

Eastover Patrol

It was a melodious sound to Captain Rennok Grald's ears; the drumming of hooves upon the small wooden bridge spanning the ditch surrounding Eastover Keep. Not that Rennok loved riding. He'd never been a horseman. But, the meaning behind the rhythmic pounding filled him with the only true joy of his life; the prospect of bloodshed.

Behind him, seven other grim-faced riders followed, moving swiftly beyond the exit gate and into the open expanse beyond. These seven others rode under Rennok's command, and like him, wore the drab gray livery of the Eastover Keep garrison. The unit rode with purpose, pinpointing a specific task. One day earlier, a cluster of campfires had been spotted south of their fortification, along the ankles of the Malvus Peaks. Captain Grald's company intended to investigate the area and deal with any threats.

This type of sortie wasn't uncommon. Although Eastover Keep did a splendid job preventing savages from passing through Nirem Pass into the province of Goraj, various barbarian tribes, as well as others of ill intent, appeared resourceful at finding passage beyond the great barrier by simply scaling a mountain-range most sane men deemed unscalable. Thus, detachments were sent at regular intervals to patrol the land and eradicate the roaming tribes that had proven far more than just a nuisance.

Leading his men south at a trot, Rennok recalled the beginning of his term at Eastover Keep, a distant fifteen years ago. Such sorties numbered a dozen men in those days. Unfortunately, that number had been reduced to eight, a result of Eastover's garrison decreasing significantly to facilitate the Brittour Kingdom's raging war in the west. Thus, those who remained of the eastern edge of the civilized world found themselves burdened with more duties than ever before. Eastover had become a somber, joyless place, operated by assiduous soldiers who got little reward for the painstaking fruits of their labor.

None of that mattered to Rennok at the moment, for he was not a ponderous man. Immediate joys drove him, and he modestly hoped this little excursion allowed him the opportunity to smash some barbarian skulls.

In his late thirties, his sturdy, brick-like frame appeared to be one large undefined muscle. He kept his jet black goatee trimmed in standard military fashion and his hair slicked back. He bore hardened facial features, almost chiseled, seemingly incapable of producing a smile. If ever there was a man built for the harsh, numbing life of a soldier, it was Rennok. Across his back was a great bearded axe, taken from a slain foe in battle. This was his mounted weapon. On the ground, he would pull free the giant spiked chain currently hanging across his destrier's hips. This large spiked chain, an exotic item that seemed far too cumbersome to realistically be used as a weapon, had been mastered by Rennok. With it, he was fierce indeed upon the battleground.

As with most patrol units, Captain Grald's riders were not trained cavalry, but merely mounted infantry men who possessed passable skills with the reigns. These days, even the lowest ranked footman had to learn basic riding skills, as Eastover Keep utilized its ever dwindling heavy cavalry only sporadically to safekeep their numbers for the most important battles.

The calendar marked the month of Sigur, the wildflowers had bloomed, and the skies stretched blue before them. Riding south in swift silence, the contingent wouldn't reach their goal until late afternoon and had no intention of dawdling about. The wilds simply weren't safe, even inside the boundaries of Goraj, and one could almost read the desire of the patrolmen's faces to be done with the task and back amid the safe confines of Eastover; all of them save Rennok himself. The captain never seemed to concern himself with normal fears. His mind, always precise and goal oriented, didn't operate in the same fashion as others. This tunneled concentration occasionally led to the detriment of his own men, but Rennok wasn't a man to accept blame. He regarded losses a result of the unpreparedness of the victim. Many believed this particular mindset kept him from any promotions beyond the rank of captain; a belief that held merit.

As Eastover Keep disappeared on the illuminate horizon behind them, Rennok glanced back at his troop once, then turned forward and led them further into the wilds.

"Orcs, Captain," the rider whispered, "and not so many. They're split among three fires, about twenty of them."

They stood in silence behind a hillock, not a half-mile from the camp they targeted. Rennok gazed at the soldier in the waning light. The man had just returned from a brief excursion scouting the enemy. Rennok acknowledged the information with the barest of nods and asked, "Any watches?"

"Only two," the other answered. "One on a southern knoll, and one just beyond this ridge, on the north side of the camp."

"And the fires?"

The scout rubbed his eyes. "All three clustered in the center. They've no camp discipline and don't appear on their guard. They won't be expecting us."

A malicious look of satisfaction graced the captain's face. "We'll ride in and wipe them clean with one throw of the dice."

"Do we wait till morning, Captain?" asked a different soldier. "It grows dark, and they've better vision at night."

Rennok squinted, as if trying to view the camp through the hill. "No. There's still a bit of daylight left. We can make use of it if we strike immediately. Waiting till morning brings other risks. Quickly gather the men, Bert, we have plans to make."

The sun strained to grant the world its last fading rays when Rennok, on horse, burst through one side of the camp like a flushed boar. With a

second rider on his left, the two flashed past the orc standing watch on the north side, paying it no heed as they bolted toward the center of camp with weapons overhead. The emergence of these riders posed such a shock to the orc watchman that it hadn't the time to even raise a weapon before they were beyond its reach. It could only chase them on foot while bellowing a warning.

From two other corners of the camp, the remainder of the Eastover patrol emerged, and a sudden spark of chaos ignited what had been a calm evening only seconds prior. The orcs, most of them not wearing their armor, staggered to their feet amidst grunts of confusion and fumbled for their weapons. For many, the time it took to gather themselves and assess whom, or what, their enemies were proved costly.

Rennok, the stimulant of battle provoking his senses, split a scalp with the first stroke of his axe, and was already running down a second. The captain fought like a lunatic storm giant, cursing, yelling, and laughing, seemingly all at the same time, while he delightedly arched his weapon with brutal intent. Cleaving a path of destruction before him, he took a moment to glance around, noting his other riders having similar success. The unwary orcs fell like willows in a gale, shrieking unpleasantly as they dropped. The whole of it lasted only a couple minutes, and of the entire group, only four had taken hold of their senses and formed a type of resistance while their brethren were slaughtered. The bedlam subsided just as quickly as it had started. When the dust from the charging horses settled, these four ill-fated targets gathered back to back in the center of camp, holding out their weapons defiantly as the Eastover patrol circled them.

His axe blade dripping crimson, Rennok casually led his mount over to what was now a small gathering; eight horsemen around four unfortunate orcs. Near them, the campfires still burned, throwing vague shadows over the ground as night nearly finished swallowing the last bits of daylight. The captain gazed disdainfully down at the orcs, who rebelliously hissed and gnashed their teeth, giving the air of feigned fearlessness. Even if they had wished for mercy, Rennok would not offer it. He pitied nothing.

"Keep them together," he commanded the others, dismounting in one leap. His axe thudded to the ground as he moved to his saddle bags. With an

almost deliberate slowness, as if intentionally playing up the curiosity of the remaining orcs eyeing him, he withdrew the giant chain that hung there. Preparing it in his arms, he gripped the iron-wrought center ring and coolly took some practice swings as the remainder of the patrol backed away. They'd seen this before. Rennok was a death machine with that spiked chain in his command. Eastover soldiers festered a hatred for orcs, however, and they'd feel no guilt standing by as the captain did his grisly work.

The breadth of Rennok's precise swings grew to full length, and the massive chain started moving toward the wide-eyed beasts. There was nowhere to run. The orcs own weapons couldn't match the reach of their attacker, and they shifted in place, still snarling in rage, but uncertain if they should remain on the defensive, or attack.

They were given only moments to choose.

The first unfortunate victim was violently lifted into the air, the sheer force of the heavy links cracking bone on impact. As it landed awkwardly, the side of its gut shown nothing but a messy pulp. When the same happened to a second orc, the remaining two realized they stood no chance if they remained in place. In desperation, they rushed the murderous captain. Rennok's final swing dropped them both, their legs taken from underneath. They writhed on the earth in agony, bones broken where they'd been hit. The captain didn't finish the job, but instead gathered up his weapon, wiping the blood-stained spots with a rag he pulled from his saddlebags. Others from the patrol took it upon themselves to end the whimpering orcs' suffering.

All told, twenty-four corpses littered the small campsite, all done in the time it took a man to squat and empty his bladder. Not a single Eastover soldier among them, nor had any horses been lost. The foray had been a complete and total success. Post-battle exhilaration filled the men. They slapped each other's shoulders and hooted over their triumphs while they searched for any orc valuables worth keeping. Mostly, they were glad to have lived. Life was far too fragile in the tired, beat-down province of Goraj, and none took a sunrise for granted. Now, all that remained was the return to Eastover Keep bearing news of their accomplishment.

"What do you make of this, Captain?"

It was morning. The men had camped near the orc site the previous night, giving it one more inspection before returning north. Unfortunately, they'd come across something worth investigating. The eight of them stood on a southern knoll, gazing at marks in the soft earth.

"Orc tracks, for certain," Rennok answered, bending low to examine them. "And some worg prints among them. Recent, too."

"Worgs? We saw none at the camp."

Grunting, the captain straightened his body and stretched his neck. "No, but those are worg tracks nonetheless."

The other soldier visibly frowned. "Perhaps the band we killed last night was once part of a larger group that has now split?"

Rennok spat upon the ground, the ichor clinging to a blade of grass. "Or, they're still together. Whomever left these tracks might be coming back."

"We'll need to report this when we return to Eastover. The next patrol will want to know."

At this, the captain laughed. "The only news we'll be reporting is news that we've eliminated both sets."

The eyes of each of the other soldiers widened considerably, almost incredulously. Their united voice, carried forth by Rennok's unfortunate second in command, commenced their argument. "You want to follow these tracks south? Captain, you're not serious! This was to be a two day excursion."

"We have provisions for several days, Bert. By Tah's blood, you expect a different patrol to come investigate these when there's an armed patrol

already here? Our mission is the same; clear the area of these beasts, and godsbedamned, we're going to do it."

Perhaps, ever so slightly, almost inaudible, there were groans from the circle of soldiers. Rennok's second-in-command made a vain attempt to persist his case, though he knew he'd already lost once the captain had made his mind. "Have you any idea where these tracks lead? They could carry for miles on end."

A grin crossed Rennok's face, an alarming image. His voice was bold, specific, excited. "That's what we're going to find out."

"We don't even know what we're up against, Captain. General Elhon did not assign us anything beyond this camp."

"General Elhon didn't know we'd find evidence of more orcs. I'll not debate this, soldier. If you wish to ride back on your own, do so. I'm certain you'll have a grand time explaining to the General why you've abandoned your patrol. Otherwise, I'll hear nothing else."

Rennok glanced at his command. The soldiers made every effort to look indifferent, but inside, they wanted nothing more than to return to Eastover. They pointed their eyes on the ground, silently pleading to whatever gods they followed that the captain would have a sudden change of heart.

Unfortunately, the captain had no such inclinations. "We have nothing to fear," he shouted to them. "Whatever made these tracks will pose no more threat than what we massacred last night. On our return to Eastover, we'll leave nothing behind but the corpses of those who wished to destroy us. Now mount and let's be off."

Minutes later, the patrol galloped further south, following the inconsistent tracks left by their newly designated prey. On this day, the weather was comfortable; balmy with a slight breeze caressing them from the west. The rider's minds, however, were not directed at the weather. They were too busy mulling over this unfortunate second excursion. They'd been so close

to heading home, and now, they were riding *further away*! Gods! The thought was almost unbearable. None of them, save the captain, were eager for what lie ahead, and they brooded to each other with their eyes so that Rennok did not see.

Not that the captain would have cared. He'd made his intentions clear, and as always, there was no convincing him otherwise. They rumbled along at a swift pace, and when their path turned toward rockier terrain, the tracks suddenly disappeared. This proved no deterrent for Rennok, and he forged his way along searching for new signs of his prey.

That's how it went. Morning turned to noon, and noon came and went. Had the captain paid his men any attention, he would have realized their sour mood. But Rennok paid no mind to such matters. He only thought of a single purpose, the blood he would shed, and the stories he would tell afterward.

It wasn't until late in the afternoon, when the company came across a tiny stream meandering along the bottom of the Malvus, did Rennok halt them and allow them to dismount for an extended period of time.

"Get the horses some drink, then tie them. Stretch your legs a bit," he called out.

There was little conversation among the men, save terse mumbling. Their collective mood had grown most fowl throughout the day, and they kept silent for fear they'd say something they'd regret. Rennok led his own mount to the stream and the horse drank greedily. The wheels turned behind his eyes as he gazed on the southern horizon. He couldn't fathom what had happened to these mysterious orcs. Damn those beasts! They had to be somewhere in the area! The thought they'd somehow evaded his wrath infuriated him, and made him more determined at the same time.

He scanned his men and clearly noticed the downcast, halfhearted looks on their faces. By no means did they appear energized as he felt they should. In fact, they seemed glum, as if they'd rather be somewhere else. This maddened him all the more! Had these men no ambition and honor? By the gods, they were professional soldiers of Eastover, not strawhead

peasants! They should want to dance on these damnable orc corpses as much as he. Scowling, he tied his mount to gnarled, ugly looking tree and walked away from the stream, to a flat clearing where the men could fit.

"Everyone here!" he barked.

The men did not move quickly, and he followed his order with a curse-laden string of insults. They finally made their way to stand around him, groaning as they adjusted their cuirasses and wiped the sweat from their faces. and he glared relentlessly at their faces, cursing again for good measure.

"Five minutes, you whoresons, then we ride again until we find what we're looking for. I don't give a damn how bad you want to return to Eastover, we are soldiers with a task, and that task will be completed!"

Again, it was Officer Bertrand Morland, Rennok's second in command, who shocked everyone when he spoke up against the captain. His words came forth as an angry, impulsive burst. "Bloody Hell, Captain, we've already completed the task given! This wild chase you put us on was not ordered us. Now we've ridden a full extra day further, with nothing to show. How long to you wish to continue this meaningless hunt? Another full day?"

Rennok's dark eyes opened like saucers, his death stare causing the ensign to look away briefly before regaining his resolve and meeting the captain's stare. "Those are treacherous words, Officer. The thin ice you stand on can easily break." His voice was slow, venom filled.

To the sheer incredulity of the others, Bertrand stood his ground. Despite the evident crack in his voice, the officer, a well-liked soldier about five years Rennok's junior, held strong. "Captain, this added venture has not only wasted valuable time, but placed us in a perilous predicament. This is hostile land."

Rennok looked for all the world like a man who'd just been slapped in the face by someone half his size. His face burned red, teeth gritted, the anger swelling within his eyes. He took a measured step toward Bertrand and spoke slowly, as if making every effort not to strangle the man then and

there. "I've served Eastover for fifteen years, you treacherous shitpicker. Of all here, I know more than anyone how hostile this land can be. If you don't stand down I'll make certain—"

Grunting, shrieking, and pounding sounds echoed from up the mountainside, cutting the captain short. Every head turned toward the direction of the noise.

Not far away, riders on giant wolf-like beasts were clamoring down the side of a rounded hill, the backdrop of the great mountains behind them. Rennok watched disbelievingly, drawing his eyes across the breadth of them. There rode at least thirty, dirt flying from where the beasts, clearly worgs, clawed and kicked the ground into the air. A single orc on a worg was a frightening proposition. Thirty of them? Well, it wouldn't end well, that was certain. Rennok then drew his gaze to where his own men had tied their horses, near the stream. The animals were too far away. The riders, charging full speed, would have them before they could mount. Inwardly, he cursed, for his spiked chain was still hung across the hips of his own horse. He'd have to use his axe until he could get there, which he intended to do, half-dead or not.

"Worg riders!" the captain cried out. "Form a defensive circle!"

"You fucker!" a soldier despairingly cried. The remaining patrol, all stunned by this sudden and seemingly improbable orc surprise attack, hesitated for only a moment before making the protective ring, their blades drawn. They spoke no more, for there was no time, nor was there any need. They all knew they'd be shortly dead. Anger fueled them; anger at their captain. The only positive they gleaned from this new predicament was the knowledge that Rennok would die as well.

Charging orcs, atop huffing, red-eyed worgs, reached their level and rounded them, grinning savagely. The Eastover patrol, surrounded on all sides, kept themselves shoulder to shoulder, swiveling their heads in every direction, weapons out. Without the heavy shields or pikes typically required to repel a mounted assault, they were terribly unequipped and undermanned. Most of these men had never been charged by cavalry before, and this was no common cavalry. A feeling of sheer, near

debilitating terror consumed them. The sour realization of what their own victims had experienced when they'd ridden them down only a day before was now all too clear, and it pained them even more. This was not the way any of them envisioned dying.

The frightening cavalry did not savor long the moments of dread they'd sown within the faces of the soldiers, for they closed in and rammed the garrison full bore. The circle disintegrated immediately. Everyone found themselves on their own, and at that moment, the world became a maelstrom of ringing steel and dying screams. There was no fluidity to the battle, just the frenzied waving of weapons and the cursed wailing of worgs.

Rennok hacked viciously in every direction with his axe, intent not only on survival, but to make his way to his mount at all costs and retrieve his spiked chain. He only had to live long enough to get there. Swinging low, he brought his weapon across the legs of a charging worg. The beast toppled, along with its rider, in a mass of muscle. He leapt atop the orc, still squirming to free itself, and drove the head of his axe into its skull before doing the same to the worg.

Glancing beyond the squall, he pinpointed the tied mounts, then noticed a rogue orc taking it upon himself to kill each of the helpless, flailing horses, one by one. Rennok sprinted in that direction, dodging the lethal stroke of a mace. He closed the gap to the mounts quickly, but another worg rider discovered him. This orc chose to ride him down from behind. The captain, functioning entirely on instinct, heard its advance and rolled to the side while swinging his axe in a high arc. He took the head of the orc with a splay of blood. The worg bulleted beyond him, unaware its rider was dead. Rennok ignored the unholy beast and continued his pursuit of the horses.

A javelin struck the ground near him, almost tripping him up, but he did well to stay on his feet. A few strides later, Rennok arrived at the horses, quickly moving to stand beside his own mount. The equine body lay on the ground in a bloodstained mess. It still lived, but was rapidly dying, much like the other Eastover mounts. The animal kicked its legs weakly, a ghastly neck wound draining its life. Rennok ended the animal's misery with one swing, but his attention had already fallen upon the spiked chain that

lay next to the corpse. A jolt of wild pleasure crawled up his spine. By Tah, there would be reckoning now!

Sparing not a moment, he dropped his axe and hoisted the giant chain, sensing the immediate surge rush through him; the surge of uncorrupted conviction. At this point, living or dying mattered little. As long as he held his instrument of death, his world was bliss.

Rennok returned to the fray like a man possessed by all the furies of Hell. Both ends of his chain swung with fatalistic rage. Worg and orc alike fell before him, their chests or faces caved in. At this point, only impulse ruled the captain. All militaristic strategy had been tossed to the wind from the initial charge, and now, it was only a matter of who remained standing. Rennok savored this, lived for it. His eyes grew luminous as he wheeled his weapon in circles, rupturing bodies that dared intrude his way.

Something slipped past his guard and he instantly felt a distant pain in his shoulder. Without taking the time to turn his head, he threw his forearm into the chest of the foe, battering it into the muck beneath him, then drove the heel of his boot at full weight into the neck while still keeping his attention upon other foes, madly swinging. A dull crack beneath him informed the captain that he'd broken the creature's neck. He shifted his weight away and continued his mechanical march forward.

Rennok didn't know how many he'd maimed and killed, but at some point he noticed the orcs moving backward, away from him, seemingly to avoid the chain-wielding juggernaut. Then suddenly, they were retreating. With some effort, he halted the momentum of his menacing weapon and allowed himself to focus solely on the orcs. Six of them, all on worgs, were riding west, away from the melee. He watched them go, waiting for them to turn at any moment and make a cohesive charge. They did not. The worg riders fully fled, moving beyond his vision. *Only for the time being*, he thought grimly, guardedly.

With the flame of battle extinguished, the captain finally managed to exhale fully. He touched his shoulder with a hand, and though he felt nothing, the blood on his palm was a stern message. But, there was no

time to worry about that now. He gazed about his surroundings, and silently cursed the gods.

The small battlefield was littered with the dead, or soon to be dead. Orcs, worgs, humans, and all the horses. Gods mercy, he'd have to huff it on foot! Rennok was struck with the sudden thought that he might be the only one in this place who still lived, that he alone had survived this onslaught. While this sentiment might have filled him with a tidbit of pride, he desperately hoped he was mistaken. Weapon in hand, the captain began to walk among the bodies.

Officer Bertrand lay awkwardly on his back, helmetless, his one remaining eye staring soullessly into the sky. He'd been hammered across the face with a mace, then trampled. It was a common sight amid the lifeless figures who wore the gray of Eastover Keep. They had fought hard, but they'd been killed. Rennok quickly counted them up, realizing he'd only found six. One was missing.

Frantically, he looked about, searching for the last Eastover corpse. It took him a minute to understand he'd been looking in the wrong place. Upon a large rock was the last Eastover Soldier. He was still alive! The body was in a sitting position, head buried between the arms and knees. A bloodied sword lay next to him.

Rennok rushed to the survivor and grabbed his shoulder, but the man didn't move. Was he injured?

"Soldier, how badly are you hurt?" he asked.

Finally, a face slowly pulled away from its hiding place, tears falling down a young man's eyes. In a voice that reeked more of utter despair than anger, he declared, "You pigheaded son of a bitch!"

"Help me gather some provisions from the dead, and let's be off. We've a long walk ahead." Remarkably, Captain Grald, perhaps due to the circumstances, had ignored a scathing insult from a subordinate only moment's before.

The other soldier, a younger lad, somewhere in his early to mid-twenties, eased himself off the great rock, taking the hilt of his sword in hand. "I'm not going anywhere with you."

This clearly startled the captain. He cocked his head and narrowed his eyes upon the soldier. "Is that so?"

As was typical with someone at odds with the captain, the other soldier had difficulty meeting those menacing, borderline lunatic eyes. In this instance, however, the man's fully blossomed resentment of Rennok won the day. He spoke firmly, angry and full of defiance. "You're the reason we're stranded out here. You're the reason the others are dead. I've lost friends because of this fools errand. It's on your hands, *Captain*." The last word was injected with noticeable venom and perhaps the slightest bit of mockery.

Rennok did not speak immediately. He continued to enfold the soldier with those weighty eyes, sizing him. At last, with remarkable control over his voice, he asked, "What is your name, soldier?"

Mountain take me, the other man thought. Of course he wouldn't know my name. The captain never learned anyone's name unless completely necessary. It was no wonder everyone hated him!

Despite his profound frustration, the younger man complied, "Garrus Weldner."

The captain nodded at this, as if understanding something the other soldier did not. "Listen well, Garrus. Neither of us can change what has already happened. All we can control is how we respond. We've no horses, so we're left with one option. But we're still going back to Eastover."

"They died because of you, Captain! You led us here!"

"I led us to the enemy, which is my job," the captain retaliated. "I cannot do the fighting for every man in my command, soldier."

Garrus just shook his head. "We never had a chance, and you know it! You dropped us in the middle of an ambush. Their blood is on your hands! They're all dead!"

"You're not dead, Garrus, are you?"

For some illogical reason, Garrus noticed, the normally headstrong, confrontational captain was actually rather composed. And even more interestingly, this unpredictable mood change only increased Garrus' exasperation. This captain, against the advice of others, had single-handedly led his troop to a horrible end, and *now* he remained calm? It was unfathomable! The young soldier's words of reprisal were on the tip of his tongue, but never escaped his mouth, as the captain beat him to voice.

"Enough of this bickering," the captain muttered, swinging his spiked chain over his shoulder. "We've not the time. I'm walking back to Eastover, and if you wish to live, you'd be wise to accompany me. If not, then I'll leave you to your fate. I'm sure those orcs will be quite pleased when they return to find you still here."

For his life, Garrus couldn't comprehend how this man operated. With a little effort, he snapped, "It's probably a good five day march."

Rennok's stone face actually grinned. "Nothing we can't manage. Now, are you going to help me gather a few extra supplies, or am I to do this alone?"

Garrus watched the man begin to dig through the supplies of the dead. Blessed Tah, how far could they go before Garrus killed him himself?

Rennok emerged from the darkness and found a seat in the tiny area where the two men had formed their camp. Following the massacre, they'd walked in almost complete silence for three hours. As dusk settled, they wisely established a place amid the foothills, hidden from view. With the orc's prominent nightvision, and other beasties about, it was foolish to travel in the dark.

"No sign of them so far," the captain grumbled, taking a bite of some stale bread. "Maybe they've had enough of us."

Garrus couldn't tell if the captain was speaking to him, or just rambling to no one in particular.

Rennok had already rubbed a healing salve over his shoulder wound, wrapping it as best he could without impeding mobility. The grimaces he made as he moved his left arm proved an obvious indication that the injury pained him, though the big man would never admit it. The real question was whether the salve would prevent infection or not. They had no healer to attend them out here, and infections could be quite lethal.

Garrus hadn't escaped injury either, though his were less painful and serious. A retched, ugly bruise reached across his forehead where his helmet had been knocked off during the skirmish. The younger soldier had carried a pounding headache since. He'd also gained a long cut on the underside of his forearm, but it wasn't deep and didn't really need attending other than some salve.

"We'll need to kill the torch. Too dangerous to keep something lit around here," Rennok announced, lifting his cold stare from the ground and placing it upon the other man.

Garrus noticed that the faint glow of the torch upon the captain's face gave him almost a ghoulish appearance. Frowning, the younger man looked away. The captain still angered him greatly, and Garrus bit his tongue so as not to voice something he'd regret.

Oblivious to his comrade's disdain, Rennok unceremoniously took hold of the torch that had been shoved into the ground between them, snuffing it out. With that, they were swallowed by the glittery heavens above. In this isolated place, the cloudless night sky was quite extraordinary; the stars seemingly far brighter than at Eastover Keep, like a million tiny candles. The spectacle was oddly therapeutic. He stared for several silent moments, his troubles briefly vanishing.

As if on cue, it was Rennok's coarse voice that ruined the young man's tranquility. "Tell me Garrus, how did you come to serve at Eastover?"

Dolefully, Garrus wrenched his eyes from the scenery above and looked over to the captain. So dark it was, he could barely see the burly man's silhouette only a few feet away. "Not by extraordinary means. I'm a local, grew up in the Eastover town proper. Parents were hired laborers. Dad a plowman. He died when I was young, and mom took any work she could. When I came of age, I chose the path that made the most sense."

A moment of silence, then the captain asked, "Still alive? Your mother?"

"Don't humor me, Captain. You care not about my mother," Garrus interjected, keeping his eyes on the fire."

"If I didn't care, soldier, I wouldn't have asked," Rennok responded.

Garrus shook his head and took a deep, frustrated breath. He answered Captain Grald's question despite his own wishes. "She held on longer than I expected. Passed only two years ago. I was able to be there when she died, praise the gods."

"It is good to have memories of those who raised you," Rennok responded. "I remember my father moreso than mother. He was not gentle with me, but I am stronger for it. He molded me into the soldier I am now."

Garrus found the comments exceedingly curious. Firstly, he never suspected the man was even capable of delving into personal matters. Secondly, for the briefest of moments, Garrus almost detected a tone of wistfulness within the captain's voice. Gone before it could truly appear, though. "And where are they now?" the soldier asked.

"Oh, long gone." Rennok suddenly straightened himself and altered the conversation, speaking more firmly. "Someone will have to sit watch while the other sleeps. Four hours segments, I'd say. Any manner of foul creature could sneak up on us. I'll stay up first. You rest, Garrus. We've much walking ahead. Sleep in your armor. It's possible we'll have to leave in a hurry." He paused, then added, apparently as an afterthought, "We'll see Eastover

again, Garrus.” Rennok stood and walked a few steps away, completely disappearing in the black murk.

Just like that, their discussion had finished. Garrus could only shake his head as he sprawled out in the dirt, trying to get comfortable, his head upon a flat stone. Would they truthfully see Eastover again? he wondered. Rennok’s words hadn’t assured him in the least. *So far they must walk!* Rolling over to a shoulder, he speculated on just what hostile threats awaited them in this remote area. His imagination would have gotten the better of him had his exhausted body not given out, and an uneasy sleep taken him.

“You shouldn’t have left your helmet behind,” Rennok said, breaking a long silence as the two men trudged along the base of the Malvus, oftentimes taking to the lower cliffs in an effort to remain out of view. The path kept them safer, but it undoubtedly made walking more arduous, and Garrus found himself harboring a reinvigorated resentment for his superior officer.

Even worse, the captain, wound and all, axe on his back and giant chain over his shoulder, never hesitated or faltered. He just plowed on as if they walked downhill. The man was unreal. Garrus guessed he was in immense pain, but far too stubborn to show it. Too stubborn. The type of man who would claim victory even as he received a death blow from an enemy.

As the day reached noon, Garrus’ legs had developed a ceaseless ache from the uneven path they took. He was irritable, and in little mood for conversation. Still, he couldn’t ignore Rennok’s comment, for the captain would continue asking until he answered.

“You don’t wear a helmet,” he responded, crossly.

“I don’t need one, soldier. You, on the other hand, clearly do, considering the mark on your face.”

To this, Garrus remained silent. The discolored bump still throbbed where his helmet had most likely deflected a killing blow, and the true reason he wasn’t wearing it was the helm would now be quite uncomfortable to wear.

The bridge of the piece would have endlessly chafed his swollen bruise. In leaving it behind, it was one less issue and pain he'd have to worry about.

The day was overcast, a cool breeze wafting along the rocks of the mountainside. Garrus thanked the gods it wasn't unbearably hot, for his armor had grown increasingly uncomfortable. The notion of wearing it several more days without relief nearly drove him to fall over and concede. How he wished to remove his surcoat and cuirass to let his sweat soaked skin breathe! He did no such thing, though, and continued onward without complaint, wondering if Rennok's intractable manner would rub off on him and make it easier.

The captain reached into his pack and withdrew his waterskin. After one large gulp, which he swallowed, he followed it up with a small sip. This he swished in his mouth for a few seconds before spitting out the contents. "I fear I won't last so many days without an ale," he lamented, irritably.

"Yes. Unfortunate you led us into an ambush," Garrus retorted, no longer caring how angry he made his superior officer.

This prompted the captain to halt in his tracks. He turned his shoulders and scrutinized Garrus with eyes so narrow they appeared closed. "When you join the Eastover garrison, you pledge your life to its cause." He waved an arm as if pointing back toward where the ambush had taken place. "The men who died did just that. Perhaps some would have fled like spineless women, but not my command. None can prophesize where the fortunes of war tilt, but the gods will always favor the brave."

"Do they favor recklessness as well?"

"It was *not* recklessness!" Rennok shouted. "Think, solider. Do these orcs seem your typical run of the mill savages? They've shown organization and cunning. If we hadn't sought them out, the next patrol would have been their victim, or perhaps some unprotected village. No, Garrus, we did our duty to face them."

Garrus could only shake his head. Arguments with Rennok led nowhere, for it only caused the mulish captain to dig his heels deeper. It was wasted

effort to carry on, and the younger man hadn't the will to continue. Of course, Garrus despised the man more with each ensuing quarrel.

Both resumed their trot, but a low hum forced them to pause immediately. Neither of them needed to voice their thoughts, for each face showed identical concern. The sound grew in volume, and they quickly dashed up a tall rock for a better viewpoint.

Not far off, a pack of worg-riders dashed across the low hills, coming in their direction. With a quick count, there looked to be nearly twenty of them.

"Persistent bastards!" Rennok spat, backing out of view and pulling Garrus with him. "We've stirred up a nest, it seems. They've regrouped into larger numbers again."

Garrus could not believe it. "What do they gain by still pursuing us?"

Rennok guffawed, "Perhaps to finish what they started. Truly, is there any rationalizing what those beasts do? I'd like to know where this endless supply of orcs is located." He pointed to an outcropping of rock that pressed against the base of the mountain. "Hurry, let's take to the other side of that ridge. We may be able to watch them safely from there. We'll stay hidden and see if they ride through."

At the end of a couple anxious minutes, they'd settled into a tiny corner amid some broken scree that afforded them view of the worg-riders with little chance they'd be spotted themselves. The pack of riders rose to the summit of a hill, then jerked to a halt. After several moments of obvious conversation which they could not hear, half the pack dismounted, and those on foot went scurrying into different directions.

"They're searching the base of the mountainside individually," Rennok mumbled. "They know we're here somewhere."

The two men watched in silence as single orcs, weapons drawn, began exploring the nooks and crannies of the mountain slope. Eventually, one of

them began its vigilant search in their direction, coming closer as it scuttled up a dirt path.

"We're found," Garrus whispered.

"Quiet!" Rennok admonished. "Wait."

Hope that the hunter would pass by them proved vain, however, as the orc seemed to be inexplicably led by divine intervention. It didn't deviate from his path directly toward both men.

When the beast reached only fifty or so feet away, Garrus dipped his head down behind the rock. "If he yells to the others, we're done."

The captain leaned closer to the other soldier, his eyes stern, but confident. "Listen to me now, Garrus, and you will live."

Garrus felt like an idiot.

He lay awkwardly on the ground, unmoving, his weapon a few feet out of his reach. He could hear the orc's footsteps coming from around the sharp turn in the rock. Playing dead was not something he'd trained for at Eastover, and the thought that the orc could simply saunter up and deliver an easy death blow gave the young soldier a tender, helpless sensation.

The grunting beast, still in full exploration mode, rounded the corner and witnessed Garrus' ungainly limp body. As the soldier had hoped, it briefly froze, completely blindsided by the appearance of a dead Eastover soldier. That single moment of hesitation proved costly.

Rennok, like a dark shadow, moved in from behind a tiny crevice. In the time it takes to blink, he'd wrapped one hand around the orc's mouth, and sliced its throat with a dagger in the other. The orc squirmed pitifully for several moments, but Rennok held tight his mouth, not allowing it to make noise until it had fully bled out. When it stopped thrashing about, he unceremoniously dropped the corpse with a thud. "Up Garrus, it's dead."

The younger man scrambled to his feet, snatching his sword. The corpse lie amidst its own blood upon the rocky earth. For some odd reason, the scene appeared more grisly than the corpses typically seen on the field of battle. Perhaps the way it was unmercifully executed made it seem so.

"They'll come looking for it when they realize it's missing." Rennok declared with a shake of his head. "We can't be around when they do."

"If we move now, they others will spot us," Garrus responded, still staring at the slain body.

"We'll climb up the rocks a bit more before starting north again. The mountainside is probably more dangerous, but we'll drop back to the foothills once those beasts are out of sight. Either way, we can't remain here."

Garrus tore his eyes away from the still bleeding corpse and locked eyes with Rennok. "*More* dangerous up the mountain?"

The captain nodded, factually. "No civilization up there. Only wildlife, much of it unsafe."

Before resigning and following the captain, the younger solider hurled of bevy of curses to the skies.

Despite the ominous words from Rennok, the higher crags proved untroubling. Only the weatherworn rocks that broke through the surface, causing difficult footing, impeded their progress in any way. Soon they had worked around the orc patrol and descended to the base of the mountain, turning north once again, clear of any pursuers.

Even more remarkably, for the following two days and nights, the amount of disturbances were minimal. At one point, Rennok even commented that the orc pack had most likely given up the chase. Only a lone wild boar, expelled from its pack, delirious and starving, caused the men to bear weapons. They made little work of the weakened animal, and cooked it for a welcome warm meal.

Through an unrelenting sun, the men trudged on foot along the foothills of the Malvus Peaks, turning northeast, until—early on the forth day—they could barely see the great walls of Eastover Keep in the far off distance, shining like a tiny lost beacon against the dawn's cresting sun. For Garrus, it was unquestionably the most welcome sight of his life. The two men had only crumbling, moldy bread left as food rations, their armor was itching uncontrollably, they'd slept on rocks for three nights, and the young soldier longed to share his time with someone other than the habitually insufferable Captain Grald.

"If we keep our pace, we'll be stepping up the ramp by late afternoon," Rennok muttered, keeping stride as he spoke.

"I thought I'd never call that place beautiful, but it is," the solider answered.

Rennok laughed, surprising Garrus, who hadn't heard any emotion from the man since they'd joyously devoured the meat off the wild boar two nights prior. "Beauty is driven by your greatest need. When you desperately need it, it is beautiful indeed."

Truly it was, thought Garrus. He'd have a story to tell we he arrived back among his friends. It was even possible he'd be commended or advanced in rank.

So it was, that when hope had fully sprung within Garrus, and the young soldier suddenly believed he'd actually survive this ordeal, everything went terribly wrong.

First they heard the scraping of endless claws across the earth from behind. It was a terrible sound, one that tore every ounce of optimism from Garrus and left the pit of his stomach with an empty, dreadful sensation.

Turning around, both men witnessed exactly what they expected, and feared; an angry flock of worgs rounding a hill and bounding directly at them, the shouts of their riders becoming audible as they neared.

"By the Gods, they've returned!" Garrus cried, his voice despairing. "We are done!"

A single, solitary curse, and then the captain shouted, "Come!", sprinting toward the mountain, not waiting to see if his young companion followed.

Garrus, so despondent from his abrupt change in fortune, briefly hesitated, almost for too long, before turning tail and chasing after the captain.

The screaming worg-riders closed the gap between them. Rennok, ever the survivalist, formed his plan only moments after the threat emerged. With all speed he aimed for a ten feet tall outcropping of rock which jutted from the face of the cliff. The ledge of the outcropping had enough room for him to stand upon it if he could get there in time and was able to climb up.

Legs exhausted and sore from walking, Garrus labored after him, trying to fathom how the captain managed to run so swiftly after their long journey, and with a giant chain around his shoulder no less! The clamor of their pursuers grew steadily in volume, and to Garrus it seemed they would stampede him at any moment. He hadn't a clue what the captain planned, and he certainly didn't see any escape.

Rennok reached the mountainside and immediately tried to scale the rock that led to the protruding ledge. He swore as he slid back down. Climbing was not an option.

Yelling in urgency amid the gut-wrenching storm of noise coming from the blood-thirsty orcs, the captain commanded the newly arrived, terribly huffing, Garrus, "I need a boost. Get your hands and knee out."

Frantically, the young footman did as he was told, and Rennok managed to throw his forearms above the upper ledge. With an unreasonable show of strength, he pulled his bulky frame up and over.

"Captain!" Garrus called, risking a glance at the oncoming band of orcs. They were a handful of strides from cutting him down. He looked up, and saw Rennok had pivoted on his stomach and was reaching down with his hand.

"Grab and climb, soldier!"

Adrenaline pushing him harder than he ever believed possible, he grasped the captain's hand and scrambled to the edge, rolling over the top just as weapons clanged against the rock beneath him.

Unable to climb it themselves, crazed orcs hammered the side of the protruding shelf with their axes and other crude weapons, grunting furiously. Rennok uncoiled his chain and slung one end over the edge, catching an orc in the back of the neck, mashing its head into a red smear upon the side of the mountain. Following a second toss, the orcs backed away, furiously displaying their sharp, yellowed teeth and grumbling. The two men, with nowhere else to go, sat above and watched the remaining orcs dismount, eyeing them with hatred.

A javelin flew at them, just missing Garrus' head and landing against the bare mountain behind them.

"Lay down!" Rennok ordered, and both men quickly did so.

Pressed face-down against the ledge, they gave their enemies no clear target for the javelins tossed from below. That, however, didn't stop the orcs from trying. Another missile flew over them, this time landing harmlessly atop Rennok after bounding off the mountain. Rennok threw it back to no effect.

For what seemed an eternity, they lay flat while javelins arced overhead, pummeling the rock behind them. Then Garrus cried out painfully. Rennok turned his head to see a spear-like missile wedged into Garrus' left calf muscle. The weapon must've recoiled off the side and unluckily dropped directly into the soldier's unprotected leg.

Without a word, the captain reached over and tore out the javelin amid a deluge of blood and flung it back. With Garrus screaming in pain, he tore off some of the cloth from his cloak and handed it to an agonized Garrus. "I don't know how bad it is. Tie this around it and stay low."

Garrus, wracked with pain, reached down toward his leg and gingerly tied the fabric around the wound. He felt the warm blood leak onto his hands as he did so.

Then the javelin's abruptly stopped.

Both men waited in silence.

"I'm not looking up," Garrus whispered, still pressing his body and face tightly against the shelf.

Captain Grald lifted his head ever so slightly, peering over the top and onto the ground below. The orcs had redirected their attention to setting up a makeshift campsite.

"The stubborn bastards are going to wait us out. Take a look."

Garrus mustered the nerve to peek himself. One orc, a massively muscled beast who stood a full head larger than the others, was directing them about in some guttural language. A group of them roped the worgs and set up a fire pit. Incredulous, the soldier watched for a few minutes, then shook his head. There were still around twenty of them, milling about in some random task, but always keeping an eye on the two men. "What will we do? They've trapped us. Our rations will only last another day, and we've barely room to move between the two of us."

The captain mumbled an affirmative. "And your wound doesn't look good. It's already bled through the wrap."

Garrus tried not to think about the wound that jolted him with pain every time he moved his left leg in the slightest motion. "What then? We can't charge them. There's too many."

"Our patrol never checked back in at Eastover. Surely another will ride by within a day. We only need survive that long."

"And if one doesn't?" Garrus asked.

Spoken solemnly, Rennok answered, "The bridge of death always bears fear from the unready. But, when one is finally willing, it is easy to cross."

"Go to hell," Garrus responded.

All that day the two soldiers of Eastover Keep lay flat against the rock, for anytime one would sit up, the javelins would begin again. Twice, the orcs tried to climb the outcropping, only to be beaten off by Rennok's looming chain and Garrus' sword.

In late evening, as the sun settled, dark clouds eased their way over the sky, carrying a surfeit rain. At first, Garrus found the steady shower refreshing, expecting the orcs to leave and find shelter. It did not happen. Unfortunately, it became obvious that the beasts had a singular goal in mind; the death of the two Eastover soldiers.

Sleep would not be attainable that night amid the continuing downpour and uncomfortable setting. Garrus could feel his leg stiffening with each passing hour, and he wondered how badly infection had set. Although, he admitted to himself, he probably wouldn't live long enough for it to matter. With that comforting, or rather uncomfoting, thought, he quit worrying over his leg.

Rennok, who'd been silent for hours, abruptly lifted his head and felt the cool raindrops splash him as they dropped from their dark hiding place in the sky. "Tomorrow, they'll come. You'll see, Garrus."

The younger footman couldn't help but laugh, though he didn't respond. Defeat was not something Captain Grald accepted easily, and though Garrus would never confess it, that inflexible mindset of his captain was all that still gave him hope.

"Tomorrow. You'll see," the captain repeated, then slumped his head back down onto the rock.

This time, it sounded to Garrus as if, for the first time ever, Rennok doubted his own words.

The rain showed them mercy the following morning, only to be replaced by a remorseless sun. Both men turned on their backs and ate the last of their dry, tasteless bread, while their enemies still waited patiently below. Liquid wasn't an issue, for they'd used their waterskins to collect the rainwater. Alas, that gave them little peace of mind as they finished up the remaining bits of their meager food supply.

The orcs seemed to sense their prey weakening. They'd stopped attempting to scale the rock and appeared content to wait out their trapped foes.

Garrus had never been more miserable. Like his captain, he had ceased to speak at all, most likely to conserve energy, but in truth, there was nothing to say. His leg, almost entirely numb at this point, had become a double-edged sword. The lack of pain was certainly welcome, but the implications were far worse. Not only that, but every other part of his body ached from lying upon this uneven shelf of rock. His skin chafed and itched everywhere, he was sweating profusely from the unbearable heat of the sun, and there proved nothing he could do to alleviate any of it.

An ostensibly endless day followed. Every sound out of the ordinary gave Garrus an irrational fervent optimism that a patrol had arrived to rescue them. Each disappointment proved more torturous than the last.

As another silent night fell upon them, Garrus desperately waited for Rennok to give him words of encouragement.

There were none.

"You lied to me, Captain."

Rennok weakly lifted his head against the noon sun the following day. Like yesterday, the heat was blistering, and the men deteriorated fast. "Oh?" the captain managed to say.

"You told me we'd make it back to Eastover Keep.

Surprisingly, Rennok guffawed. "Wrong! I promised we'd see Eastover Keep again. And we can!" He pointed to the horizon, where Eastover was just a fragment in the distance. "Is it not magnificent enough for you?"

Garrus slightly adjusted his body in a wasted effort for comfort. "We were so close."

"Listen, Garrus," Rennok wheezed, stifling a cough, "I can't waste away any longer. I'm going down to fight. I figure if I'm going die, I might as well take a few of those goatfuckers with me."

The news didn't surprise Garrus. He had sensed the captain's resolve breaking. He own resolve had disappeared long ago, but his wounded leg prevented him from taking action.

"I don't expect you to join me," Rennok continued. "You probably can't stand with your leg the way it is. But, let me tell you this: after they bring me down, there is no shame in using your own sword to end it. You've lasted far too long to give them the satisfaction of killing you yourselves."

Few things the captain said surprised Garrus anymore, but that last statement did. Nevertheless, the soldier would have none of it. "I'll go down with you, Captain. My sword arm still works."

Captain Gald accepted the younger man's request with a somber nod. "I honor you then, Garrus. Tah would approve of—"

A remote echo caused the captain to pause.

In disbelief, both men drew gazes north, and thereby witnessed a sight so magnificent they hesitated to trust it. Armored horseman tore across the terrain, riding hard with weapons drawn. Garrus could make out the gray livery worn by the riders; a division of Eastover Keep.

The orcs detected the incoming threat simultaneously as Garrus and Rennok did. They scampered to collect weapons, but had no time to loosen and mount the worgs. When the horsemen collided with their fragile and imbalanced line, it quickly decimated. Only seconds after the war shouts and initial engagement, the beasts were on the run, fleeing in every direction under heavy pursuit from the riders.

Garrus watched in disbelief. The dreamlike scene, so sudden and unexpected, had the ambiance of hallucination, so much so that he wondered for a brief moment if he had actually died already. But, Rennok returned him to reality when the captain swore repeatedly under his breath in full incredulity. Eight days after leaving Eastover Keep on a routine two-day patrol mission, Garrus would return.

When the rout had become a formality, a trio of riders broke from the main group and approached the outcropping of rock where Rennok and Garrus lay in a pathetic heap of their own sweat and urine, hungry and dying.

"Captain Grald!" shouted one of them with an obvious grin. "You look as if you just crawled out of a goblin's anus." The other two men beside him laughed jovially.

For perhaps the only time in his life, Rennok had no retort.

When Garrus woke, he immediately knew where he lay; in a bed somewhere in the medical ward of Eastover Keep. His left leg was heavily wrapped from the knee down. The rest of his body seemed fine, albeit a bit skinnier than before.

Three men stood over him. Garrus recognized them as Albright Wain, the Eastover Constable, General Elhon Silverhelm, and one of the temple's healers.

"It is good to see you awake," the aging, long-tenured constable said in a comforting tone.

Garrus acknowledged him with a nod.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, but we need to record your account of what took place," Constable Albright continued.

"Have you spoken with Captain Grald?" Garrus replied through a cracked voice.

The constable smiled. "Oh, indeed we have. Now we'd like to see how well your account matches his." Noticing the faint look of worry across Garrus' face, the older man added, "Fear nothing, soldier. You are not under scrutiny. Word has it you served well."

Word has it? Garrus contemplated. That could only mean the captain had been positive in his account regarding his lone subordinate's survival. Nevertheless, when the soldier began his own account, he stayed as truthful as possible. He expressed his own frustrations with the captain's decision making, but also praised his perseverance and dogged resolve for survival. When he'd finished his tale and answered every question, the men nodded to each other, apparently hearing precisely what they expected.

"Thank you, soldier," the constable offered. "You should be proud of yourself. You've proven yourself a valuable asset to our garrison. And more good news! Although your leg was in terrible shape when you returned, our healers firmly believe it will be saved. They did a splendid job upon it. Of course, you are placed on bed rest until you sufficiently heal, after which we will evaluate your progress. Do not feel guilty of your time off," Albright smiled, "you have earned it."

"Thank you, Constable," Garrus answered, mostly relieved his leg wouldn't be amputated from infection. Everything else seemed irrelevant at the moment.

The men said their goodbyes and left the room.

Not long after, a different man entered. This man Garrus knew well.

"Look who's still living! How are you, soldier?" Captain Grald asked. He stood at the door, looking less than perfect himself.

Garrus fixed his gaze on the captain and shrugged. "No worse than you look."

Rennok chuckled. "Then you're fine. You did good, Garrus."

The younger soldier nodded quietly.

"Albreight is only giving me two days off. The unsympathetic old cripple doesn't think I deserve more," the captain snorted. "I'm sure I'll see you back on the grounds soon. Perhaps you'll be ready for another patrol where you end up crawling through the gates of Eastover barely alive."

With a shake of his head, Garrus laid his head back down. "Go to hell."

The captain laughed heartedly and stayed at the doorway for another minute, then offered a supportive farewell before leaving.

With everyone gone, the room seemed very quiet. *Barely alive*, thought Garrus, still thinking of his captain's last comment. *But alive nonetheless!*