~ Túatha dé ocus andé
~ Nómad mí, cethair-deec éis blíadain fortach
~Epeltlu ocum cóic

- We owe the cat demon

A few hours ago, The Mountain was almost set free. I know there are details I should prioritize writing down above everything else. What were their numbers, what were their primary skills, what weapons did they favor, how did they advance so far into the stronghold, how did they plan to break its chains, what tactics of our's worked best against them, what tactics worked most poorly?

All of these, and a dozen other things, are more important to immortalize than what I find myself going back to again and again. I'm not sure I can even recall those much more useful facts, just the feelings of it. I am forever cursed with a memory that, against my own desires, is a scribe for my feelings, not the details I decide are most important in hindsight. I know it won't change, it hasn't changed for any dwarf, but fuck if it wouldn't be nice.

Oh well, I'm not a battle historian, I'm not going to know troop numbers and armor styles and tactical strategies. I'll just write what I know happened. For the sake of some safeguarding, I will be calling the place where the Mountain is housed, well, the place, or the fortress, and the people who were guarding it the guards. Even if this is meant only for my personal records, there's no use leaving a fucking sign post saying exactly where you can find this beast of mass destruction.

Last moon, we heard that followers of the Harbingers had come down from the mountains, and were going towards the place where the Mountain is held. At the time, we were not aware that it was held there, so we didn't know the direness of what was happening. Besides that, our innkeeper, who is a guard of that place, told us not to go there. She said their people had it handled. So we complied with their request and did not go, though I had a feeling it might've been an unwise decision.

Over the course of this moon, the place had fallen silent. Not a word from them. We rescued some captured party members in the morning,

and when we gathered to choose our afternoon mission, our innkeeper from Huron clan was there. They *very* strongly suggested that we prioritize that mission, telling us they did not have the resources to do it themselves. Huron does not order us. This is as close to an order from them as possible. That made it very clear this was something of utmost importance.

Even more worrying to me, our innkeeper showed panic. It was still just under the surface, but it was there, so close you could see it bubbling under their skin. I have never seen such an obvious display of emotion from them before, which meant this was something very important. We didn't even need to discuss to decide on this mission immediately.

On the way out, Giltsvod ambushed us. This does not matter now, but I know it will matter quite a lot very soon. We also met a bone faced cat demon, which does matter later in this story. A cat demon which Xerian tried to befriend. That child, he makes me fucking furious. I know his heart is in the right place, I know he has values that I should honestly take notes from, in fact, I want everyone to be a little bit more like him. I don't want to beat all the hope and compassion he has for everyone out of him with my cynicism.

But he is so fucking undiscerning with his enthusiasm, and so ignorant of the potential consequences of his actions, that he is going to fuck himself over sooner or later. Because he's in our party now, he'll probably fuck all of us over as well. Worst of all, I know that the only way he'll ever understand all the nuances of the world and learn how to navigate it is through personal experience, and so all I can do most of the time is watch. It is so, so tiring.

But, my gripes with the youth of today aside, we eventually did make it to the place. We still hadn't been told the Mountain was kept there, but we had guessed it along the way. But once we got there and saw what had happened, I think it stopped being a guess.

Even outside the entrance it was a massacre. There were bodies everywhere, those of guards and Harbinger worshippers alike, some freshly killed, some weeks dead. All of them were killed by morganti, flesh and soul slashed to ribbons and left to rot. The harbinger followers were all different species, elf and dwarf and hobbit alike. In hindsight, I'd

guess the reason we only saw morganti'd bodies was because the ones who could be revived had already been so, and were down there fighting once more, but it was still a fucking slaughter.

It always hurts me more to remember seeing something like that than it does to see it in the moment. When I'm there necessity is all I have room for in my head, and then a massacre is not a tragedy, but a warning. In hindsight however, I think about just how many people ceased to be in that place, the sheer amount of loss I walked through, and I feel retroactively awful.

Once we realized there was nothing we could do for those dead on the surface, we went down into the fortress. We were working under the assumption that they hadn't released the Mountain yet, because we would've been able to tell if they had, so we had to do whatever it would take to stop them before they got to it. Once the Mountain was free, there would be nothing we could do besides die in a "glorious last stand." I fucking despise glorious last stands, they're poetic bullshit. So we went into the ground with the goal of killing every follower we could find as fast as we could.

Indeed, it didn't take long for us to find some of them. A group of Harbinger followers were swarming a lone guard near the entrance. We fought them and beat them without too much difficulty. Once we finished, the guard told us to keep going deeper and kill the rest of the followers, while they tried to find help or more survivors. Xerian gave the guard his calling horn, and we pushed forwards.

More bodies, more morganti wounds. The deeper we delved, the more it looked like there had been a siege. Weeks of the followers pushing deeper and deeper into the guard's fortifications, morganti on both sides, slowly wearing down their defenses and culling their numbers till they broke through. Whatever misery we endured during this mission is nothing compared to what they endured.

We found another group of followers not long after. They briefly tried to trick us into thinking they were guards, but of course it didn't work. We came to blows, but this time we lost, and they killed us. I think our main issue was our low healing capacity. I and the other bards could get some healing, but nothing from death that was quick enough for

combat, and Two Twitch had healing spells. But that was it. We were out-skilled and didn't have a strong strategy, but I think we could've made it through if it weren't for the lack of healing.

Luckily some surviving guards, probably retrieved by the one we saved, snuck back in and revived us. They told us to loot whatever we needed off the bodies of the fallen guards and keep going, and so we took what we could and continued.

We delved further, and came to another group. This one tried to ambush us by sending a lone man forwards to lure us into where the rest hid, but we didn't fall for it. Despite that, we lost once again. I wouldn't say we went out easy, but we certainly went out in the end. No one came to revive us this time.

After a while, I'm not entirely sure how long, it's all sort of liminal as a wisp, myself and several others left our bodies to get resurrected. There were two presences we could be summoned by, one being Il-Arkh-Nazril, and the other being something more… evil, but much closer by. As much as I didn't trust that presence, I had a feeling it was the better option in this case.

The summoner turned out to be that bone cat demon we'd encountered earlier. It said it would expect repayment later. When I asked it to help with the situation, it said that it already had. Fucking demons. I appreciate it helping us, but I don't like owing it. Nevertheless, we ran back in, got our stuff, and resurrected as many of our remaining party members as we could. We'd gotten four of them back up when more Harbingers followers came.

I saw it this way: we had already lost to them twice, and that was when we had more numbers. Some people were down, and others had gone to town to get summoned, one of them being our main healer. There was no way we could win, so we had to get out and get reinforcements. We had to do something big to keep them off our backs, and derail them as much as we could.

So, as the followers approached us, I Bardic Rouged into sorcery. Right as the ground began to shake with an earthquake, I spent all my lifeforce into casting the word crush. From that point on I was dead, so I

didn’t see the direct aftermath. I was resurrected on the surface, meaning my party got out, and I saw the hole where I’d caved in the structure right over their heads. Useful stuff, but I’ll never do it again.

After I was resurrected, I switched and cast Bardic lore. The feeling I got from it was “the cost will be high either way, but it will be higher if this is left undone.” I think we all agreed with that sentiment. So, exhausted, we went back to the city as quickly as we could to find reinforcements.

Huron couldn’t give us much, no one could. In terms of resources, the most helpful people we’d encountered were the corpses we looted. This isn’t an insult, everyone has been scraping the bottom of the barrel lately for good reason, and that barrel does not fill up again just because you want it to. But it was a dire fucking situation.

However, we were given one powerful tool. 3 gods banded together to give everyone in the party a blessing of freebirth. That was yet another glaring indication of the weight of what we were dealing with. 3 gods, working together, to give us a blessing of that power level? I don’t think many situations bring that about, even in the city of gods. Even they agreed that we couldn’t let the Mountain out.

So, with a new blessing and fresh party members, we went back. Down into the fortress we delved, and easily cleared through 3 groups of them, as more Earthquakes happened in closer and closer succession. It wasn’t easy in the way of lacking difficulty, it was still a challenging fight where several of us died, but compared to our first fights it was like cutting through butter. The blessing, combined with fresh party members who had more combative skill sets, was a fucking breath of fresh air.

Well, no, no it wasn’t like that, because nothing was a breath of fresh air down there. I can’t even describe how suffocating the sensory experience was. The further we went down, the worse it got. The air was putrid, trapped under the ground and filled with the unmoving stench of fighting and rotting corpses, coating my skin and filling up my insides. There were still bodies everywhere, still in different stages of decay, with blood and guts and other liquified parts of dwarf greased up against the walls and down the staircases.

It was cramped, too. No secret doors, no other passages, one way down. I'm not claustrophobic by nature, but I think I understand the feeling now, after being funneled through a little passageway covered in the remnants of other people, with hundreds of tons of earth around me. And it was hot. The deeper we went the more burning hot it was. It felt like my insides were going to melt out from under my skin if I stayed down there long enough. The morganti wounds on the bodies even looked odd in the depths, sort of greasy and metallic. Every single sensation was in agreement, this was a disgusting and awful place.

But there was no turning back, so we marched through. Finally, we made it to a door frame, though there was no door in it. It was carved with the mountain range, and a red gem in it. Clearly this was where the Mountain lay. We charged in.

A group of followers were swarming a final remaining guard, holding fast in front of the door at the end of the room. It was our innkeeper, still holding her morganti ax, but we were in the fight before I could even register what exactly was happening. It was a tough fight, but not impossible. One of them was a shrine with morganti, I think they gave a blessing from a Harbinger to do terror damage. There were others, too, like an assassin slaying our party members with the terror magic.

I fought people, I can't say who exactly, or what they did. Hrutr and the shrine dueled, he killed the shrine, but lost an eye morganti. The other followers dropped. An assassin kept hiding and killing us, but I switched to ward and got the people who could fight back up. Vakhan locked down the shrine.

It was finally over. We killed them all, so our innkeeper told us she would clean up, and sent all of us back but Hrutr. We told city officials what happened, and gave back the things we took from the bodies.There. That was a simple recount of events as they happened.

I died five times in those few hours. So did Hrutr, so did Xerian. Xerian and Abby PD'd, though they got interventions. As far as I know, every other party member died down there at least once, if not more.

I cannot really describe how I felt. Dying again and again, having my guts ripped out of my chest or channeling all my life force into a spell,

getting back up, dying again, being brought back again, dying more, being summoned, going back just to do it again and knowing I'll die once more in those depths. Knowing that I had to give whatever it would take, the price we were paying now would be nothing compared to the one we would pay later, nothing compared to the prices that had already been paid by the dead bodies we were stepping over. Whatever it takes. Whoever it takes.

In a morbid way, there was something comforting about it. You lose yourself in it, there isn't a you anymore, there's a tool you operate and a goal it must accomplish. Everyone working as one, for the same end, no matter the cost. That sense of unity, of shared sacrifice, shared duty, shared endurance. There is something about it I like more than I should. In another life, I would've made a fine soldier.

I see why heroism is so tempting. It feels good to commit to a cause for the greater good of everyone, to overcome odds to achieve it, and then to walk back home knowing that there are people at the end of that walk who will be grateful, maybe even impressed. Even if you aren't hoisted onto the shoulders of the cheering masses and given your own fortress and pile of gold, there's still a pleasure that comes from knowing you have done something noble, and someone loves you for it. It feels good to be a hero. I can feel the temptation slipping through the gaps between my choices. But god, I fucking despise it.

Everything I do up here feels wrong, no matter how unquestionably good it is, no matter how much I think it's the right thing to do. I'm afraid I've already become one of them without noticing. High and mighty in an ivory tower at the center of the city of gods, pondering what great deeds I can do for the world, and with all my arrogance thinking that only I know what is best.

Because I have fought to keep the mountain down, talked to gods, gained a reputation, money, power, touched the mystical secrets of this world, I am now greater than those who have not done those things. I am now more knowledgeable than them, I know what they need better than they do. They are stupid little ignorant commonfolk who should fall in line behind my command from on high, because how could they know what's best for themselves without my all mighty guidance?

I know that in the grand scheme of things, there must be those who tend to the big picture. Clans are here for a reason: some decisions are big, and someone has to make them. If we tried to meet every single individual need, we couldn't meet anything at all. But that doesn't make the little picture unimportant. So many people fall to the bottom, and even when clans do work I respect, in the grand scheme of things? All the "unimportant" people still fade away into a blur that gets stomped into the mud.

Who, amongst these ivory tower fucks with their big pictures and their politics, can actually say they have looked into the eyes of the people they care for and asked what they needed? Who can say they have treated them like they deserve one iota of the respect they believe they are owed? Who really knows who they serve? I don't think it's very many.

I know that I can help here. I know I am too tired to carry out my duty like I used to. But I cannot turn into one of them, and yet every time I do one of these important tasks I feel like I'm losing myself to it. I'm afraid I'm seeing people's faces less and less, I'm seeing them as… the citizenry. A hoard that must be fed resources, a problem to be solved. Everytime I try to ground myself, some new problem of unimaginable proportions appears and I have to put it first in my mind. Besides, I'm not just me anymore. I have a party.

My party. I like them, I really do; we do good work, and I'm glad to be one of them. But sometimes I feel that they think like damned heroic idiots. Then I wonder if I'm just too old and stubborn to see that I'm wrong. They aren't all like that, it's unfair to characterize them as a mass with one mind. Perhaps my perspective has calcified, and I should listen to the youth and their new perspectives with a more open mind. I do try to, and I have changed my mind. I changed my mind on our visitors, though perhaps that was by necessity. I try not to set myself too firmly in my ways, and yet…

I can't help but feel that they think with such an agonizingly mystical and grandiose view of the world. It's so rooted in Courts and Gods and things that come from magic and the divine. It thinks in politics and quests and curses that've fallen from the sky. I wish I could school them in the importance of what they see as mundane, and I wish I didn't wish

to do that, because I know the arrogance of old age. My discomfort with the mystical doesn't make the mystical unimportant, I know that. Maybe I'm a fool, and they're all right. But yet I still can't shake the feeling that sometimes, they're too absorbed in the big picture, just as everyone else is.

All I do is watch myself these days. I watch to make sure I do not start thinking I am better than others because of my world view, or the duty I carried for so long. I watch to make sure I don't become just another self righteous piece of shit who looks down on others. I watch myself for my bad emotions, for undue anger at my party, for arrogance, for frustration, and I watch myself for being too forgiving of something I could've helped, but didn't because I was too caught up in not wanting to be arrogant. I watch myself for the bitterness of old age, and I watch myself for being too dismissive of my own instincts. I watch for self-martyring so that I can complain about how I'm the only adult in the room, and I watch for relying on others too much. I watch for too much self assuredness, I watch for too little. I'd be less vain if I stared in a mirror all day fixing my beard.

Some days, I wish I could meet a dwarf who's a hundred years older than I am. They'd sit me down and tell me "Ingrin, you're full of shit, *this* is what it means to have lived beyond your years," and I could ask them how it is they did it. I could ask them if I'm doing it wrong. Maybe they'd ask me the same thing. We could walk together and talk about all the years we bare, and all the little things everyone else has forgotten. *Dúthracht mé coicéile.*

But I know that's wishful thinking. Today was a victory. We did well, the Mountain is still chained, and my party is all here. I can take that.