

Snow clung to Ferrus' black beard, almost obscuring the single Inon clasp at the top of his lifebraid that bore his birthplace and clan name. The sun shone brightly off the snow that thinly covered the mountain crag.

"Ye would never ken it was summer from up here." Elika said as he came alongside Ferrus.

"Nay, ye would not." Ferrus said. He pulled a pair of field glasses out of a leather pouch on his belt and raised them to his eyes. Elika shrugged his repeating rifle off of his shoulder.

"Ye seem troubled cousin."

"Aye, look yonder." Ferrus pointed down to a ledge several dozen feet below them as he handed Elika his field glasses. Elika shifted the rifle into the crook of his arm and followed his cousin's finger, scrolling the focus til the image came in clear.

"A tunnel entrance, to uniform to be natural. Could it be the missing scouts?"

"I doubt it. I would kill myself if I dug even an night burrow with shuch shoddy craftsmanship. If a dwarf made that he is mad as a lark." Ferrus said.

"Kazikandra or Goblins?"

"Kazikandra for sure, to cold for goblins." Ferrus took back his glasses and returned them to his pouch. He put his thumb and pointer finger in his mouth and whistled. The sound rang off the mountain peaks. An answering call came from further up the slope. "Let's get back to the others."

"Ye not worried that gave our position away?" Elika held his repeater at the low ready as they made towards the pines.

"They are on us already or I'm an elf." Ferrus unslung his shield and fitted it on his left arm, unslashing his warhammer he rested it at right shoulder arms. The snow crunched underfoot as they pushed through the trees.

"Can't see gaz in these trees." Elika said.

"Keep ye're eyes up, The trees should give us cover from prying eyes, but once we hit a clearing it's prime for an ambush." Loud rustling came from ahead. Elika raised his rifle to his shoulder and Ferrus stepped to cover them with his shield. Helez and Abiezer Surefoot appeared through the trees and stoped short.

"Peace kin, ye are a mighty twitchy." Abiezer said.

"Spotted sign of tunneling, We suspect Kazikandra." Ferrus said. The older Mountaineer stroked his long beard, clasps rattles, His beard was full of them made of different metals each reflecting a different deed.

"Whistling was risky." Abiezer said.

"We are already being followed I think, we need to find fighting ground and fast."

"Aye, there was a ledge a ways back near the peak, steep slope decent sightlines." Abiezer turned back swating aside nettled branches as he went. They came to a clearing under a great crag which ran along the side of the mountain. The rocky peak jutted out just above, the wind whipping the light powdered snow off the top like smoke. A scraping sound came from beneath Ferrus' feet.

"They are coming up." He said. Then kept aside as the ground began to crumble. An orange furred head with large yellow eyes popped out of the snow, with claws grasping. It's lips curled back in a snarl to reveal pointed teeth. His fox like ears went flat and his eyes wide

before Ferrus' hammer smashed it back down into the hole. A metallic tink signaled Abiezer tossing a grenade into the hole.

"Onto the ridge double time." Abiezer said. The dwarves began to run up the steep slope, stepping high to move through the snow which was deeper on the leeward side of the mountain. A loud boom shook the mountainside. Abiezer was the first to reach the foot of the ledge. He pulled his climbing axes off of his belt and leaped up. The first axe bit into stone and he hauled himself up embedding the next at the extent of his arm's reach. Twice more and he had reached the ledge. On the slope below indentations formed in the snow then collapsed. Kazikandra spilled out whooping and snarling. Their fur ranged from brown to a rusty orange, some were dressed and they carried a smattering of weapons and equipment. Ferrus took a knee planting his shield in the ground. Elika rested the barrel of his repeater on the shield and opened fire. A Kazikandra dropped. Elika racked the lever ejecting a spent casing with pinged off of Ferrus' helmet. Helez stepped alongside readying his poleaxe.

Abiezer pulled a long piton off his belt and set it against the ledge. He flipped the Climbing axe in his hand and with two heavy blows drove it to the ring into the stone. He dropped the climbing axes. Shrugged off his pack and flipped it open. He drew out a rope slid it through the eye of piton and tied an elaborate knot.

"Rope." he called down and tossed it over the ledge.

"Elika first, so you can lay down fire!" Ferrus said. Striking down the first of the Kazikandra to reach him. Abiezer opened up with his repeater from above. Elika grabbed the rope and hauled himself upward spiked boots biting into the rough stone face. Ferrus battered down a Kazakandra with a mace and brought down his hammer, as Helez brought the poleaxe around in a wide arc forcing two of the Kazakandra to leap back one took a bullet to the head. The other was hit by Helez on the backswing.

"I'm up!" Elika shouted.

"Reloading." Abiezer said. Turning the rifle and pulling bullets off of his bandolier. Elika laid into the onrushing Kazikandra.

"You next." Ferrus said.

"Aye!" Helez took the poleaxe in one hand and the rope in the other, he made an s anchor with his feet and began to haul himself up the rope. The Kazakandra came on an arrow pinged off of Ferrus's shield. He stepped back towards the rope. Warding off a blow from a club with his shield and catching an overhead swipe of a two handed axe on the haft of his hammer, he drove the axehead into the dirt then lifted his hammer in a backswing that caught the Kazikandra across the Jaw.

"Grab the rope we will pull you up!" Helez shouted. Ferrus hook the hammer onto his belt and grabbed the rope, wrapping it around his gauntlet as he curled up behind his shield arrows and rocks pinged off the adamantite plated shield. Pain shot through his shoulder as his kin began to haul him upwards. A horn sounded from across the clearing and the Kazakandra fell back towards their tunnels where they had dug a trench along the treeline. His armor scraped across the stone as he was pulled up one jerk at a time. Hands grabbed him under his shoulders and bulled him over the lip. He fell onto his back wiggling to get entirely on the ledge. There was a sharp whistle. Abiezer cried out. The long haft of a bolt protruding from the right of his chest. The veteran fell back onto the stone. Ferrus rolled to his feet.

“Pull him away from the edge.” Ferrus ordered as he rolled to his feet. He placed himself between his uncle and the enemy position. Across the field Kazakandra crossbowmen had taken position in the trench. A rust furred Kazikandra stood on the upper edge pulling the string on his crossbow back. It was a dwarven crossbow, and it wore dwarven adamantite full plate, not so different from Ferrus’

“I found the missing scout’s bulwark.” Ferrus said. Abiezer coughed as the others pulled him out of the enemies firing angle.

“Abiezer what do we do? Should we pull it out?” Erika asked.

“Only if you want to kill me. Toss me my pack. Helez take my rifle and you two support Ferrus. Ferrus what are they doing?”

“They built a trench near the tree’s. It’s in crossbow range. They have a leader who is wearing dwarven plate...”

“Bastards.” Helez said. He spit on the stone.

“Hush, time for that latter.” Abiezer grunted as he dug through his pack. “Ferrus, continue your report.”

“We seem to be at an impasse. They can’t tunnel up here or further up the slope because of the stone. Not without tools. Barring picking us off with potshots, they have to advance into our guns.

“Can you get a count?”

“About thirty dead, as for the trench, more than ten counting the leader.”

“Well that serves us fine for now. The question is do we have more bullets than Kazikandra.”

“If they took down our scouts they would have taken losses, we got thirty. We could have damn near wiped out their colony.” Helez said.

“I have my doubts, Kazakandra usually can’t be found this high on a mountain, they prefer earth they can tunnel through with their claws. Their presence and the entrance we spotted below implies extensive stone carved infrastructure. I doubt they are as few as fifty.” Ferrus said.

“How confident are you all that are kin are dead?” Abiezer asked. Silence followed. “Alright then we need to make our escape. This is clearly their mountain, if only the evil bastards posted signs.

“Or had the inclination to negotiate.” Ferrus said.

“We must recover our kin’s gear, the thought of those savages with our craftsmanship sickens me.” Helez said.

“Like it or not we are both trespassing and wildly outnumbered. Even if we could retake the gear we shouldn’t. Abiezer said.

“Why the Hell not?” Helez said.

“Because this is our home. If we were fighting to recover the bodies that would be different. I fear they are lost to us, and we have more than exacted the blood price for the death of four of our own. No purpose will be served with continued fighting.”

“I don’t mean to be insubordinate uncle.” Ferrus said. “But we are trapped on the top of a mountain, fighting on isn’t a choice. We will not be able to survive up here for as long as it would take for reinforcements to arrive, even if we had a way to send a message.