and had great hosts of all three on his battle lines when the time came to fight.

"But just as he was reaching out with his left hand to suborn our folk, loyal orcs were slipping out of his right. Over 200,000 orcs defected and came to fight against him, side by side with the Noldor."

His handsome features twist into thoughtfulness. "They were brave. They all knew what would happen to them if they were captured, so they marched forth knowing beyond a shadow of a doubt that they would either die or win their lives back. And one way or another, it would be decided by sundown. Well, they never got their lives back, I'm afraid,"

I stir the fire uncomfortably. "So, the Noldor lost, then."

"Oh, yes. Rather badly. The Enemy was not only cruel, sociopathic, and narcissistic, he was also a cheater. My point is, the apple doesn't fall from the tree, you know?" He sweeps his arms around him, referring to all our recruits.

"...what?"

"The orcs," he continues on with great relish, "are elves with twisted souls. Nothing more. They cannot even be considered a separate race, technically speaking, though of course we still like to refer to them as such. The Enemy had decided to make a mockery of the elves, and so near to the beginning of time itself he captured thousands of them. He tortured and mutilated and warped them and molded them in his own image." In my humble opinion, Angnar may be more than a little uruk himself. Not physically, but mentally. "And from his sick little experiments, the orcs were born."

He lets loose another gale of joyous laughter. "And now look at them! They're reverting. You Southrons have worked wonders on them, you know? You've retaught them loyalty, courage, honor, self-respect. The greatest heroes in history have been brought low by a single flaw. Apparently, it can work in reverse as well- the most twisted and bent souls can be lifted up by a single virtue. I wouldn't be surprised if the descendants of these fellows look more and more like elves."

"Hmm," I said. I really couldn't think of anything to say to that. I decided that I liked Angnar, but that I should probably avoid him in the future if at all possible. He's a very unsettling person to be around.

...

And we're retreating again. Our rally point is the city of Czernograd, at the delta of the Duath river. The enemy host is slowing down- wounded and ravenous and struggling to knock their way through obstinate resistance. They can't stage any operations to the southeast, due to Webfoot's marine corps, and the terrain is rough and easily defended to the northwest, so they've been hammering away at our center as best they can. So the Captain had the last of Sapper's caltrops spread liberally about the center of our retreating line.

Some nights, we can hear the other team howling in frustration and rage. The howling becomes literal if there are wolves involved.

Mind you, not all is wine and roses. Of the 10,000 we started with, over 3,000 are dead- one third gone, erased. That is *my* duty in this campaign- I keep the Book of the Slain updated. This is pretty much a full-time job, so I'm given no duties at all beyond the Annals. I know better than anyone save the Captain that we are almost as roughed up as the enemy is. But as Shatarz had pointed out, we get fed well after every engagement, while they are practically reduced to eating each other.

Barring any disasters, I think we have a chance.

14. The Battle of Mordor: The Steel Rain

The Captain is one sharp-eyed fellow. He has noticed that the wolf legions of Mordor never seem to suffer supply problems like the rest of their force- they can still ride all night and fight all day, so to speak. After a few hours of investigation, he has discovered that the wolves eat their fallen comrades, gleaned sustenance in abundance off of every battleground.

First off, this is revolting. Uruks are unpleasant enough without adding them to the dinner menu.

Second, now that we know how they feed, we can hear opportunity knocking. The Old Man cooks up a scheme to put a serious stitch in the side of the other team.

First, Webfoot launches an amphibious campaign up and down the coast, trying to locate the Black Numenorean and pin him down. Once they find him and force him into fighting them, Webfoot sets up massive fires fueled by enemy corpses and generous doses of naptha. This signals Bullet and Salim to start a major offensive to the northwest, far away from that pale little bastard's sphere of influence. They retake a few miles of land, slaying thousands and reveling in the resulting chaos. Reinforcements

can't arrive in time to check them, due to the general squalor and starvation and lack of command structure in their organization. Hell, if we had three times our numbers, we probably could have had them dead to rights in this stroke alone, but there you are. With only 4,000 effectives on the attack, we can only do so much before getting bogged down and losing momentum.

We make good use of the breathing space Bullet and Salim's advance brought us.

I am the one in charge of Operation: Corpse Greaser, as the uruks under my command have dubbed it. You see, the manufacturing centers around the Sea of Nurnen stock plenty of poisons; some subtle and elegant, and some as blunt and unapologetic as a hammer blow. Me and my command take it all and advance just behind our attacking comrades, sprinkling each corpse we find with some of the nastiest shit that Mother Nature and the Red Eye's imagination can produce.

I disliked the operation's name at first, but I suppose that a bad joke that's made a mile behind the lines becomes hilarious once you get into the thick of it. By the time I'm through daubing wolf-death onto the fallen enemy, I'm cracking horrible jokes and making tasteless puns like the rest of my uruks.

...

A message from Pork Chop summons me to his makeshift hospital in Czernograd.

"So, how did it go?" Pork Chop doesn't even bother to look up from his work as he addresses me—a silent, pale uruk with a wide gash in his abdomen in need of stitches and painkillers, though we had no painkillers available. Early on, we had confiscated every ounce of hashish from the men, but that has long since run out.

"What?"

"The poisoning thing." He carefully snips off the thread and pats the uruk on the shoulder, as though out of obligation and habit, then sends for the next one. The new guy is missing his left hand. "Corpse Greaser."

"Eh."

"That good, huh."

"It worked. I mean, no drama on that front." I quash my instinct to rush outside as Pork Chop cauterizes the stump with a hot iron. I've been in the business for a long time, but I'm still uncomfortable around the medical side of things. Too much time spent in armies whose idea of medical care is primitive at best. I remember being astounded when I

joined the Company and found out that more of us die on the field than in the hospital tent. "But I can't say it was at all enjoyable. Must've been 4,000 corpses we smeared that shit on. Not a fucking day at the park, you know? Crap jokes aside."

"I hear you." The uruk, who had remained stock still as his left wrist burned, nodded as calmly as he could and staggered away carefully, trying not to show how woozy he was. The next came in. This one had a broken off arrow through his knee.

"Of course," I add, as Pork Chop saws away at the arrowhead on the other side, "I don't imagine that all the blood and guts I had to wade through would stir much sympathy from you. I mean..."

"Yeah, whatever." The uruk squeals in torment as Pork Chop slides the wood out of his leg. "There you go. Smooth as anything. Some of you guys will do anything to get out of walking, eh?"

The uruk nods his head, eyes wide and neck tilted. "Ha," he gasps. "Lazy-ass Parckaz, they call me. I'm a fucking sloth."

Pork Chop grins, deftly concealing whatever is happening on the inside. "That's the spirit. Send the next one in, please."

Then, to me; "Hey, listen, you got the Captain's ear, yeah?"

I close my eyes and looked away from the black blood that's pooling on the stone floor. "Sort of, yes."

"Them tell him this, from me. I'd tell him myself, but I got a lot on my hands at the moment, and I'm not sure he'd listen to me. Tell him we can't keep this up anymore."

"I'm not sure if it's my place to correct the Old Man's tactics, Pork."

"No, listen, I ain't talking about tactics or strategy or nothing. I'm talking about cold, hard facts. If we keep charging forward aggressively, swapping body shots and shit, we're going to start losing wounded simply because there won't be enough of me to go around. I can barely keep up with the demand as it is."

The next guy has come in. It's a Company brother, a man named Dizzy who has a dagger plunged into his belly. I suspect that Dizzy's a dead man already, but what are we going to do, send him away again? Pork Chop sits him down and gets to work.

"Tell the Captain, defense only. I can only stay on top of things if he stops sending me new legions of broken bodies to fix up every hour on the fucking hour. Tell him that, will you?"

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I depart, holding a hand over my mouth and nose to block the stench of blood and fear and infection gone rampant. Outside Pork Chop's surgery room, there's a line of a bit less than 300 men holding themselves stiffly, seeping blood from various holes in their bodies and/or missing significant portions of themselves. In addition to the room I'm exiting, there are three other groups taking in the casualties- there's Pork Chop's apprentice Wee Lad, an uruk shaman who has some slight knowledge of piecing people back together, and three recruits who had volunteered for the duty. I doubt that the newcomers knew how to even stitch someone up before Pork Chop taught them how.

I pass Pork Chop's message on, with my recommendation that the Captain ought to take it seriously.

...

Operation: Corpse Greaser is a rousing success. We just wiped out over half the wolves in the enemy host in a single day.

Hooray.

I hope that we can survive another victory like this one.

...

The other team is knocking on our front door in Czernograd. They immediately threw 10,000 men into our defenses and watched them get chopped to pieces. We've been setting up shop here since we took over, which they found out the hard way. They fall back, discouraged and bleeding, and then grudgingly set up barricades to prevent us from sallying.

They have little food. They cannot function, not as well as they need to. But this is our last line of defense. Behind us is flat, gentle farmland and small towns with weak defenses. We have no place else to run. We have to stand here and fight it out as best we can.

5,000 of us against 40,000 of them. We have home-field advantage and all the time in the world.

Confidence in our victory is shaky, but omnipresent. Every one thinks we *can* do it, but no one is sure that we *will* do it.

...

The enemy host ran out of arrows. Their archers, rearmed with bucklers and long knives, join the infantry in the trenches.

Our crossbowmen and uruk archers are thrilled beyond reason. Now, instead of having to play at sniper duels with obstinate opponents, they can just set up massive shooting contests amongst themselves, picking off the enemy one grunt at a time, often betting on who can score the most confirmed kills. If you believe the bowmen, we wiped out over 10,000 enemy soldiers, though I put it closer to 300. The other team learns quickly to hug the dirt properly, so we're not exactly inflicting massive amounts of casualties.

And then things get into a dull routine, with them digging their trenches closer and closer to our walls while we snipe their engineers as often as possible.

Once they get close enough, things will start up again.

...

The balance of power on the Sea of Nurnen has shifted unexpectedly.

Near the start of the campaign, just a few short weeks ago, the other team had tried to put some ships in the water to counteract Webfoot's predations. Their attempt to wrest naval supremacy from us was half-hearted and shortlived- Webfoot had contemptuously boarded the poorly constructed crafts, butchered the crew, and then sent the boats back to Grufoz in flames.

Their second attempt this morning was far more successful.

One moment, our marines were basking in the dull morning sun (for the sunlight is always dull in Mordor), shipping out to wreak some havoc on the western coast, chopping through the bitter water at a fair pace. Then, the sea around them starts boiling, and to their surprise, the boiling spot follows them at the same speed they're going. They slow down, the boiling pool of water slows down; they haul ass and try to lose it, it keeps pace.

The boiling water surrounds two ships of the eight total in our navy.

And when the crews lean out over the railings to try and get a closer look at the churning water, massive pale tentacles come out and snatch them into the water. Before the surviving marines jerk away from the sides of their ships, they see the thrashing water turn black with blood.

For the two ships that were attacked, it is merely the beginning of the end. The tentacles are relentless and swift. When the marines try to seek shelter beneath the deck, the tentacles crash through the paneling and smash the crafts into splintered wood and torn bodies. The monstrous white arms

then sift through the wreckage, seeking any survivors and dragging them down into the thrashing waters, into the depths...

The other six ships in our little armada were powerless to help- they're designed for shipping, not war. They had no built in ballistas, no ramming spikes. Webfoot tried shooting arrows into the boiling water, but the monsters didn't seem to even notice.

Webfoot called his men home to Czernograd before the tentacle monsters can target his six remaining ships.

In the space of a few heartbeats, our marine corps loses 72 men out of 346.

We'll have to keep an eye on Webfoot. He spoke in a near monotone when he gave his report.

...

Shatarz and several other veterans of the Mines of Moria have stepped forward and volunteered information. They had worked with a monster matching the marines' descriptions- they had slipped him into a largish pool by the western end of the Mines, carried by underground currents from who knows where. When the dwarves tried to sally out of that end, they discovered that the tentacles could reach onto the shore, so they retreated back into the blood-stained dark to avoid getting dragged into the water.

Shatarz's reports are not encouraging. He had never actually seen the monster in its entirety, just the tentacles and its actions. He has no idea how to kill it without entering the water and swimming down to the body that the arms are attached to- an approach that we prefer not to try if at all possible.

Webfoot broods, then approaches the Captain to gain access to our captured stores of poisons. He stocks up every ounce of nasty shit we have and stows it onboard, then takes to the seas looking for blood.

He returns three hours later, at dusk, missing another ship.

The Captain sends me to debrief him, since Webfoot's intel needs to get into the Annals as well as into his hands.

I debated with myself on how to handle the situation- should I be pure professionalism, concerned only with facts and figures and allow no room for emotion? Should I seek to be empathetic, to help Webfoot process his loss? What, if anything, is the right way to do this?

Finally, I decided to just ask him how it went and play it by ear.

...

Webfoot and I were in my tent, early into the night. Having more privacy than I actually needed, there were few passers-by and no interruptions.

He looked like hell. He picked up a slight injury on the left side of his face, a jagged crimson slash across his cheek; I imagine it came from a flying splinter. His shoulders were slumped, and he sat like a man too tired to remain upright.

"I know you all got beaten up," I tell him, "but did you get them?"

"No. They don't like all the shit we put in the water, but they were alive when we disengaged," He breathes deep, lets it out in a ragged rush of exhaustion. "They swarmed over Blackhawk's ship, both of the little fuckers. One started in on the bow, the other on the stern. Those boys never had a chance."

"I'm sorry." Even to my ears it sounded stupid.

Webfoot waves his right hand and shakes his head. *Not a drama.* "It felt like Pelennor, Papa. Just like when we had to watch those poor fucks on the right get outflanked by the Rohirrim. Except this time it was my boys and not total strangers."

Webfoot hawks and spits in the direction of the Sea. "I'll figure out how to beat those fucking tentacle monsters. Just you fucking wait."

...

He did. Sort of. Each ship now carries a few barrels of poison every time it goes out. Standard procedure for them is to keep a sharp eye out for boiling water. If spotted, the whole crew dips their blades and arrowheads into the poison barrels, then sloshes a couple of gallons of liquid death over the side. Then they form square in the center of their ships. I'm sure that there's a technical term for the middle part of the boat, but hell, I'm a lubber.

The monsters don't like getting close to that rancid shit, and even if they overcome their apparent revulsion, they can't snag many people and drag them overboard.

Stalemate, of a kind. Our sea mobility has been greatly neutralized- we do not have sufficient ships to mount the kind of amphibious assaults that Webfoot loves so much. But nor can the other team try to bypass Czernograd by sea.

So we lost a lot of good men in exchange for not a whole lot.

I hope all the brevet-privates in our army are paying attention, because this kind of bull crap happens to us all the fucking time.

...

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The other guys come at us, we greet them with a hail of missiles, and then we both get down to the grim business of hacking each other up. Same shit, different day. And after they retreat, we all lick our wounds and grab some grub.

Whoop de fucking do.

Are you happy, Captain, sir? I've updated the Annals, just like you asked. Did they need to be updated? Did anything of interest or import occur since the last time I wrote? Hell no, of course not.

I truly can't wait for this tired little campaign to wind up. My only consolation is that the other team is about a bazillion times more miserable than we are.

...

I consider myself a generally optimistic man. I can usually make the best of anything that life chooses to throw at me, I can stay positive and look on the bright side and so on.

However, I can't ignore reality when it hits me right between the eyes.

We're going to lose. I wish to fuck I could see some distant ray of hope, but it's just not there.

From the south just past the Mountains of Shadow, well-armed and bloodthirsty tribesmen are streaming over the mountain. From what Ghazi's scouting expedition gleaned, they number approximately 3,000, all fanatically loyal to the Red Eye and positioned worryingly close to our supply depots in South Nurn. Oh, we could turn around and whup them hard, but manpower, manpower! We can't destroy them and have enough men to fight the raggedy-ass host besieging us in Czernograd. So we send the Auxiliaries off the front lines to go Southron hunting. 450 warriors against 6 times their number. Dwarves and elves are badass, no doubt, but they have to cover such a large area from such a large force...

In the East, a fresh block of Variags numbering 2,000 are aiming to march down the eastern shore and wreck everything in their path. We do not have soldiers anywhere near that area, nor the means to transport them there, so all we can do is let them march and reinforce Angnar once they link up with the Southrons.

On the high seas, Webfoot makes little progress fighting the sea monsters. It's as close to a stalemate as it's going to get- they can't close in on our remaining marines, but our marines can't touch them at all. But since the stalemate prevents us from mounting any amphibious offensive, they won from a strategic viewpoint.

There's just too fucking many of them and not nearly enough of us. If only the main host across the lines to the north would up and starve to death already, we could turn and rip apart the two smaller armies. But Saintly can't kill enough of the supply wagons to choke them to death instantly, so they're dying slowly. Too fucking slowly.

Once our own supply caches start getting hit by the Southron savages, we won't be much better off.

I think that when we deserted the army of Mordor and came here to recover our Annals, we made a bad bet, and now we're going to get burned. We may well have to pay double, just like in Tonk.

...

Just a general progress report.

Webfoot managed to drive one of his tentacle monsters into shallow water on the southern shore. His boys rammed poisoned pikes down into the water aiming at its blobbish body, while archers sent shafts into its thrashing arms. The monster died hard, apparently. Really hard. So Webfoot dragged its carcass onto dry land just to make sure it was going to stay dead. In killing it, he lost another two ships. So he may have reduced his obstacles, but his capabilities diminished as well. I don't think we'll ever regain the momentum on the seas- I suspect that soon his bold marines are going to be strictly land troops.

Angnar's dead. By all accounts he died well, like that means anything; he fell charging with three other elves headlong into a pack of Southrons in order to cover his men's retreat. A dwarf named Grimhald took command. I know nothing about him, other than that he has been given an impossible job that he doesn't dare fail. Poor little bastard.

Things are still gridlocked in Czernograd. Our casualty rate had dwindled greatly in that area, as Salim has been steadily whipping the vinegar out of the opposition.

...

Provisions to get the Annals out of Czernograd have been made. We picked the toughest, most durable men we have, and tell them upfront that the survival of their new family depends on them. I am aboard a barge with the Annals, floating down the Ephel Duath towards the section of the mountain range that borders nominal Gondorian territory.

Amin with the Standard. Myself with the Annals. 68 roughnecks armed to the teeth. We just need to hike through the narrow, twisty paths of the Ephel mountains to reach the vaguely friendly territory of Ithilien. At which point we tell the Gondorians that,

no, really, we are on their side now, and never mind that we once tried to wipe Minas Tirith off the map.

Obviously, gaining the locals' trust will be difficult. But as long as we are alive and have our past intact, we'll power through anything.

However, we are not abandoning our brothers. We'll stick around until we actually lose. We're not cowards running from the fight. We're just... more practical than honorable, that's all.

...

I am stationed at the foot of the Ephel Duath, far from the grim slaughter and hectic mayhem of the front lines. Life here is calm, if decidedly nervous. I sleep well in my little makeshift shelter, without being disturbed by the screaming and horrific smells and constant tension of trench warfare.

When I went to sleep last night, I had a dream. Maybe it was just an ordinary, run of the mill dream, or maybe it was something else. I don't know. But I'm assuming it's the real deal, and so I record it.

I don't know where I was. At the time it all seemed quite natural and it was perfectly obvious where I was and what I was doing there, but you know how dreams are.

Sapper was there. He looked compact and muscular—nothing at all like the chubby little spitfire I knew. His face, brown to start with and tanned by decades spent on the march, was now transformed into a noble and even handsome countenance. This was the face of a wisdom and power, containing both grace and dignity. I barely recognized him, of course, looking like that. After the initial confusion, we got to talking.

"Is this a dream?" I remember asking him. I remember having looked around at my environment. Whatever I saw seemed normal enough, but I can't remember it.

"Yes. Or, no, not really. Sort of." Ah. Sapper's face may have changed drastically, but his speech had not. Still the same old barely hidden contempt for people dumber than he is. "It looks like a dream, feels like a dream, and obeys the same rules as dreams. But it is not a dream."

"Uh huh. Is there any particular reason you look like a body builder with the face of a wise sage?"

Sapper looks annoyed. Well, he always looks annoyed, but now he looks it even more so. "Don't push me, Jack."

"What? It was just a question."

"In these kinds of not-dream, your self-image gets projected into public. Occasionally, things get a little... embarrassing."

I grin. "You see yourself as a cross between the Grey Walker and a bare knuckle boxer."

"Don't. Push. Me."

"That's..." I search for the most appropriate insult. "That's *adorable*, Sapper. You really think you're the resident wise man?"

"Well, it's better than you."

I look down at myself. "As far as I can tell, I am unchanged."

He chortles. "Of course you do. When I look at myself, I see the fat old geezer that I always see. It's only when others see you that your self-image comes out."

"What do I look like, then?"

"Like a young man, not out of his teens. All lean and fit and full of piss and vinegar."

"Oh." Not out of my teens. And here I thought that I had moved on from my family.

"Mind you, yours ain't too bad. Old fella like you, who can blame you for remembering when you were younger and stronger? The worst offender so far is Saintry."

"Oh?"

"When I tried this on him, he looked like one of the villains in a bad piece of Umbar street theater. All wrapped up in a black leather cloak, hooded and cowed and sinister and shit. Like the world's gaudiest assassin."

"That shouldn't have come as a surprise."

"I know, right?" Sapper puts on his best grin, but I can tell his heart's not in it. "I contacted you for a reason, mate. What's the situation like down there?"

I fill him in. Easterners and Southrons swarming into our soft spots. That fucking Numenorean prick holding the main host together and pressing down hard on Czernograd. Webfoot joining up with Grimhald to create a mobile defense.

Although, I do not recall actually telling him this. I seem to remember a vague draining sensation from my skull. Like I was bleeding info and he was collecting it. It was weird, but in dreamland it felt natural enough

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"*Shit*," Sapper says. He draws the word out to almost three syllables. "Fucking hell, and other comments."

"Since do you speak fluent uruk?"

"I reckon we're dead," he says matter-of-factly, ignoring my witticism completely. "I'm here to pass on some fairly bad news, and if you combine it with the shitstorm you're dealing with down south... Yeah. We're fucked left, right, and center."

"Tell me."

"The Gondorian army- if you can call it that- is closing in on the Black Gate."

I stare at him with dull, tired eyes.

"Yes, you heard me. We have about two days, tops."

"How do you know? You can't have scouted that far north."

"Spike and Bop went to work on prisoners from three separate regiments. All of them gave independent confirmation, unaware of the other two. All agreed the clash will occur within a week. That was almost a week ago, Jack. And once the Gondorians bite the dust, well. They'll swarm," he states with gloomy relish. "They'll swarm right across Gorgoroth and just throw waves of warm bodies at you until you break."

"How many troops do you think will get sent south after our Western buddies get curb-stomped? 100,000? At least?"

"More than that. One of the guys we caught was from fucking Rhun, man. That's, like, three hundred miles north of here. Sauron the fucking Putrid is gathering fresh troops from every corner of his little empire. I'd say there'll be about 300,000. A bit less, if the Gondorians get the same kind of unholy luck they had on Pelennor. But it'll be well over a measly little 100 grand." He favors me with a sickly smile.

"Oh, fuck it," I spit out bitterly. "We should never have stuck around. We should have picked up our Annals and hightailed it out of Nurn before the Eye could catch up to us."

Sapper shrugs. A good enough answer, by any standard.

I know why we didn't, of course. There were 10,000 of us then. How do you feed that many men? Equip them? We had no choice but to stick around the industrial and agricultural base that is the Sea of Nurnen. Moreover, where could we go? Back down

south, where every tribesman and his mother takes orders from Barad-dur? East and north are right out- we have no idea of what's out there, and how far the Dark Lord's influence reaches. Even if we found a neutral state, what king or warlord would welcome 10,000 heavily armed strangers onto his turf? The only other option was west, where every single fucking nation has reason to kill us. And if they decided to accept us, well, then we'd be right where we are now- outnumbered and facing extinction.

Fuck it. Just, fuck it all. The deck was stacked against us from the start.

If only the fucking gods had left well enough alone on Pelennor, we wouldn't be here now.

I wrench my attention back to the miniature muscle-bound sorcerer. "We have the Annals and Standard ready to be evacuated. The Company will survive, at least for a while."

"Yeah. I guess. And hey, if you all die hard enough down there, it'll be years, maybe decades until Mordor is ready to start conquering again. You can't forge an empire without a industrial and agricultural base, and I don't think the Cap will leave so much as a mill wheel standing by the time you all... Yeah." He scratches his arm awkwardly. "You can get all them elves and dwarves and Westrons whipped into shape in that time." Sapper shrugs again, this time more optimistically. "Me, Saintly, and the boys won't be around to see you all rise again from the ashes, but in the meantime we'll stir shit up till they catch us."

"Aye. Well. Best of luck in your guerrilla campaign."

"Thanks. Enjoy convincing all those dumb-ass westerners that you're legit. Make sure you bring that Gondorian lass, what's-her-face."

"Zim."

"That's the one. Things'll go smoother if you got a white face vouching for you."

We shook hands, and I woke up again. I'm operating on the assumption that I was not having just a mere nightmare about 300,000 screaming fighters descending upon us, so I sent a rider to headquarters to inform the Captain about the impending doom. Then I sat and wrote this entry.

I have nothing to do right now, and I suspect that it will be a few weeks before I can be of any use to anyone at all. So I think I'll go outside and star gaze for a while- just sit upright, arms propped behind me and chin pointed straight up, and soak in their

celestial glory. I've had little opportunity to enjoy any kind of beauty in Mordor.

15. The Free State of Mordor

We won.

I'll be good goddamned if I know how.

In South Nurn, it was 5,000 savages against about 600 of us- Grimhald's Auxiliaries and Webfoot marines put together. Those 5,000 screaming warriors just did not stand a chance. Webfoot's boys engaged them head to head and tore them to fucking shreds, and when the Southrons and Easterners tried to back up for some breathing space, they found Grimhald sitting in their camp, with his muddy boots up on their furniture and an axe in his hands. Metaphorically speaking. Not even 2,000 of them escaped alive. We lost exactly 53 marines and 17 of the Auxiliaries killed.

To the north, the Captain broke the back of the host besieging Czernograd. I don't mean that he knocked them away from the walls, or that he got the better of them, or that he outmaneuvered them. He did do these things, but that's not what I'm implying. I mean, the opposition has ceased to function as a military presence. All 40,000 of them are scattered, dead, wounded, or captured. We could send out a man with a white flag right now to offer our unconditional surrender, and there just would not be anybody around to take it.

The Black Numenorean is ours now. Salim caught him trying to run after his army got wasted. He's alive, for now, although we had to chop off some fingers and gag him to keep him from busting out any major sorcerous mojo on us. I expect that his fate involves a vat of molten silver and a long-term relationship with the bottom of the Sea of Nurnen. We still remember the fall of Grufoz, and his policy of publicly torturing Black Company prisoners to death has not precisely endeared him to us.

A Free Army patrol to the north found the other tentacle monster washed up on shore, dead as anything. No puncture wounds, no nothing. Just a white blob with freaky looking arms splayed out on the rough sand.

We here in the Ephel Duath camp received never-ending streams of good tidings from the front. Messenger after messenger after messenger, giving us news of salvation and survival...

And how did we manage this? What stroke of tactical genius turned the tides? What feat of valor snatched us from certain doom? What bit of wisdom gleaned from the Annals saved our lives?

Well. Nothing. Or at least, nothing we did.

The volcano to the north erupted. That is all. It went off like the climax of one of Sapper's daydreams, threw a lot of ash and flames into the air, and killed the army of Mordor. I can't explain it better than that. They had the morale knocked right out of them. They threw down their swords, howled like wounded dogs, and ran around like chickens with their heads cut off. Beating them in that state was a bloody cake walk.

I am going to bust out some Noose and celebrate with my companions from now till the booze runs out. When I recover from the epic hangover I intend on getting, I will try to work out just what exactly happened.

...

Saintly's crew sent a rider today. They've established contact with a group of Gondorian knights. Saintly even managed to overcome his homicidal instincts and initiated a meeting that led to establishing a truce between Gondor and the Free State of Mordor. I would have thought that he would ambush them and steal their stuff.

Every thing to the south of Gorgoroth is ours, and not to be entered by Gondorian soldiers or their allies. Likewise, we are not to enter any section of Ithilien north of Minas Morgul. Southern Ithilien and the Plateau of Gorgoroth are both disputed territory.

It's slightly stupid, over all, since our army is about 3,000 strong and their army is about 10,000, and neither one of us possesses the capability to strike the other at all. This is not exactly a recipe for wide-scale warfare. But one day, we will rebuild our strength, and they theirs. We would prefer to have the boundaries firmly set by the time either of us becomes able to attack.

...

The messengers keep riding in and giving me updates to put in the Annals. In that I am still in the Ephel Duath mountain range, I am far away from the center of activity, so I can't turn this flood of data into any kind of narrative structure. So, I'll just write down the events as I hear them.

Today we tossed the Black Numenorean into the drink. We couldn't tell if he was still alive after the silver drenched him, but I hope he is. We had two

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Gondorian emissaries watch the ceremony. Hopefully it will convince them we are akin in our hatred of Sauron's legacy.

Webfoot is down in the dockyards, building ships and filling his vacant ranks. Much to his disgust, Webfoot has to make them as transports first and then weaponize them afterwards. The Captain wants to be able to ship anything to any shore as soon as possible. Just like how you can't throw a punch without a proper stance, you can't assert national will through war without having solid footing at home. It pains me to say it, but I detect future tension between us and Gondor. With Barad-dur's fall, we are both being sucked into a power vacuum. Since the Black Company intends on sticking around for awhile, we would prefer to be in a strong position.

The uruks in Sauron's host are scattered every which way. Most are heading east or north, where they'll either be butchered by the inhabitants or set up their own little fiefdoms. But a lot of them are coming to us, offering to be our slaves in exchange for safety. We set up a nifty little system of indentured servitude- they either serve ten years in the legions of the Free State, or eight years in the labor battalions. They can prove their dedication to our cause by rebuilding the ravaged land of Nurn or by protecting it. We've recruited 3,000 uruks in the last 32 hours. We anticipate more as word gets out that we hold no grudge against former servants of the Dark Lord. Me now, I'm hoping we can recruit some trolls into our ranks, but that may end up being a pipe dream. Either way, Bullet now has a lot more raw material to create an army that's up to our standards, and a lot more time as well.

A small-scale attack from a local Easterner tribe is repelled by Salim, with no losses on our side. As near as we can tell, it was strictly a smash and grab raid, hoping to turn a profit while we were still trying to recover from the war. Salim pays a quick visit to that tribe's hometown and sets it ablaze. He makes it painfully clear that attacking the Free State is not only profitless, it is hazardous to one's health. However, the raid prompts the Captain to send scouts into Haradrim territory, to watch for any potential problems. We have no idea how the fall of Sauron will play out down there. Ghazi is selected to guard the passes in the mountains.

We have been reinforced down here in the Duath. 200 veteran uruks, now Company brothers. I don't know why.

...

We're off. I'm in charge of almost 300 brothers hell-bent for leather. We're double timing it up into South Ithilien, hoping to lay claim to it before the

negotiations begin. Possession is, of course, nine tenths of the law. If there's Free State soldiers crawling all over the land that's being disputed, than it's not really in dispute, is it?

Before we left the camp, Kisander came in with an additional 400 men. Presumably, they'll be committed if things heat up.

...

I hope to hell Gondor and us don't go to war over this. One could make the argument that it's not really our fight.

"It's strange, isn't it?" the knight said.

"Yep," I agreed. I was willing to agree to just about any random comment he made.

King Elessar had had the same idea as the Captain, so before I knew it Elessar's men and my men made contact.

1,000 of them. 300 of us. We have the high ground, defending a fairly steep ridge, but they have cavalry. I didn't want to have to worry about cavalry on my fucking flank again while I am busy holding off the infantry.

I really, really did not want to go to war today.

The Gondorian knight is tall, pale as marble, blonde as anything. From the ease with which he moved in his plate armor, I assumed that he was strong of limb and broad of shoulder as well. His deep, grey eyes pierced mine, and I tried my utmost to pierce his right back.

He and I had met together in between our two companies, very calm and respectful and so on. He was atop his horse, I was on foot staring up at him.

"I always thought," he said, "that Sauron would be around forever. I never actually expected to see him overthrown, you know?"

"Yeah, I hear you."

"When I heard he fell, well! I figured it would be peace and prosperity for all."

"We had our sights aimed lower. We just wanted to get out of it alive."

"Quite." The knight sighed. "I assume you're here for the same reason that I am?"

"I reckon."

The knight looks north, gauging his force, then south towards mine. I made sure to keep the bulk of them behind the hill to hide our numbers. Useless. He had seen us before we got established on the ridge.

"I lost 48 men up in the Black Gate," he says suddenly. "One of the trolls burst through the footsoldiers on my right, and tore into us before we could turn and engage it."

"Sorry to hear that."

"I don't wish to lose more if I don't have to."

"I can top that, though. While you all were marching on the Gate, we were swapping body blows with a host of uruks still loyal to Sauron. When they came to our headquarters, a place called Grufoz, the Black Numenorean blasted a hole in the defenses for the trolls to attack through. We lost 600 in a single day."

The knight whistles softly, impressed. Then he gives me a bright, friendly grin. "I can top that. I got separated from my unit at Pelennor, and got integrated with the Rohirrim. I swear to you, when we charged the Oliphaunts, we suffered 50% casualties. 50%, no joke. We had to distract the archers on their backs, see, and get the beasts' attention to allow our archers to line up shots into the eyes. 500 men dead in a matter of minutes."

I grin right back. "I was at the docks when your allies sailed in on the Corsairs' ships."

The knight groans in sympathy. "Ouch. That can't have been fun." He takes off his helm and tucks it under his arm, brushing his sweaty golden hair out of his eyes.

I shake my head. "No, it was not. We were so damn sure we had you dead to rights."

"Heh. The funny part is, we thought the same thing. Our Steward had divined that Corsairs were coming upriver to fight, and he committed ritual suicide rather than watch Gondor die in front of him. Then it turns out it was Elessar coming to the rescue. If the poor man had only held on just a little longer..."

"Yeah. Pelennor was a fucking bad day all around."

"No arguments here." The knight glances behind him. "I have an idea."

"I'm listening."

"This ledge you're on. What do you say we make it the new boundary between Gondor and Mordor?"

"The Free State of Mordor."

"Yes, the Free State of Mordor, as you say. Everything south of where you are right now is yours. Everything to the north is ours. Then you and I go back to our commanders and tell them, 'Mission accomplished.' "

"Don't worry, Captain, I stopped those white boys dead in their tracks.' "

The knight laughs, high and clear. "Fear not, my king, the Southron horde won't come a step closer to Minas Tirith.' "

"Shake on it?"

We shake. Then we return to our respective commands and start entrenching ourselves.

...

Zim is leaving us. She recovered, mostly, and once she heard that the war was over she cried for about a minute, or so I heard. Then she picked herself up, dusted herself off, checked all the wounded to make sure Pork Chop hadn't accidentally killed any of them, and went to the Captain for permission to return home escorted by the surviving Auxiliaries.

Apparently, it was just an alliance of convenience after all. She never saw herself as one of us. I regret that, I really do. It's always nice to think that decent people like to be around you.

I suspect that if Haroun had survived Pelennor, Pork Chop might have gained a permanent aide.

Why hold back? I'm old enough to get away with being maudlin. Haroun was reckless and dashing, funny and earnest. Zimraphel is young and beautiful, warm and courageous. I can see them in my mind's eye, belonging together and sharing each other the same way that Fragrance and I had. The worst part about being an old man is envisioning so clearly what might have been.

I wish that Haroun had made it. The world would have been a better place with those two together in it.

...

Well, we're back in Czernograd. Sapper's taken over from me in South Ithilien, supervising construction projects staffed by indentured uruks. Soon, there'll be a line of fortresses separating us from them. Once we build up enough population to pull it off, we'll start sending colonists to work the land down there, and soldiers to guard them from any Gondorian power grabs or Haradrim raids.

The Black Company in Middle Earth

There was a lovely ceremony that most of the 3,000 Black Company brothers attended. The Captain spoke to us- the fuck ups, the stragglers, the rejects, the lost orphans that the world has no time for.

He told us we had fought for the right to survive and won. He told us that just as our past brothers had suffered and bled to give us a home, generations of our future brothers would remember the boons we gave to them over the past few weeks. He told us that to be Company was to be special, elite, a cut above the rest, and that we had proved ourselves worthy of the name. He reminded us who we were, and assured us that the pain and fear and despair we had endured had been worth it.

I half-slept through most of it. By the time you reach my age, you'll have heard it all before too. For me, the most interesting bit was finding out that during the fighting around Czernograd, Bop had picked up a wound himself. He and his brother are a matching set again.

...

I've been reviewing the evidence, comparing notes, and I think I understand how Sauron the Putrid met his end. I've interviewed foot soldiers who were on both sides at the Black Gate, I've heard second-hand some of the history available in the Library of Gondor, I've put two and two together and wound up with four.

Here's the story, as I understand it:

Long ago, and far away, elves created some Rings of Power. Just what this power may be, I'm not sure. I'm positive that if Sapper made a ring of power, it would shoot lightning or something, but Sapper has a vastly different mindset than the elves would. So these rings become a bit of a fad, and the other races get in on it- the men make a few, and the dwarves as well.

Sauron, then operating under a different name, charms his way into the ringmaking project and fucks around with the process. I can't get any more specific than that, I'm neither a ringsmith nor a wizard. He creates one ring to rule all the others, and pours himself into that ring- all his malice, all his cruelty, all his will. Again, I'm not clear how this works, but I'm willing to accept it.

He betrayed the elves and dwarves and men, chaining their rings of power to his. It's almost comforting to know that he was always a treacherous bastard.

It turns out, those rings of power corrupted nine men into Sauron's service; the Ringwraiths, currently deceased. And there we were, thinking they were just psycho sorcerers.

The dwarven rings were mostly destroyed, and the elvish rings kept hidden and unruined.

So, after taking the time to properly organize a military alliance, a massive host of elves and men came to Mordor, aiming to crack some skulls and blast Sauron's power base straight to hell. In the course of an epic battle, Sauron lost his ring. Had it chopped off his hand by some hero or another.

I ask you. What's the point of owning a Ring of Power if any idiot can just walk up to you and hack it off? Shouldn't it have some kind of, I don't know, anti-personnel abilities to keep people from chopping at you?

But I digress.

Sauron got kicked out of Mordor. He went off somewhere and did some stuff for a few centuries. That's about as specific as I can make it.

Sauron's raw power was greatly reduced by the loss of his ring- he spent an ungodly amount of time, effort, and treasure trying to locate it, all to no avail. By the time he returned and reclaimed Mordor from a weakened Gondor, his ring was lost forever. Or so it seemed.

Enter the Grey Walker. The old wizard found it somewhere called the Shire, the land of the Halflings. An emissary showed me on the map where the Shire was- it's like, at least a thousand miles away from where it disappeared. Fucked if I know how the bloody thing got up there.

Long, confusing, incomplete story short- the Grey Walker sent the ring to Mordor, to be tossed into the fires of Mt. Doom, which as far as we all had known was just a bloody volcano. Yes, that's right. The one thing that the Eye of Sauron desired most of all, and the Grey Walker sent it straight to his homeland.

I don't understand the logic of it. Perhaps he was operating on the assumption that it was crazy enough to work.

About right after the time we seized the eastern half of Osgiliath, the Grey Walker started out his plan to just walk into Mordor and destroy the ring.

It worked. Just like Pelennor, the enemy did something so stupid that turned out to be exactly right.

Two little halflings, likely the two dwarves Kisander tracked in Cirith Ungol, completed their mission. Sapper assures me that to destroy an artifact like that would be more than enough to drastically wreck whoever put themselves in it. And Sauron had built his entire empire on his own thaumaturgical power...

God, you couldn't make this shit up. Armies marching and counter-marching, clashes of arms, intricate politics and furious storms of sorcerous might, and in the end it all depended on whether or not two northern midgets could manage to chuck some jewelry into a fucking volcano.

It really is kinda funny, now that I think about it.

...

King Elessar isn't willing to surrender control of northern Mordor. The land has no value in itself but if hostilities between the Free State and Gondor ever occur, whoever holds the Plateau can launch attacks directly into the other side's home turf. Since neither he nor the Captain believe that peace eternal has come to the world, both are striving to occupy it, although neither is willing to commit to any military actions as of yet.

Well, I'm no diplomat. I'll report anything that happens, but I don't think I'll bother to opine on it.

...

Three days ago, Amin the Standard Bearer disappeared from Czernograd around the same time as Saintry, Kisander, and Sapper. I couldn't for the life of me think of where they might have gone off to, but I didn't give any more thought to it until they came back. All of them were dust-covered and exhausted, jubilant and excited.

Sapper just scored the motherlode.

What had bugged Sapper, after he read my complete account on how the Eye fell, was what happened to Sauron after. Surely, he thought, he can't have just vanished, and he certainly wouldn't die from it. So... what happened?

He hypothesized that the Eye must have been rendered a warped spirit, powerless and formless and helpless, doomed to wander a world that he can no longer dominate or harm.

This thought warmed him inside, and for a while he was content.

Then he thought, what if I can find this helpless spirit?

So he recruited his posse of bodyguards, told them what was up, and they went out into the wastelands of Gorgoroth to do a little soul searching, if you don't mind the pun.

They met with Gondorian outriders, who questioned their right to be there. They explained what they were trying to do. The Gondorians laughed their heads off and joined up to help them.

It took two days for Sapper to find what he was after. The spell he was using required him to be within a mile of his target, but when you're riding quickly, you can cover a lot of ground.

In the old days, when the Company and the Lady and the White Rose teamed up to bitch-slap the Dominator, the Company wizards came up with a spell to capture the Dominator's dark spirit and jam it into a silver spike for all time. They were kind enough to leave instructions for their future brothers on how to do it.

Amin's Standard has a little extra kick to it now. The next time we tangle with a heavy hitter of a sorcerer, we can unleash sheer hell on him. As in the old days, we have a magic spear that kills sorcerers again.

Sapper has a unique view into the minds of sorcerers. He assures me that a life of servitude to his enemies would be torture for Sauron. A torture that will last pretty much forever.

And over time, Sauron's soul will degrade and dissolve and transmute into nothing but pitiful malice and unendurable pain, lending its power to our cause.

Hoo-ah.

...

I do believe we'll be sticking around the Sea of Nurnen for a while. Maybe raise up another generation of recruits and build ourselves up from the degraded state we found ourselves in after Pelennor. I don't think I'll still be around to see us march out of here, but Amin likely will. By the time we leave the Free State of Mordor to its own devices, we'll be strong again- free to go north to the wild lands around Forodwaith and Mirkwood, or east out to Rhun. Any place that still needs swords for hire, we'll prosper in. And it doesn't really matter to me where we end up going, now does it?

All that matters to me is, the Company will march again.

Author's Afterword / Behind the Scenes

I wrote this story because I am going off to boot camp soon, and I wanted to process the concept of being a soldier and work through the nervousness and excitement that comes of watching your shipping off day come closer and closer.

However, I wrote *this* story because I love the Black Company and I love the Lord of the Rings and wanted to see what would happen if you flung them against each other at high speeds, Hadron Supercollider style.

The Black Company was a story about the lowly soldiers of a stereotypical high-fantasy Dark Lord, and how they viewed themselves and their situation. The Lord of the Rings was the story that pretty much invented the concept of a high-fantasy Dark Lord.

This cross-over was practically begging to be written.

I sat down and pumped out the first chapter in about an hour or so. It seemed so natural and inevitable that I knocked out chapter two almost before I knew it. Things sorta snowballed from there.

...

I do not expect that the behind-the-scenes details will interest everybody else as much as they interest me. I wrote this chapter not for your benefit, but mine. It is *intensely* frustrating to know the origin of a character's name, or the source of a certain reference, or the backstory to a minor character, and not be able to tell it in the story. This chapter is primarily designed so that I can get stuff off my chest and out of my mind. If you all enjoy it, then that is a bonus that I'll just have to live with.

Osgiliath

Haroun: His name comes from one of the three protagonists of one of Glen Cook's other fantasy series, the Dread Empire, which is occasionally referenced later on. The original character was Haroun bin Yousif, a loyalist guerrilla who harries the theocratic dictatorship that killed his family and took his throne. The plan was to make Haroun bin Yousif an alternate version who happened to have joined the Company. However, I quickly discovered that my Haroun is one sarcastic, irreverent punk, while the other Haroun was pretty humorless. I ditched the previous characterization but kept the name.

Haroun's voice and tone comes from my experience with the theater department at my local community college. Most people involved in it are very flippant about everything, and I do mean everything, and yet are dedicated to doing a good job and helping each other out. They can go from making fun of how melodramatic one of their roles is- mocking the dramatic monologues and exaggerating the angst, and so on- to playing it dead serious in nothing flat.

It's a mix of an earnest desire to perform well and a need to show there is nothing at all earnest about it that characterize both Haroun and my friends.

There was more stuff to his background- I envisioned him as a street rat in his younger years, for instance- but he was just too flip and cheerful to have him angst too much about anything, so I never found an opportunity to find out more of where he came from.

Sapper: When I first had to think of a wizard character to stand in for One-Eye and Goblin, I couldn't think of anything special. So in the tradition of nicknames in the Company, his name was also his job description. A sapper is the guy on the battle field who's responsible for constructing just about everything, and for undermining the enemy constructions- the modern title is Combat Engineer. So Sapper was the guy you go to when you need to break into the other guys' fortress. He gained most of his personality from Haroun's comment about him whipping up a throne of skulls.

The previous Annalist, Wallace: At the time that I wrote that small little paragraph describing Wallace's death, I hadn't decided to make the Company Middle-Eastern flavored. The previous Annalist has a rather Celtic name for a brown guy from south of Harad. I completely forgot about him until later, and when I reread this chapter, I smacked myself upside the head. During the Pelennor Fields, I made Papa Jack mention the Keltoi cavalry solely in order to justify it. Keltoi is the Greek name for the Celtic tribes, which might explain where this random Scottish name came from. I doubt it bothered anyone but me, but I'm glad to finally get it off my chest.

The Sapper Protection Detail: When I started this story, I never intended to kill any of them. Sorry, Blink, Reader and Haroun! Also, I couldn't think of either a name nor a character trait for Saintly at first, so I decided to make his "quirk" hatred of religion. This was long before I knew his backstory. His nickname, like Reader, was supposed to be wholly ironic. I'm still not sure why he called the priest a lying catamite.

And at the end of that section, I got to reference the hell out of Cook's other series. Soulcatcher and the Limper are from the Black Company universe, of course, but Varthlokkur and the Thing are both Dread Empire. Nakar the Abomination is from a stand-alone story of his, The Tower of Fear, which is also set in an alternate Middle-East world. Apparently the Company gets around a lot.

Haroun pondering various translations: Tolkien was a linguist before he was a storyteller. Having a character happily speculate on place names is my way of acknowledging his influence in this story as well. Having a character keep on screwing up the translations is my idea of having fun.

The Battle Scene: At the time I had written about half the fight scene, I had intended this story to start at the beginning of the Battle of Pelennor Fields and end with their defeat. But then I reread The Return of the King and discovered that at the time of the battle, Mordor had already captured the eastern half of Osgiliath. I hadn't wanted to go back and rewrite it all for accuracy's sake, so I changed the timing and had them lead the charge that conquered it in the first place. Which means, for those who don't exactly study Tolkien lore with dedication or fervor, the good guys who retake the western half are led by Boromir and Faramir, just before Boromir rode north to attend Elrond's council.

Minas Morgul

Killing time in Minas Morgul: And because I moved the timeline back a bit, I then had pretty much nothing to write about. The armies of Mordor do nothing at all from the time they take Osgiliath and when they move on Minas Tirith. Truly, this story would have been much different had I not been too lazy to make the correction in the previous chapter. Well, I'd heard that warfare is 90% boredom and 10% terror, so let's see how bored troops in Mordor spend their time.

Paygrade of an officer, authority of a corporal: I had recently discovered the difference between rank and grade in the military, and I wished to share it.

Bullet sweating Haroun, and going deaf with exhaustion: After a particularly grueling session of Physical Training (PT) down at the station, I was literally incapable of seeing something in front of my face, and having difficulty hearing anything but roaring in my ears. So I went back and rewrote this section to describe my condition. Since Haroun, Spike and Bop are infinitely more badass than I, it takes a whole day of getting their asses kicked by Bullet to put them in that condition, while it only took two hours of mild PT to knock me out.

Personal sex fantasies: It always struck me as weird that Croaker would put his poetry about the Lady in the Annals for all posterity to read. This is my take on how it could make sense. Also, at this point, I had no plans to introduce Zim, so I suppose you could conclude that this is accidental foreshadowing.

Tonk: It's a fun game. I've played it in real life, though not for actual money, unfortunately. I was proud that I could remember the rules without looking it up. Also, Aya Bastard was supposed to survive till the end; more on that in a later chapter.

"Ay! ya bastard!" is actually what I say when I lose a hand of cards. Depending on the company I'm in, of course.

The Nine get trashed: Have you ever wondered just how all the grunts in Sauron's army reacted upon seeing the fearsome dark magic psychos come home utterly defeated? It would surely unnerve them, right? Like if you try to rob a bank and then find out mid-heist that someone had replaced the guns with toys.

And then, I referenced the hell out of stuff again. Dros Delnoch is from the first book in David Gemme's Drenai saga; the middle two battles are Black Company; the last is Dread Empire. If I'm going to cross-over, then I'm bloody well going cross-over hard.

The Grey Walker: It's pretty well acknowledged by Tolkien that Gandalf navigated the realpolitik world of LotR to fight Sauron. I'm assuming that this is how the bad guys view him- both holding him in contempt for his schemes and underhanded manipulation, and also fearing him greatly.

Rohan, Mirkwood, and Dale: Most people who don't delve deep into Tolkiens world tend to forget the fact that *everyone* was at war in this time. I think most of it is in the appendix, and some mentioned in passing in the books themselves, but it's easy to miss, especially if you're only familiar with the movie versions. I just wanted to view more of Tolkien's world through my characters' eyes, is all. Little plot significance, overall, but fun anyways.

The Pelennor Fields, Part One

Listing the Bad Guys: The sole point of this section was to set up the last line. I hammer my brain for ways to show extreme confidence on the part of the Company, then decided to just go with a list of assets they had and let the numbers speak for themselves.

The Black Company in Middle Earth

Kukri knives: They're beyond intimidating. Nothing is scarier than a crazed Ghurka coming at you with one of those. Seriously, hit Wikipedia and type in Kukri. Go on, I'll wait.

The Captain's plan: In the book, the Gondorians say something along the lines of, "They launched a surprise attack by using boats- we had to run for it!" Then I got to thinking, just what the hell had the good guys been expecting? Aren't the bridges broken? How else could the enemy get at you, except by boat? I used this small section to showcase some Company sneakery. I like to think it came out pretty well.

Sapper's explanation of Sorcerous Warfare: I really, really enjoyed writing the dialogue for this section. Also, I got to name the pterodactyl bird things, and that was fun too.

Shaggy's hashish: This was originally just going to be tobacco. Then I remembered that tobacco apparently only exists in and around the Shire. So I swapped it for some Middle-Eastern flavored smoke. Then I realized I might have accidentally made some pro-drug propaganda. Then I decided to hell with it, no one's going to be looking that deep at it.

Zimraphel: I looked it up online at some Tolkien resource center; Zimraphel is an appropriate name for a Gondorian girl. I added her as a love interest solely in order to test myself, because I'm usually crap at writing female characters.

"Luftig-hai burzum": I also looked up Black Speech dictionaries online. I have no idea how accurate they are, but who cares? So long as it sounds good.

One random site I found claimed that *luftig* meant warrior. *Hai*, of course, must mean people- *uruk-hai* and *olog-hai*, and so on. *Burzum* is darkness; you can even pick it out of Tolkien's poetry- "One Ring to rule them all, and in the darkness bind them." "Darkness" is translated to *burzum*. Feel free to check your edition of *The Fellowship of the Ring* at home, when Gandalf first tells Frodo about the Ring's history.

Luftig-hai burzum = Soldiers of Darkness. Those of you who are familiar with the later books in the Black Company just said something along the lines of, "Ah ha!"

The Pelennor Fields, Part Two

The Girl from the Wadi Hammamat: This is a real song, by the Pogues. If you YouTube the title, you can hear what all the boys were singing at Haroun. I had *Waiting for Herb* on while I was writing the first paragraph, and so decided to blatantly insert it. I figure, if Tolkien can interrupt the narrative to have characters burst out in song, why can't I?

Haroun hitting on Zim: I also really enjoyed writing this bit, as well. I don't think I made it very obvious, and of course I don't expect anyone to carefully study every word searching for subtext and hidden depth, so I'll just come on out and say it: when Haroun hits on Zim, she discovers that all the southern savages she's grown up fearing are just like the men she grew up knowing, even to the point of using the same pick-up line. It was at that point that she starts to accept possible brotherhood in the Company, because she sees them behave like normal human beings.

I apologize for just putting that out there- I always figure that if my readers can't figure out my meaning from the words on the page, then I'm the one who screwed up- but it was an interesting enough character dynamic that I wanted to make sure people caught. You can go back and reread that section with this in mind, if you want.

Haroun's death: This bloody hurt to write. Not from any great emotional pain or anything, but because I hadn't *planned* on it. Seriously. I reached that point, thought that it would give a nice hard punch to the guts to anyone reading who's invested in Haroun, and then realized I screwed myself over. At the point that Haroun's last entry was finished, Papa Jack was nothing more than a throwaway name in chapter one. Writer's block ensued as I tried to figure out how to proceed from here.

Eventually, I pushed through it, but it was hard, bitter and unrewarding work at first. Whereas while writing Haroun, the witticisms would fly like flocks of birds and the action was as smooth as glass. To wax poetical about it.

I hope I made at least one reader's chest tighten in grief and shock as they realized that Haroun's entries had been cut off, because if not then that plot twist was *fruitless*.

The Pelennor Fields, Part Three

Papa Jack's voice: This is the chapter where I hammered out how Papa Jack sounds, and shake off writing as Haroun. It was hard, but it got easier as I wrote more of it. It weirded me out greatly by

the time I reached the last chapter to realize that Haroun had only been around for the first 3rd or 4th of the actual story.

Blink and Reader: I know that one could argue that they had died in the previous chapter, but I don't care, I'm putting it here. When I killed Haroun, I decided to cut his squad half to death along with him- just to pound in the fact that the Company got raked in that fight. After some deliberation., I selected Blink and Reader, because I disliked Blink and because I liked Reader (I can't put it any clearer than that). Spike and Bop got a free pass because they're a matched set, and even I wasn't vicious enough to kill one and leave the other alive. I compromised; I just stuck Spike in the hospital and left it at that.

The Corsair mix-up: This was actually the first scene I thought of; before I sat down and wrote a single word, I envisioned a group of sympathetic characters eagerly awaiting their allies for a harsh battle, only to discover that it was the enemy in disguise. I saw their confusion, their fear, their frustration and horror. Basically, I figured that the whole battle would be a reversed version of the books- whenever the good guys are in despair and think they're doomed, my guys would be pumped up and confident. Whenever new hope grew in Gondor's hearts, my guys would be flabbergasted and horrified.

Spike getting shanked, and faking death to avoid death or capture: I always figured that Papa Jack was just putting a good face on here. What I imagined happening was that they were running helter skelter when they were overtaken- Bop and Papa hit the dirt and played dead, but Spike flopped down too late and was spotted. So the Dunedain stabbed him multiple times while Spike's comrades watched. Only once the Rangers had passed did they help him.

Just because my character says something, don't make it 100% true.

Water Sleeps

The chapter itself: I wrote and posted this chapter very quickly, to avoid losing readers who might have thought that I had finished.

Sauron has several instances of being a total dick throughout Tolkien's canon. I see no reason why his servants would be exempt from this character flaw.

Also, "Even water sleeps, but the enemy never rests" is originally a Turkish proverb that Cook borrowed for his series.

Aya Bastard and Croc: They died because I wanted to kill named characters to reinforce how serious things had gotten. I picked these two because I liked them both, which is a shame, because Aya was supposed to survive to the end.

Military Coup, Part One

Fuck, this chapter was difficult to write: Between leaving canon far behind me and having to restock my character roster, I think it's safe to say that this was a rough one.

Papa's guilt: I had thought that Papa Jack should be racked with guilt over the Annals, so I had him in angst about it. Later on, he just kind of stopped, because I forgot to keep it up. This tells me that having him constantly think of his failure was a bad move. If this were a novel, I'd edit it out and try for something better. But I don't have the ambition at this point. I'm just glad I got to the end of the story before leaving. Anything more than that is icing on the cake.

Saintly's "drunken" fights: It was at this chapter that I decided on Saintly's backstory. More on this in the Gorgoroth chapter.

The translation of Sauron: Yes, "Sauron" means foul, or putrid. "Foul" is kind of a dorky way to insult someone, so I went with the alternate option. There should be a reason why he doesn't like his servants referring to him as Sauron.

Nazgul coming to inspect troops: I couldn't think of any way to end this other than having a cliffhanger. More on this vestigial plot point in the next chapter.

Military Coup, Part Two

FUCK, this chapter was worse to write: I tried and tried to think of an interesting, believable way to write a surprise inspection. I really did. But nothing came to mind. I knew I needed to get a move on, since by this point I knew how far I had to go and I could feel my deadline marching towards me inexorably.

So I banged my head against the literary wall and nothing spilled out. Nothing at all.

Finally, I said, "Eh, screw it, I'll write about Papa Jack killing some guy." I believe that there's a piece of writing advice floating around, saying that if you write yourself into a corner, just have someone burst through the door with a gun. I inverted it- when I hit a brick wall, I simply had my protagonist burst through the door and shoot someone. Metaphorically, of course.

The Black Company in Middle Earth

Krauchbangh's endless cursing: I recalled that Tolkien mentioned that orcs were crude and foul of mouth, and that he acknowledged using a translation convention to render their vocabulary choice acceptable. I figure that means they drop cluster F-bombs at every opportunity. To cover my ass, I make sure Papa notes that their endless crudity is wearying to listen to, so I could be clear that I wasn't having my characters curse just to be edgy (Guy Ritchie, I'm looking at you).

Papa Jack is a bad-ass: Almost the only part of this chapter I actually enjoyed writing (apart from Saintly's dialogue) was Papa breaking some poor dumb uruk into multiple pieces.

After all, he's bloody Tiger Hand.

The Nazgul anticlimax: I couldn't figure out a way to make anything interesting happen here. Either the Nazgul notices something off, which would end the story with a bit of a whimper, or he notices nothing, and if that's the case then why bother with it at all?

Blah.

The best thing about this chapter, as far as I'm concerned, is that it let me go on to a part of the story that actually matters.

Cirith Ungol

GAAAH, somebody kill me, I hate this story: I recall hearing about an art instructor who told his class, "You have ten thousand terrible drawings inside of you. Start getting them out now." That's how I feel about the previous chapter and this one together. They don't extend naturally from the premise and the decisions of the characters, they only exist because I didn't think I had enough time to be elegant about it. So I hammered through them as best I could. However, this chapter is at least funny, to me in any case, and it did give me an idea for a spin-off cross-over (CSI: Mordor- imagine the possibilities). Nonetheless, it is essentially filler, even if it does let me come up with new characters to use in later chapters.

Kisander: Kisander's name is the Afghani corruption of the name Alexander in Rudyard Kipling's "The Man Who Would Be King." I had just watched the film version with Sean Connery and Michael Caine before writing this chapter, and had been in the market for a new Middle-Eastern name. Kisander is bright and cheerful because the chapter would have been boring as all hell if he hadn't been jazzed about tracking and clue-scouring.

Kisander facts: ...I make no apologies. It's funny, damn it, or it should be, anyway.

Ghazi: A term referring to a warrior who fights for Islam. Obviously, Islam doesn't exist in this universe any more than Christianity does, but apparently the concept of holy war is still around. I had an interesting background picked out for Ghazi, where he was a holy warrior in an army dedicated to wiping out the Company's employer, but was captured and had to watch his side lose. Having nothing left to go home to, he then joins up with the Company and so on.

Obviously, I never got around to telling that until now.

"No fucking sport, no fucking games...": This is an actual song dating back to WW 2. It describes a small town called Halkirk way up to the north of Scotland. It was apparently not a fun place to go on leave in. Also, this is the second time the characters have burst out into song in my story. Tolkien influences in mysterious ways.

"Stabbing motherfuckers in the face and desecrating their corpses": Part of an actual quote from my recruiting sergeant, except he said "shooting" instead of "stabbing", and "people" instead of "motherfuckers". Don't worry, he was being about as serious as Papa was.

The Plateau of Gorgoroth

Webfoot on the perimeter: Just after Cirith Ungol went up, I got the idea for Webfoot's marines. So I shoehorned him in here and hoped it would look natural when he turned up later.

Webfoot's alternative name could have been Leatherneck.

Noose: I lifted this joke directly from Monstrous Regiment, in Terry Pratchett's Discworld. I am not ashamed of it.

Papa Jack's story: I am, however, *slightly* ashamed to say I lifted the idea of an Empire drafting their vanquished enemies directly from the Clive Owen version of King Arthur. I think that it happened in real life as well- the Gurkhas come to mind, but that's not really a good parallel since they weren't actually drafted. But the source I took that plot point from was that movie. I am ashamed of this not because I stole the concept, but because when I steal ideas from other stories, I prefer them to be *good* stories.

"*She was getting betrothed at 13?*": Fun fact: Juliet, from *Romeo and Juliet*, got married at thirteen. Most people who read Shakespeare know this. Most who do not, miss it. Those who don't read Shakespeare and find this out get very uncomfortable for a moment, before assuring themselves that that sort of thing was acceptable back then.

Saintly, however, has no knowledge of cultural relativity, and so speeds directly to disgust.

Saintly's story: As at least one person acknowledged in the comments, Saintly is Ehud from the Old Testament. Check out the Book of Judges, he is somewhere near the beginning of that text. Or, if it's more convenient, hit Wikipedia and type in Ehud for more detail.

Let's just say that while Moses may have received the Law from YHWH, and led the Israelites through the wilderness to the Promised Land in His Name, Ehud racked up a body count worthy of Rambo.

The Book of Judges is *hardcore*. Also, it's morally challenging, and a theological meditation on human frailness and our inability to cleave to any moral code. However, this is a subject best avoided in a story that glorifies war, violence, and cruelty.

...

Moving on.

"*Forcing my jaw up and down and throwing his voice into my mouth*": I'm imagining that the same thing happened to Saintly as happened to Frodo in the Council of Elrond. Just like Saintly, Frodo stepped forward and fulfilled the command of some mysterious higher power, without even deciding to. It was vaguely implied in the Fellowship of the Ring that one of the Valar or even Eru inspired him to do it.

Are we to assume that Frodo and Frodo alone in all of the history of Middle Earth received such divine inspiration? I doubt it.

The Sea of Nurnen

The numbers involved in the final battle: Tolkien is mum on just how large the host of Mordor is. I have no idea if the bad guys were supposed to outnumber the good guys 10-1, 60-1, or 1,000-1. Any one of those three choices would make for a different kind of story, but all three are covered by the blanket statement that the hosts of Mordor were overwhelming. You just gotta make up your own facts to suit yourself in those situations.

Shatarz's supplies: I have heard it said that in modern day warfare, it takes 10 people in support roles to place a single infantryman on the ground, pretty much for the reasons listed.

A shout out to any soldier who counts potatoes or repairs trucks or diagnoses systems or whatever. Without them, every operation grinds to an embarrassed halt.

"*They will be eating dust and bitter air*": "The French are learning that in Spain, small armies are defeated while large armies starve." -Bernard Cornwell, in his *Sharpe* series.

Sapper's caltrops: Sapper just invented a magitech version of the anti-personnel mine. I told you, he's a combat engineer.

Paleboy, Mahmoud, and Landshark: I specifically introduced these three for the purpose of using them in the coming battles. Then I went and completely forgot about them till writing this just now.

I guess I'm kind of a ditz sometimes.

Zim's last significant scene: I had literally nothing planned for her at all, except to smooth things over with the Gondorians. So I gave her an illness and hoped that would fill her drama quotient. Then, the many battle scenes took over and I never really got back to her.

So, sorry about that. I told you, I'm crap at writing women's roles.

Saintly's joke: The original plan was to have Papa Jack accompany the raiders to take the Annals back. But I couldn't be bothered to write a fight scene without some canon to lean on, so I gave Saintly a practical joke instead. Judging by the reviews of that chapter, people dug it.

The Battle for Mordor: Preparation

Ancient training drills: I had been recently been introduced to cadence running at this point. I decided to throw it in for some realism and color. The one that goes "Let the bodies hit the FLOOR!" is particularly fun to sing, especially while pwning in Nazi Zombies. You get the Death Machine, start pumping out storm gales of pain and destruction, start stomping your feet to the rhythm...

Anyway. The point is, those lyrics are real lyrics, mostly. For Kisander's chant, I replaced "Airborne" with "uruk", and "Paramedic" with "battle medic", but that's all.

The Black Company in Middle Earth

"Don't call me sir, I'm not an officer": I had this big scene planned where Bullet unleashes hell on the uruk for calling him sir. Then I remembered I had promoted him at the top of the page.

facepalm So, yeah, I worked around it.

"If we lose cadence, your mates are going to suffer for it": Making everyone around you do push-ups because you personally screwed up is called "fucking your buddy." I know this, because I've been getting familiar with the concept over the past month or two, on both sides of the equation.

"Where there's a whip": If you're really into Lord of the Rings, you probably know of the animated version of The Return of the King. It's slightly hokey, but the music is top notch. If you *are* unfamiliar with it, YouTube "where there's a whip there's a way". It'll be worth it.

The first draft had the uruks making the whip sounds with their mouths when they found that no whips were available. I rewrote that because, well, it was sorta funny(ish), but not funny enough to justify ruining the scene's purpose.

The unbreakable spears: The motif of spears or arrows that can be broken one by one but are stronger together is an old one. It's sorta kinda the basis of Fascism, *fasces* being the word used for a bundle of sticks tied together.

So yeah.

I swear to you I'm not a Nazi, I'm not a Nazi, I swear I'm not a...

Webfoot's marines: It was my experience that the Marine Corps and the Army have two very different recruitment pitches.

The Army says, "Look at how much you can gain by joining up. We give you pay, promotion, education. We will give you online courses to expand your skill base. Just sign the dotted line and we'll give you all kinds of benefits."

The Marine Corps says, "You will suffer in Basic training. We will torment you, wear you down, chew you up, and spit you out. Only a real badass can endure what we will do to you. Think you can handle it?"

There is some overlap- I recall that when the Corps tried to recruit me near the end of high school, the recruiters made a point of telling me how much being in the Marines had improved their lives, both financially and personally. And certainly my current recruiting sergeant boasts about how hard Ranger school is. But broadly speaking, the Marines get recruits by emphasizing how hard it will be, and the

Army gets recruits by emphasizing how beneficial it will be.

Webfoot's boys are pretty much the modern day USMC armed with swords and bows. If I'm a little hazy on exactly how they operate, it's because I don't have many specifics on them. All of the meager info I have on the military focuses mainly on the Army.

Wolf riders: Seriously though, why weren't there wargs at the Battle of Pelennor? Why?

The Battle for Mordor: Conflict

In the trenches: The Company's basic strategy is to use WW 1 style trench warfare to slow down and absorb the enemy attacks. Every time the word "trenches" is used, just imagine a scene from All Quiet on the Western Front. Except with no rifles or grenades or artillery...

Ach, just go with it. Details just ruin everything sometimes. Just imagine that it's actually possible to have something like the Western Front occur with medieval technology.

Sapper's moment of glory: I wanted to have Sapper quote Colonel Kilgore: "I love the smell of naptha in the morning!" But I couldn't think of a way to do it without sounding cheesy as hell.

Angnar: I made this name up after searching for an elvish dictionary online. Isn't Google wonderful? "Angnar" translates to Iron Rat, on the grounds that to survive five centuries in a death camp you need to have that kind of mindset. Accordingly, I doubt that Angnar was the name he was born with.

Orc and elf side by side: Somewhere in the Silmarillion, there's an account of a battle where the narrator specifically states that members of every race fought on each side. Back when I first read it, I couldn't figure out if that meant some of the orcs had fought with the good guys. It seemed out of character, to say the least, but the words stood: "Members of every race."

For the purposes of this story, I chose to interpret it so that some orcs rebelled against Morgoth.

However, I was too lazy to look up the exact circumstances of the battle, so I went by memory. Send in a comment if you know the battle I was thinking of.

Also, ever since writing this story I have to keep reminding myself that they're called orcs and not uruks.

Czernograd: Czernograd = Stalingrad, in my mind. Enough said.

The Battle for Mordor: A Steel Rain

The title: I was under the impression that "A Steel Rain" was the name of an upcoming sequel to the Black Company, to take place after *Soldiers Live*. Then I looked it up online and found that I had misremembered it- it's supposed to be "A Pitiless Rain". Oops.

Well, I like mine better anyway.

The Watchers in the Water; the raiders from south and east: I kept trying to find ways to worsen the situation for the Company. I am particularly glad that the Watchers saw military action again. I felt so clever when I came up with that idea.

Boiling water following the ships: Boiling water is one of the signs that a Kraken is near. Wikipedia is both amazing and convenient.

"...often betting on who can who can score the most confirmed kills": Ever notice that historical snipers tend to come with little tags saying how many confirmed kills they got? I did.

Sapper's message: Norwest suggested to me that I try to include a report that they saw two smallish sized uruks prowling around Mt. Doom, looking suspicious.

I loved the idea.

I couldn't think of a way to include the idea.

Nor could Norwest come up with something.

He suggested I should drop it if it didn't fit, so I did.

The Free State of Mordor

Today we tossed the Numenorean into the drink: If I did my job correctly, you all nodded with satisfaction while you read about a war crime. Cruelly executing prisoners of war without trial is not how the good guys roll. Luckily, I only deal with anti-heroes.

Papa Jack and the Gondorian knight swapping tales: It's a guy thing. Maybe girls do it to, I wouldn't know, but I can assure you that swapping stories about injuries is a guy thing.

"I broke my arm last year. Jumped off the bleachers and landed badly. It was all out of alignment, poking at the skin."

"Nice. But check this- you see this scar? I accidentally ran straight into a broken off tree branch while on vacation in Yosemite."

"Sweet. You know, when I was five years old, my brother pushed me into the hot tub at my uncle's house. I cracked my head on the side of the tub. I had to get 15 stitches, right here, just above the hairline."

God knows that *I* do it all the time, I don't see why they wouldn't. The fact that it doubles as a significant plot scene is just icing on the cake.

Zim's farewell: Bye, Zim. Sorry I couldn't think of anything interesting for you to do in the last half of the story.

The summation of Lord of the Rings: Tolkien wrote his story to venerate the humble, to affirm the Christian declaration that our God is a God of the meek and broken, not a God who dotes on tyrants and disdains those without power. This is why the hero is a hillbilly midget who fails in the end, who gives in to his temptation and finds that he cannot complete his quest at all due to his own weakness. Then the in-universe God works through him to renew the world.

An interesting twist on the usual story of strong nations duking it out for supremacy, like in almost every other piece of heroic fantasy out there (Conan the Barbarian, the Drenai Saga, Shannara, etc.; and for that matter Beowulf and Gilgamesh and the Iliad and so on). In Tolkien's world, it is the decisions of two humble little fellas well out of their depth on which the fate of the world rests, not any feats of arms or shows of strength.

Naturally a professional mercenary would be pissed off at finding out he was at best a sideshow of a sideshow.

Sauron in the silver spike: Ah. Aha. Er.

When I wrote this section, I envisioned their spear becoming a magic artifact like in the Books of the South, where the Standard of the Black Company is a fearsome tool of unholy Power. A single puncture wound from the Lance of Passion sent a Nazgul-esque villain called the Howler to death's door. I figured that with the soul of Sauron empowering their new Standard, they would be well-equipped to deal with any more magical threats.

Then, a comment in the review section made me realize that they had in essence basically made an artifact that at any moment could be used to resurrect Sauron, Goblet of Fire style; or drag whoever touches it into psychotic corruption.

Far from giving themselves a weapon of mass destruction, they may have screwed themselves over royally.

...Oops.

I rewrote the section to make it a little clearer what the initial intention was, but it's still a little distressing that I may have set the stage for Sauron's return after what I thought was a happy ending.

Such is writing, I suppose.

Author's Afterword / Behind the Scenes

Length: Ha! This chapter is the longest of any of them. Funny, that.

Content: You can consider this to be the equivalent to the Appendices, or possibly the endless extra content that the special editions of the movies had.

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