

DISPOSABLE HEROES

Ishkaran adjusted the head cloth so that more of it covered his face. Breathing through the fabric helped to sift out the choking dust stirred up by the hundreds of feet belonging to the men and beasts ahead of him. He wished he could cover his eyes as well, but they at least were more used to sand and dust coming their way. To him, they had marched since time out of mind, and it seemed he could scarce remember his days in the far south. But the pace was easy, Ishkaran was young and fit, and the air was cool. His long strides swallowed the miles and his mind wandered to the trees. The tall elegant trees of this land were a wonder to him. In his land, the trees barely grew to his own height -- in the desert, the farther from the sun, the better; or so it was said. He listened to the twittering of the numerous birds and longed to walk beneath the trees. He wondered how the blanket of pine needles covering the floor would feel against his sandaled feet.

“Keep your focus man. You’re going to war not on your way to market,” a hard, yet quiet voice startled him from his reverie.

Ishkaran looked for the source and found a stout broad-chested man. The man’s face was uncovered and his dark brown skin was rough and leathery. He wore his hair in tight braids held together by tiny gold ringlets which kept them from becoming tangled and matted. His panoply of overlapping brass plates marked him as one of the *Qurbuti*, a veteran of past conflicts held in high regard.

“You must savor every moment. You must live your life, not deny it! You must be here and now, not elsewhere wherever your mind would take you.”

“I mean no offense, but what harm is there in taking in the beauty of the countryside?” Ishkaran asked, scarcely able to keep the reverence out of his voice.

“None. However do not let the beauty of the land seduce you. You must study it. The call of the birds, the smells in the air, these things mean life. Fate and nature will do everything they can to confound you, yet you must not let them. The shuffle of the steps on the road, the warmth of the sun contrasting with the coolness of the wind, these things are sent by fate to betray you. A commoner may delight in these simple pleasures and walk to recreate himself, but for you those days are gone. You are a warrior now, and the very shape of a morning mist can give up a lurking foe if you have the eyes to see it.”

Ishakaran felt a bit of shame at the rebuke, but quickly his mind came to his defense, “What lurking foe? What is there to fear in the midst of an army on an open road in high noon? Our enemy’s lands lie several days’ march still unless I am mistaken.”

“You are mistaken. We walk even now in our enemy’s lands -- or what used to be their lands, but which lie now disputed by accursed Gondor and the forces of the East. This was once Gondor’s ‘Place of the Moon’ or so I’m told it means in their foul tongue. It is their wont to call common and earthly things by fantastical names.”

“Then you have been here before?”

“No. But I have seen the ancient maps left behind by their ilk in many-spined Umbar, from which I hail. And the Magi have read me their names, for they can read the tongues of many men, and memories in Umbar are not so short as they have become in Harad.”

“You come from Umbar? Then you have seen the mighty ships of the privateers?”

“Aye, the so-called Corsairs. A mighty navy it is indeed. But many of those men suffer from the same conditions as our foes; the same deathly pallor of the skin, the same guttural tongue. Yet they are stout men, for it is said that many a man cannot remain aboard the ships without becoming ill. I myself cannot abide them. And yet these sailors live on them and prefer the rolling sea to the sound earth.” He paused to introduce himself, “I am Feydor, a Qurbuti for life, until dishonour or death undo me, and for my pleasure I shall keep both my legs on the stable ground.” He laughed slightly as he swatted a fly from his path. “Yet even now I can marvel with envy, and without shame, at the mighty fleet that is now being arrayed on the shores of Umbar. When all our forces are finally positioned and begin to move against Gondor, they shall weep and gnash their teeth at our majesty. For when that fleet sails against the White City, its dark sails silhouetted against the sun, then shall they know the hour of their doom is at hand. They will know that their defenses can do but little, yea, even should all their moldered ancestors rise in their defense, it shall avail them not.”

Ishkaran said nothing. Feydor spoke on, it seemed almost to himself. His voice dropping to a mere murmur and then rising at times till it seemed he would almost choke himself with the rage of his own words.

“It seems an age now and I was but a babe when Ecthelion the Murderer sent the cruel Thorongil against hallowed Umbar. My sire then served the Tower Lords as the Captain of the Havens’ personal, and most trusted, guard. Thorongil led a small fleet of ships in a cowardly attack. Coming unlooked for, in the dead of night, he attacked and burned many ships of the mighty fleet. On the deck of the flagship he fought and slew my father, and the Captain of the Havens fell with him.”

“So you’ve come to revenge yourself upon this warrior Thorongil?”

“No. It has been many many years since that time. And all those ships have thrice been rebuilt. If Thorongil is still alive, then he is surely a dotard, gumming his bread. What honor would there be to slay him now. If I met him in the streets of the White City I would let him live. If only so that he could have the knowledge that all of his supposed valor had come to naught and that the sons of his land should all die or live as slaves, and that the daughters of his kin would occupy our couches at our bidding. That he should know that all his culture should shout aloud at the dawn of every new and miserable day, ‘Woe! Woe! That we ever roused the ire of Harad! O Sadness! That we ever raised a hand against splendid Umbar!’ Then I would be glad. For were we alone to march without any aid or ally, yet I would still be here, if only to see the White City of proud Gondor fall and its soaring walls laid low.”

Neither man spoke for a short while. Feydor broke the silence, “This is your first time a warring is it not? At least you have chosen a glorious campaign with which to initiate yourself, and not some petty skirmish as I did. What private griefs have dragged you from your home?”

Ishkaran thought for a moment. He did not want to say anything that would lessen him in the eyes of this man. “When you chided me for walking as I do to market, you spoke truer than you would know, for I am a merchant by trade, a hide-tanner and tailor by profession.”

“Ha! And yet you march to certain war as idly as a love-struck knave on the way to meet the object of his heart’s folly. There is mettle in you yet lad!” Feydor clapped his hand onto Ishakaran’s back.

“Again you speak truer than you know. For I am mad with love with a certain warrior’s daughter, whose name I have not yet earned the right to speak. And he would not have his proud name sullied in a union with a mere trade-monger.”

“So you have come to make yourself a warrior? That is very honourable. You are a man after mine own heart, and I must say that I do love thee. This lady must surely be rare if you have marched the whole distance for her love.”

“That she is. She is fair beyond reckoning, like a slight desert rain in early evening just as the moon rises.” Ishkaran grimaced.

“There is more, I can see. Her father will not be satisfied if you return only with valor and glory to enhance your name.”

“No. He has set a terrible bride-price. Yet hope remains, for I have heard that there are untold riches in the White City and that they toss rare gems in their fountains for sport. I should get some of these and return with enough...”

“You’re a fool,” a nearby voice said.

Both Feydor and Ishkaran looked to see who had spoken. They saw a surly and wiry man absently flicking at the taller grasses on the side of the road with the tip of his scimitar.

Feydor reproached him, “Be silent man. We all have our reasons for being here. I’d wager your cause is far less noble than his.”

“And I would say you were right. But my grounds are more practical than this lovelorn boy, no doubt his woman lies in the warmth of another’s arms already, while he toils here under a foreign sky.”

“You lie! She is true. It is her father who...”

“Stay your anger boy. This man strikes me as one of those people who must sour other lives in order to sweeten their own but a little. So, pray tell, what is your more practical cause, nameless one?”

“My name is Hazred and I claim no more grandeur than this boy. I am a goatherd by nature and seller of meats. But I stand that I have no illusions as to why I am here. I care not for revenge, nor fortune, nor glory, but I am here to save myself and my family.”

Ishkaran and Feydor waited for him to continue his tale. Hazred smiled, a thin brutal line across his face, the expression of a man who has much to regret but cannot undo.

“I will not say all, save to say that a rich man spoke harshly to me once. And in my anger I endeavored to teach him some manners, but either my staff was too hard or his pate too soft. And I slew him. And for that I owe his kin a wergild which I could never repay. My family was to be made destitute, and so the gallows awaited me.”

“And yet you are here,” said Ishkaran, not even attempting to shield the scorn in his voice. “So how does a common murderer find his way in one of Harad’s grandest armies.”

“There are more killers here than you think, boy. But, patience and I shall answer your question. There is a noble magus, a seer, who thinks this enterprise will come to a ghastly end. It is said he even has a lost stone of seeing from across the sea and his word is often true. He is certain we are all dead men. And so when the levies came for this campaign against Gondor, he bid me take his son’s place in the ranks and he would pay my wergild. So here I am.”

Ishkaran looked to the older warrior for guidance, “What if this magus has seen true? What if this war should go ill for us?”

“That is always a possibility. But look about you. We are proud, bold men and grim. We are terrible in our wrath and fierce in our despair. We shall gather and rally and give our enemies hard labor and wear away the day. Be sure of that. But do not let that trouble you. I’ve heard tell we have powerful allies. The Eastern forces are awakened and march with us. Gondor fights not us alone, but all her enemies at once. We will not fail.”

“The seer told me that our leaders are deceived. That they have fallen under the sway of the ancient Shadow that led the Numenorian of old astray.”

Feydor looked at him with suspicion, “You speak as if you are one of those zealots of the Dark Religion, always prating such nonsense about ‘The Eye! The Eye!’ Fanatics!” He spat the last word.

“I am no zealot and despise those disciples of the Dark Lord as much as you. But it seems that there may be truth in what the seer speaks yet again, for I have heard tell of terrible monsters in the service of the eastern armies.”

“Yea. And such stories accompany soldiers on all campaigns far from home. Monsters! Rubbish! What do you think the soldiers of Gondor will say when they see the terrible Mumak bearing down on them! Surely they will think it is a monster, and yet you and I know that it is a beast, no different than a horse or a goat.”

“And what of the Urks? I’ve heard tell of them as well.” Ishkaran asked, genuinely concerned.

“You mean the *Uruks*. Well...I suppose they are probably as real as Elves and Dwarves too!” They all laughed but Feydor suddenly stopped. “Be silent. There is something...”

Then he knew, the bird calls were becoming too frequent. The hairs stood on the back of his neck. They were calls sure enough, but no birds made them. He shouted as loud as he could, “Ambush!”

The air was suddenly humming with arrows. They came from every direction and the men of Harad ran amock seeking shelter in one direction only to have more arrows harry them from an unseen foe.

Feydor turned to see Ishkaran standing still. “Get down boy!” But even as he spoke the sentence died on his lips, for he could see that Ishkaran was staring dumbly at the two arrows in his chest. The boy’s body flopped lifelessly to the ground.

Feydor turned quickly in the other direction as an arrow whistled past his ear. He has lost sight of Hazred as the entire force was now in complete disarray. He heard shouts of “Doom! Doom! Gondor is upon us!”

He shouted into the air at no one in particular, “Kill them all!” At that moment, he caught a glimpse of men just beyond the tree line, their brown-green cloaks making them hard to see. He drew his sword and charged.

And just then a Mumak burst through the chaos, trampling men and foliage underfoot. Feydor saw in a flash that arrows clustered about the beast’s eyes rendering it blind. The sightless creature rampaged in fury, crashing this way and that. Feydor tried desperately to try to get out of its way. He dove into the tree line just as the great creature smashed a large tree down. The trunk fell across Feydor as he desperately tried to shield himself with his arms. He made a narrow escape but the falling trunk caught the edge of his sword and snapped the blade.

Feydor stood and felt a slight impact. He had difficulty breathing but he forced his body to move further into the slender trees. He felt a pain in his neck and reached up only to be surprised at the smooth wooden shaft that now protruded from underneath his collar. He stumbled forward and it seemed to his eyes that he saw a tiny man in a gray cloak staring at him. Then all went black.

“It was Sam’s first view of battle of Men against Men, and he did not like it much. He was glad that he could not see the dead face. He wondered what the man’s name was and where

he came from; and if he was really evil of heart, or what lies or threats had led him on the long march from his home; and if he would not really rather have stayed there in peace...”

- J.R.R. Tolkien, The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers